

# Why don't women

A full-page photograph of two women standing on a wide, ornate staircase. The woman on the left is Black, wearing a teal double-breasted suit with a white collar and patterned shoes. She has her arms crossed. The woman on the right is white, wearing a white double-breasted suit with a black collar and black shoes. She is smiling. The staircase has dark wood railings with decorative metal balusters. The background shows a modern office interior with glass partitions and plants.

While over 40 percent of South Africa's working population are women, surveys reveal that they comprise fewer than 20 percent of corporate leaders. Why do so few women reach the top?

By Tracy Burrows

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**PERTURBED:** Brigitte Reynolds and Yvonne Chaka Chaka of Gestetner Tshwane feel the proportion of women in management should be higher.

photo: Karl Rogers





# rise to the top?

“Whers in the past, women used to look at men CEOs and think about what it would be like to be in their position, now things have changed and women are saying ‘I will have your position’,” says Brigette Reynolds, MD of Gestetner Tshwane.

Despite Reynolds optimistic words, and while it is true women are entering the formal sector in their millions, relatively few of them are reaching the top of the “corporate heap”. This was corroborated by ITWeb’s Salary Survey 2005. Proportionally, there were far fewer women in strategic management (8 per-

cent) than there were on operational management (18 percent) and staff (21 percent) levels.

Interestingly, of the 306 directorships held by women, 48.4 percent are held by black women, 43.8 percent by white women, 4.9 percent by coloured women and 3.2 percent by Indian women.

Tina Thomson, CEO of Businesswomen’s Association, noted that there were four women CEOs in state-owned enterprises and four in JSE-listed companies.

When releasing the census findings, Dr Namane Magau, President of the Businesswomen’s Association, said that the empowerment of women was critical. Magau called for fast-tracking of the

**“In contrast with South Africa’s 19.8 percent proportion of female executive managers, the US has 15.7 percent, Canada has 14 percent and Australia has only 10.2 percent.”**

– Tina Thomson, chief executive, Businesswomen’s Association

Similarly, the recent South African Women in Corporate Leadership Census 2005 found that women make up only 19.8 percent of all executive managers, 10.7 percent of all directors and 6.2 percent of CEOs and board chairs in South Africa.

The census, commissioned by the Businesswomen’s Association and sponsored by Nedbank, found that very few women held more than one directorship.

empowerment process so that more women would be in key positions.

Commenting on these statistics, top businesswomen Yvonne Chaka Chaka, CEO of Gestetner Tshwane, and Reynolds, MD of the same company say they were perturbed by the findings, since women make up more than 50 percent of the population.

## IT’S ALL IN THEIR HEADS

While there are no longer discriminatory company policies in South African busi-

ness, there are still invisible barriers hampering women's progress. Sadly, it seems women unintentionally contribute to these barriers themselves.

Jill Hamlyn, MD of The People Business, says historic comfort zones are always challenging to escape, because doing so means breaking with restrictions that are upheld by both individual and group socialisation processes.

Hamlyn says the need to involve and appoint senior personnel from different cultures has in a number of cases led to a dramatic change in the integration of pre-

Barnard adds that women also often tacitly accept that they should really be at home raising families. "I experience this in my coaching practice daily. Many women in senior or leadership positions need to get past their guilt feelings. They need the intellectual stimulation that their senior positions give them, they have earned the respect of their colleagues, they are doing a brilliant job – but on a personal level they have feelings of guilt towards their children and for time not spent with their families."

For example, Barnard says women with

women in top corporate positions. She says in contrast with South Africa's 19.8 percent female executive managers, the US has 15.7 percent, Canada has 14 percent and Australia has only 10.2 percent.

Chaka Chaka believes that South Africa leads the field as a result of the example set by the government, with its initiatives to increase the number of women in parliament.

"This is good, because if the 'powers that be' think woman can lead the way, then corporations see they should do that too," she says.

**"In some cultures, women were not allowed to develop leadership skills – even at home."**

**– René Barnard, executive business coach, MetaGen**

viously disadvantaged people into arenas that were traditionally dominated by white men.

"There is, however, no accompanying focused push to raise women to this standing in business. Correcting the dearth of females at the senior levels is therefore hampered, as individuals subconsciously bond together to protect their territory and there is an all-round lack of conscious acceptance, as these appointments break with tradition."

Hamlyn says socialisation can be blamed for a subconscious, mass acceptance that men should take responsibility for running the business environment: "South Africa is a very hierarchical society and therefore it follows that the 'culture' of the country does still favour men over women."

René Barnard, executive business coach at corporate coaching company MetaGen, echoes this sentiment.

"Traditionally men are supposed to be the breadwinners and providers of the families. Men were expected to be leaders and women were expected to follow. In some cultures, women were not allowed to develop leadership skills – even at home. This situation has spilled over to the workplace," she says.

families often find it more difficult than men do to go on important business trips. "For the businesswoman it is a challenge, because mostly she has to still organise and make sure everything at home is taken care of before considering such a business trip."

## GROWING CHANGE

Yet outstanding local businesswomen like Praxis CEO Zwane feel that change is happening, with growing numbers of women entering the upper echelons of business.

"I feel the glass ceiling for women has been eradicated so much that men are now getting worried about being casualties of this move," Zwane says.

She notes that many companies have made big shifts towards bringing women into leadership positions. In her opinion, she says, the research is slightly outdated, giving the impression that the process is slow. "In South Africa, I believe a lot has been achieved to date and I am confident we can be used as role models as far as women in leadership is concerned."

Her view is backed by statistics presented by Thomson, who says South Africa is ahead of other countries in terms of

## DIFFERENT BUT COMPLEMENTARY

Back in the days when women pioneers had to shatter the glass ceilings, many women business leaders felt the need to behave in "masculine" ways to get ahead. This isn't necessary anymore, and may even be counter-productive, the experts say.

Hamlyn notes that men and women's management styles are "very different but highly complementary". She feels that business needs this balance of male and female approaches to bring out the best in people in organisations.

She says women need to focus on producing results and uplifting people by using typically feminine management skills. "As has been proved throughout history, women can be incredibly strong and focused. They have a different, but equally effective ability to managing people, which commerce generally has not utilised effectively," Hamlyn says.

Barnard says that on the whole, she finds that women in leadership positions are exceptionally keen to develop more leadership competencies, are generally more loyal to their employers, and don't always expect as much status or monetary reward.

Reynolds agrees with this view, adding that women tend to be more honest and open and employees are more comfortable when dealing with women. Like Hamlyn, she notes that companies generally benefit most from having a combina-

tion of traditionally “male” and “female” approaches in leadership.

However, Chaka Chaka says, some men still find it difficult to relate to a woman as their boss. “Corporate leadership used to be their turf and they feel a bit threatened with the rise of women in high-powered positions.”

### FAMILY VS THE CAREER

In a society that still tends to stereotype women as homemakers and men as breadwinners, family demands can mean that a woman focuses less on a career and more on the home. Naturally, there are exceptions and a small percentage of men have opted to be the homemakers, while their female partners go out to work.

“Everyone has to make choices,” says Hamlyn. “Both men and women face a variety of pressures, but seemingly man-

major role in household tasks – this includes child raising.

“This was initially a traditional role of unemployed women; but unfortunately this has not changed even when women have taken the ‘bread-winner’ responsibilities in their families. The sad result is that women then struggle to dedicate much time for career development because of this pressure of holding two demanding positions. Nevertheless, I am still amazed at the number of women making it in spite of it all.”

Zwane herself is a mother. She concedes that sometimes her demanding schedule leaves her feeling like she has neglected aspects of her life.

“Work for me is both my career and home making. I find I have very little time for myself to ‘play’ and I do sometimes feel short-changed in this regard.”

weekends. “But this is a choice I have made,” she adds.

### A ROSY FUTURE

The consensus appears to be that while the proportion of women in corporate leadership – especially in the ICT sector – is low, it is growing, and fewer barriers stand in the way of women rising to the top than used to be the case.

The fact that South Africa is undergoing a phase of significant change and opportunity makes it all the more feasible that this country could soon serve as a sterling example to the rest of the world of what can be achieved through true “equal opportunity” at every level.

Chaka Chaka says it is unfortunate that women tend to be labelled by society, so often have to prove themselves in business more than men do.

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– Mirriam Zwane, CEO, Praxis

age the choices that they make. Raising a family is a responsibility that needs attention. When a family unit is formed the adults therein need to make conscious choices as to their individual and joint responsibilities and then distribute the time and resources left in providing for this unit.”

“Family pressures on the female are often created when there is a tacit acceptance that this is their role, whilst being the breadwinner lies in the domain of the male representative. These roles are therefore more often than not accepted due to a socialisation process rather than a conscious thought process that addresses individual needs.”

Zwane notes that in South Africa, many women still find themselves taking on the burden of homemaking responsibilities while trying to develop a career. “I am afraid I have observed that even when men are available for these responsibilities, society still expects women to play a

“There are constant challenges in our sector and pressure to compete with other ‘giants’. At home, I am working very hard to be a good role model for my kids, and cannot take the risk of giving up my motherhood and let the TV take over from me. This is a tough call for most women,” Zwane says.

Chaka Chaka – also a wife and mother – says having a family could slow a woman’s career growth, but that this need not be the case if the family is supportive.

She notes: “You have to make sacrifices, but you must make sure the sacrifices you make are worth it. It all depends on your personality. If being a corporate success is what drives you, then you make certain sacrifices.”

Where a woman chooses to focus the most of her time and energy should be about what makes her happy, says Reynolds. She herself is not married, does not have children, and says she works an average of 12 to 13 hours a day and most

Nonetheless, she and Reynolds conclude that the future looks bright for women in SA’s corporate arena. They predict that the number of woman in corporate leadership positions will double in next three to five years, reaching a ratio of 40 to 45 percent. ■

### FEMALE FACTS AND FIGURES

Figures in the South African Women in Corporate Leadership Census 2005 revealed a small improvement in the representation of women in business since last year.

	2004	2005
Women executive managers	14.7%	19.8%
Women directors	7.1%	10.7%
Women chairs of boards	11*	15*
Women CEOs	7*	8*

\* reflects actual numbers