

GETTING down TO business

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Margaret Thatcher once proclaimed: 'If you want something said, ask a man; if you want something done, ask a woman.' Nothing could be more true for the South African woman.

One could say that the Second World War started the wheels turning on the juggernaut that became the women's liberation movement. Forced into traditionally male jobs that had been left vacant by their men going to war, women discovered they enjoyed working outside of the home – earning money to boot. When the battle-weary men returned they were somewhat surprised to find their 'homemakers' brimming with confidence, technology-savvy and buying the bread instead of baking it.

Today, women can be found in senior positions across all sectors of business, contributing to progressive management styles that have changed the face of leadership in the workplace.

Stephanie Vermeulen is SA's emotional intelligence guru and author of *Stitched-up: Who Fashions Women's Lives?* According to her, the gender stereotype that women do things 'differently' to men is inherently offensive, since not all women are the same. 'There is a prized belief that businesswomen must have empathy and compassion, but leadership and management are very individual things. The real challenge for women is that they have to follow the existing corporate systems in order to compete, which means following the male model of power.'

This 'male model of power' had ample time to develop in SA as it was only after 1994 that any real change could be affected with regards to gender equality in the workplace. Hilda Ndude, chairperson of the Black Business Women's Association (BBWA) explains: 'Women in the ANC fought hard for affirmative action and gender equality, ensuring these issues transcended into government, the private sector and legislation. Despite this, there is still much to do. In a country where roughly 53% of the population is made up of women, only 15% of us sit on corporate boards. We've got to get the balance right.'

Gender equality remains controversial and Vermeulen has some strong views: 'Lots of women are called BEE tokens when they



reach senior positions – regardless of their culture. This is highly offensive because women have to fight for those positions. If they are just seen as tokens they are not being taken very seriously. Conversely, think about SA during the apartheid years: We had token white men in positions all the time – they were only appointed because they were white men – but that was seen to be legitimate then because business was run by men.'

In the same context, research undertaken by Grant Thornton International Business Report in 2007 revealed that only 29% of total management posts in SA are filled by women, with 17% reporting to have no women in senior management. Lee-Ann Bac is a director at Grant Thornton in SA: 'Given President Mbeki's focus on empowering women and the recognition that women have a meaningful role to play in the development of SA's economy, it is extremely disappointing that this mindset has not transcended into the workplace. Perhaps the focus on BEE has sidelined the importance of empowering women in management. In this young democracy, it is imperative that business takes the empowerment of women seriously.' Trade and Industry Minister, Mandisi Mpahlwa, seems to agree as he is reported in the media as saying that 'women are key to reducing poverty and halving unemployment in the next decade by their participation in the economy'.

'Women need to stop following rules and start writing them'

Despite this, another research project, undertaken by the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM), revealed that women entrepreneurs in SA are performing below average when compared to women in other emerging economies. Most of these entrepreneurs are working within the informal trade sector of crafts, hawking and personal services – all seen as 'low tech' sectors, without significant potential to create jobs. This is a serious consideration as unemployment is a huge issue for any stable economy. In the formal sector many companies are beginning to address the work/life balance in order to retain women. Vermeulen points out that to achieve this balance requires support. 'Anyone who succeeds needs a support system. In a traditional environment men have the support of their wives. The challenge for women, particularly those who choose to have children, is that they are enormously stressed because of this work/life balance.'

Employment Equity plays a significant role in the future of business growth for women. Vermeulen notes: 'When laws state that women have to be represented in business, it has come about because of men's reluctance to let go. Some of



the Scandinavian countries (Norway being one of them) have just recently legislated that 40% of board members have to be women.' Which just goes to show how far we've come. SA currently ranks in the top three countries in terms of women representation in governmental positions. With the ANC ruling that 50% of government posts be filled by women, our nation will probably vie for the number one spot once this has been realised.

Ndude believes that advancement is possible if women are allied and organised under banners like the BBWA. 'During the struggle days women activists embraced the slogan "united we stand, divided we fall". If the BBWA is representative of the broader spectrum of businesswomen and is made aware of the issues within corporate environments, it has the ability to pioneer change with a voice that will keep business on its toes.'

If women are to overcome economic hurdles then perhaps Vermeulen's advice is best heeded: 'Women need to stop following rules and start writing them.'

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Four women from diverse backgrounds and industries share their career experiences.

FIRE IN HER HEART

What is, perhaps, most extraordinary about Bernice Morgan, is that she discovered the hidden passion of her heart in one of the most dangerous jobs in the world – firefighting.

Because she is petite, Bernice is usually the first to be pushed through windows of badly crushed motor vehicles to reach for the hand of a trapped victim or to rescue a baby. And because of her sensitivity she is able to take care of people in the most traumatic of circumstances. Hers is a feisty spirit that can just as easily care for her three children before rushing out into the night to fight a blaze alongside her burly male colleagues.

But these bothers-in-arms, she says, sometimes underestimate her abilities simply because she is a woman. 'Physical strength is a factor in this career,' she says, 'but it has never hindered me. I have learned to improvise. It may be that some of the 26-odd women who graduated as firefighters with me in 2000 were seen as trophies, but we have proven ourselves more than capable, bringing to this role a more sensitive approach.

'This is a job that challenges you as a woman because we are so exposed to a man's world – from the uniform to the shoes ... even the language. It demands a certain hardness.'

After 10 years working as a firefighter, Bernice is currently studying for a degree in disaster and safety management, looking to a future in fire investigation and public education. She is also serving her third year as chairperson of the Women's Forum of the EMS (Emergency Medical Services).

RETAIL IS ROSE(Y)

Queen Rose Nkwelo is described by Rob Phillipson, MD of Spar KwaZulu-Natal, as a 'dynamic woman', whose passion and dedication have driven her to pioneer a path for black women within rural retailing. It is therefore not surprising to hear Queen Rose tell you quite directly how ambitious she is: 'I don't take second place in anything. I must be number one and I achieve that by ensuring that everything I do is to the highest possible standard.'

Recognising that she had skills and desires beyond the teaching she undertook at the Pillizintaba Secondary School in the Eastern Cape, Queen Rose entered the retail trade in 1986 and opened a small spaza in her hometown Tsolo, selling takeaway foods and basic groceries. Her husband, impressed by her success in business, bought her a much larger supermarket. Under her leadership it grew enough to be noticed by the Metro Group who awarded her a Lucky Seven dealership followed by the larger Square Deal endorsement. Under the Metro banner, Queen Rose won numerous overseas trips as Retailer of the Year. After applying for, and being granted, a Spar dealership in 2007, Queen Rose is more determined than ever to make a difference in her community by sponsoring soccer teams and supporting local development.

'I hope I am a role model in my community,' she says. 'I want women to understand they must not expect their husbands to do everything. Women need to drive themselves and realise their own potential.'

BALANCING ACT

Observant financial punters will have noticed WesBank's Shona Selley. She's the woman who, in seven years, has expanded the bank's call centre from a team of 14 to its current 1 000 employees. This division proudly boasts the lowest staff attrition in the South African contact centre industry and as its general manager, Shona swears it is not really a daunting task.

'It's not about divisional size but about the ability to look after a thousand lives. You have a social responsibility because you are not just employing bodies, you are employing hands, a full heart and the families connected to them. You have to ensure that the environment you create will enable people to be as happy as possible.'

When Shona's parents were unable to afford her tertiary education, she decided to join WesBank straight after completing school. Her 20-year stint with the organisation, she says, has given her one of the most diverse careers possible. 'Your future is in your hands, not in one division or one place.'

This single mother adds that although there is still some male domination in the industry, it's more in the minds of people. 'You don't have to fall victim to that. The way you experience things has less to do with the other person's intention than with your own predisposition.'

'I think it's time for role models to achieve the right work/life balance,' she says. 'This is more important than achieving the next rung on the corporate ladder.'

'I embrace diversity and have shaped multi-cultural, multi-disciplinary initiatives and people into high-performance teams'

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MULTI-FACETED

If you look deep into the other-worldly environment of information and communications research and technology, you will encounter a new breed of woman rising through the organisational bureaucracy. Hina Patel is clearly representative of this group, having learned to balance her interest in technology with her need to change the world.

Hina works for the Meraka Institute of the CSIR, a national strategic research and technology initiative that fosters industrial and scientific development. Hina is, among other things, the group leader for the disabilities and the aged research group and says she is driven to be part of teams or groups that have the scientific and technological depth 'to make a difference in people's lives'.

'A significant achievement for me has been to see the impact of the projects Meraka undertakes,' she says, 'In particular, the NAP (National Accessibility Portal) which uses information and communications technology to improve the quality of life of the disabled.'

Hina walks her talk by employing staff who are blind and deaf because 'of the unbounded creativity of their ideas, their technical expertise and domain know-how, who have brought clarity and understanding of requirements to this initiative, based on first-hand experience'.

Hina remains humble despite winning several awards for management, leadership and transformational excellence. 'I embrace diversity and have shaped multi-cultural, multi-disciplinary initiatives and people into integrated high-performance teams. My job is unique in that I have to cope with so many different facets – technical, operational, people and projects – but I wouldn't have it any other way.'

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write FOR THE job

Media provides a window into the lives of women – their work, their families, their health. Open any newspaper or magazine, or tune into popular radio or television news channels, and you'll hear the voices of women sharing their stories and debating their environments. Forty years ago this would not have been possible.

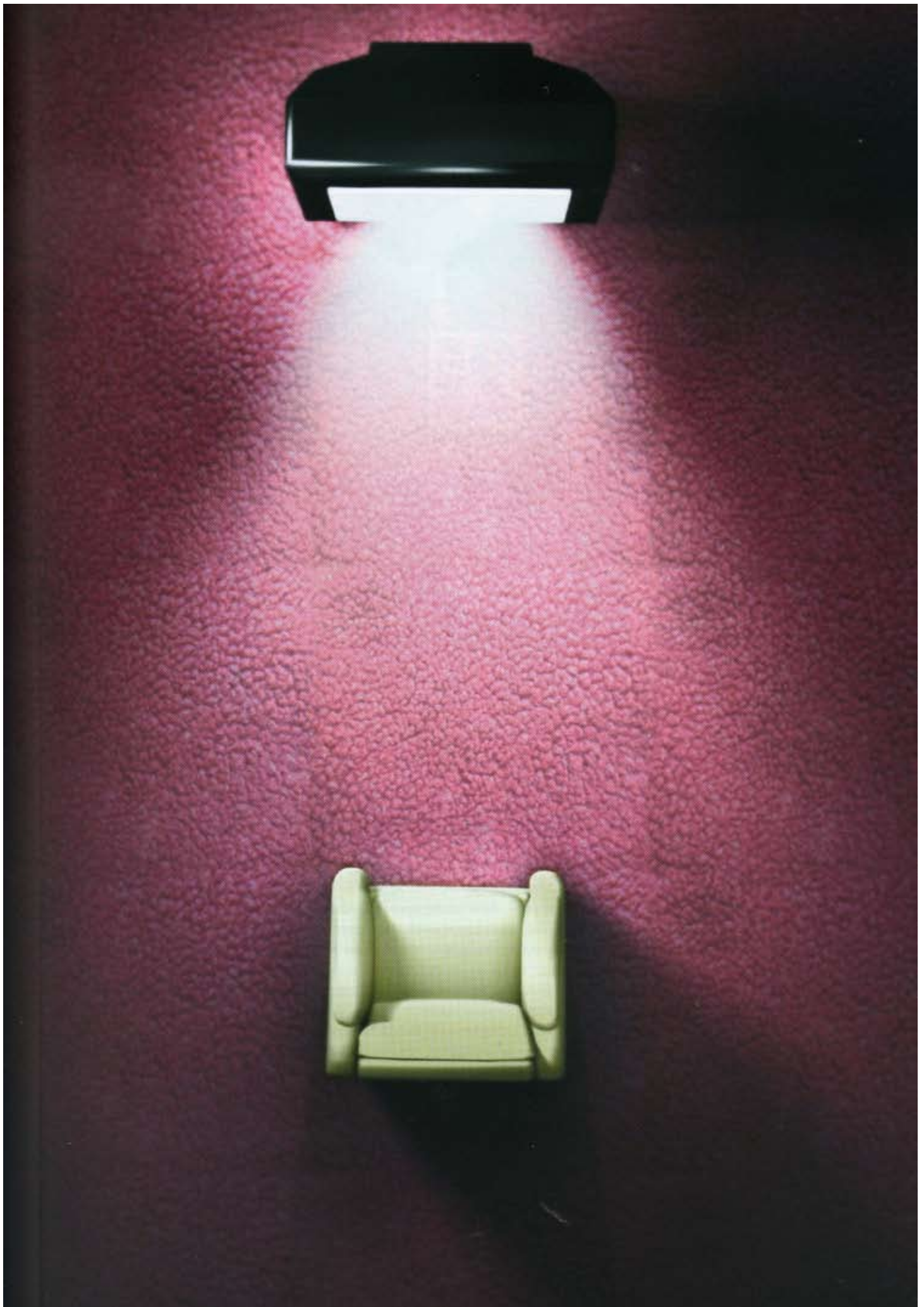
When women started to enter the world of media in South Africa they were relegated to reporting for the pages specifically devoted to so-called 'women's interests' such as housekeeping, recipes, health and baby issues – nothing that would upset their delicate constitutions. Journalist Sue Grant-Marshall recalls being the only woman in the newsroom of the *Cape Argus* in the late 1960s: 'Traditionally a woman's newspaper reportage involved interviews with the wives of politicians or famous men. It seems so archaic now but women were discriminated against, as well as being paid less.'

The situation began to improve in the 1970s. Although women were still being employed as 'soft' columnists, there were better opportunities for female investigative journalists. Salaries, however, remained poor, resulting in many women breaking away from news reporting jobs to enter into the higher-paying sectors of advertising, public relations and magazine writing. Having been forced to contain themselves within the male-structured and -defined parameters of the newsroom, women found an outlet for their collective voice in the form of women's periodicals.

There is no doubt that *Fairlady* was the pioneer of women's magazines in SA. In its early years it took a gutsy, provocative stance, defending women's rights and exploring topics such as marital abuse, rape, sexuality and discrimination, prejudices and inequalities. Socially relevant articles were finally being written by women, published by women for countrywide discussion.

Enormous inroads have been made by having women in the media, but is it enough?

Redi Direko, radio and TV presenter expresses doubt: 'I don't think SA women, both in the media and other sectors, do enough





to highlight the plight of the hundreds and thousands of women who are still marginalised and abused. More could be done because we are seeing a violent expression of male power in SA and it needs to be discussed.' She is encouraged, however, at the progress women journalists have made in newsrooms, occupying senior positions as editors, political journalists and senior reporters.

But others have a different view. Gender Links (GL) – an NGO that promotes gender equality in and by the media through research, training and advocacy – undertook an audit last year of women and men in SA newsrooms. Colleen Lowe Morna, GL's executive director, says the survey revealed 'a host of barriers to the advancement of women in the media profession' and that 'discriminatory practices, structural inequalities, cultural factors, prejudices, patriarchy and sexism are still alive and well in SA newsrooms'. These factors, she believes, clearly prohibit SA's women journalists from 'realising their potential'.

In a survey of 4 364 women employees (an estimated half of all journalists) GL found that at R184 387 per annum, the annual average salary of women in newsrooms is 21% less than the average annual salary of men (R233 737). While the income differential between white men and black men in newsrooms is narrowing, black women earn, on average, 25% less than white men in newsrooms. 'These salary figures,' says Colleen, 'more than any other detail, reflect the gender gaps in newsrooms. As one respondent put it: "It's the money, honey!" These figures do not necessarily reflect formal discrimination between women and men, but rather the lower positions that women occupy, and the lower paid areas of work in which they predominate.'

Gwen Gill, who has worked at the *Sunday Times* since the 1970s comments: 'Women have always been used as newspaper columnists but have still, all these years later, hardly cracked the sports pages and very few newspaper editorships are held by women. It's fair to say that we now have women political editors and investigative reporters, but I think there is a new brand of chauvinist thinking creeping in which may hinder us even more.'

'Although our representation in mainstream media may be awesome, more women need to be economically empowered to actually own media companies'

Redi believes that women journalists need to challenge stereotypes: 'Although our representation in mainstream media may be awesome, more women need to be economically empowered to actually own media companies.'

On that point, there is another aspect that is slowing women's progress within hard-core journalism – the control publishers have over editors. Sue points out that challenging journalism within magazines is a thing of the past: 'Magazines are very niche today, without the massive circulations of yesteryear. The publisher is in the business to make money, not upset the advertisers or the readers.'

It would seem that women in media still have a fair way to go to break the glass ceiling and there are no predictable paths to follow, but as a torch-bearer of a free and fair society, the media has a duty to lead by example and ensure a level playing field in its own backyard.

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