

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

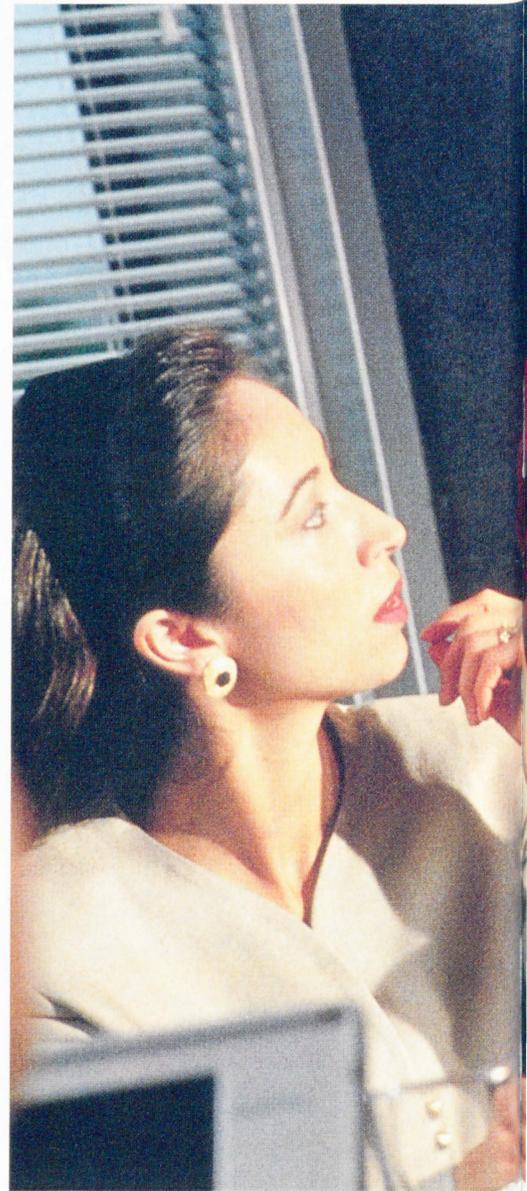
IN THE CORPORATE WORLD

By Goonasagree Naidoo

IN ATTEMPTING TO UNDERSTAND THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN the corporate world, it is imperative to understand the position of women in society as a whole. Our history spells out clearly that through all societies the patriarchal ideology based on the superior position of men pervades all spheres of life. It is a common belief that women are generally associated with certain so-called natural abilities and that they perform efficiently in those roles related to domesticity.

Consequently, division of labour in the South African corporate world is often based on these stereotypic gender roles. Tasks that are regarded as being challenging such as management positions are not easily available to women. Many jobs performed by women, it can be argued, are extensions of work undertaken in the household unit. Much of the employment in the manufacturing sector for example has been in clothing and textiles, and employment in the service sector dovetails with women's domestic roles that have become seen as women's jobs.

This is reflective from the available statistics. Women constitute approximately 54% of the population and 2/5 of the paid workforce, that is 39,4%. Although they account for 39,4% of the workforce, they account for 68,4% of all service sector employees and more than half of all clerical and sales positions.



Women also occupy a significant majority of the so-called 'pink-collar jobs'. They comprise:

- ▲ 96% of registered nurses;
- ▲ 90% of occupational and radiotherapists;
- ▲ 86% of social workers;
- ▲ 78.6% of hairdressers;
- ▲ 67% of teachers; and
- ▲ 96% of domestic workers.

On the other end of the spectrum women are obviously under-represented in the following categories:

- ▲ 5.1% of artisans and apprentices;



IMAGE BANK

- ▲ 5.9% of communication and related occupations;
- ▲ 3.1% of registered engineers;
- ▲ 9.6% of judges/magistrates; and
- ▲ 0.8% of metal and engineering industry workers.

With regard to senior positions in the corporate sector, women comprise 1.3% (49) of 3773 directors of the JSE's 657 companies:

- 14 women are either:
- ▲ executive directors;
 - ▲ chairwomen; or
 - ▲ managing directors.

Women represent less than 1% of board members in the corporate world.

The disparities between males and females is also reflective in the results of three surveys done in the corporate world, that reveals the following:

In the areas of responsibility and remuneration (even though the average, experience, qualifications and hours spent at work were equal), it was found that:

- ▲ male managers had twice as many subordinates as female managers;
- ▲ for every male earning less than R60 000 a year there were eight women; and
- ▲ twice as many men as women earned more than R100 000 a year.

It is clear from the available statistics that the South African Labour market is very skewed. Occupational segregation between men and women clearly exists.

Another feature of South African women in employment is that women enter the labour market under different conditions:

- ▲ by virtue of the racial group to which they belong; and
- ▲ with different levels of education and job training.

The status of women in the labour market indicates that the percentages of women according to gender and race are:

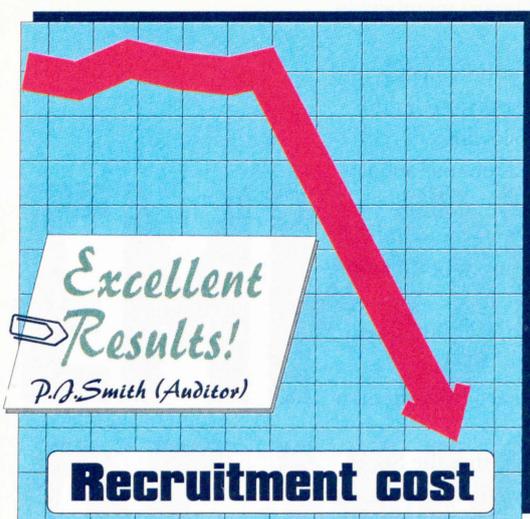
	Black Women	White Women	White Males
not economically active	52%	9%	5%
unemployed	53%	2%	1%
total employees	24%	10%	14%
self-employed	55%	6%	18%

Although women are generally concentrated in service, sales, semi-professional and the professional sector, not all women are equally represented in the occupational categories.

A vast difference exists between black and white women. Gender inequality in the corporate world takes a specific apartheid-related character; there is inequality within inequality, or put in another way, some are more unequal than others.

This is evident from available statistics: If we compare the status of white women with black women in the corporate world, the following is evident:

Not all women are equally represented in the occupational categories.



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Status of white women

77.6%	of managerial, executive and administrative posts;
57.8%	of sales and clerical posts;
57.8%	of professional, semi-professional and technical; and
5%	of service occupations

Black women on the other hand are over-represented in low-level posts. In this respect they comprise 83.4% in service, production and related occupations and approximately 38% are involved in menial work such as tea-making.

It is thus clear from the evidence available that women do not constitute a homogeneous group. Women's subordination remains interwoven by significant race and class differences. White women generally have better access to higher status and better-paid jobs whilst black women are over-represented in lower sector jobs with few or no prospects for growth or upward mobility, such as the service sector, production and related work. It must however be recognised that even white women, who have had more and better opportunities than other women, confront a glass ceiling in occupations, with their employment prospects more limited than white males in similar kinds of jobs.

Black women in comparison to white women have thus suffered from many disabilities, some of which are common to white women and some specific to them. Although they were oppressed as blacks, they face the double oppression of being black women workers.

They share inter alia:

- ▲ the experience of national oppression;
- ▲ with all other women the burdens of inequality and sexist behaviour;
- ▲ economic subordination;
- ▲ at the same time, as black women they were subjected to special disabilities and disadvantages.

There are both similarities and differences in the positions within the group of black women as well, which is further complicated by a range of other factors such as the further division of black women into different racial categories, and the levels of disadvantage.

It must thus be acknowledged that the historic, social and economic inequalities will mean that women by virtue of their race groups will start in different places and require differential treatment to attain equality of opportunity and result.

Issues on gender in South Africa must thus accordingly take into account these dimensions on the universal issues affecting women and the specific forms that apartheid has given to gender domination in our country.

Action plans

International experience warns us that the separation of race and gender marginalises black women in favour of black men and white women.

Nevertheless, in taking all these factors into account, we need specific gender-related action plans to destroy the structures and behaviour patterns created

Various women appointed in visible influential positions in parliament are likely to assist the cause of gender equality.

by centuries of discrimination against women. Organisations must be fully committed to harness their human resources as effectively as they can. This does not mean keeping women in pink- or blue-collar jobs. Women must be employed in significant decision-making positions in the corporate world. Our economy depends on the effective utilisation of women.

Accordingly many efforts are being undertaken by the government to enable women to break through the layers of disabilities identified from the past. At a political level, the government has promoted a greater participation of women.

We have:

- 117 women parliamentary MP's and Senators;
- 1 speaker of parliament;
- 101 in the National Assembly (out of 400);
- 3 Ministers (out of 17); and
- 3 Deputy Ministers.

The various women appointed in these visible influential positions in parliament are likely to assist the cause of gender equality.

The constitution and the RDP serve as a guide and legitimating agency.

The principle of equality on the basis of gender and race is accordingly at the centre of the new constitutional dispensation. The dual recognition of race and gender in the Constitution accepts that inequality and discrimination in South Africa has been based on both race and gender, and not race or gender.

The Reconstruction and Development Programme prioritises the plight of women, focusing on addressing the disempowerment of women in terms of employment. In tandem with the national women's empowerment policy of the RDP, the cabinet adopted a resolution on 15 February 1995 to establish an office in the President's office to improve the status of women. The primary goal is to ensure that gender concerns are integrated into all these aspects of departmental work. The office of the status of women plays a co-ordinating role in respect, overseeing the establishment and functioning of gender desks to mainstream gender into each government department. The main aims are:

- ▲ to ensure the empowerment of women and the gender issues are main streamed in government;
- ▲ to link with gender units to be established in each department; and
- ▲ to initiate and formulate policy and legislation.

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Government commitment

The government's commitment to empowering women is further evidenced by the government signing a number of UN conventions on women. Among these are:

- ▲ the convention on political rights for women;
- ▲ the convention on the nationality of women; and
- ▲ the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination.

While these conferences have championed the cause of women, none of them has captured the imagination of our government as did the fourth United Nations conference on women in Beijing. Since Beijing most government departments have committed themselves to supporting the Beijing programme of action at cabinet level, and implement programmes towards changing the status of women.

In this regard the office of the Public Service and Administration has committed itself to:

- ▲ ensuring that within four years at least 30% of the recruits to senior and middle management positions in government departments and provincial offices will be women;
- ▲ developing a culture that respects and promotes gender equality. This programme, set to run over two years, will include training trainers to become gender-sensitive, developing gender-sensitive training candidates materials and establishing accelerated development programmes for women;
- ▲ establish support programmes for women in the public service over the next two years, with the aim of opening up opportunities for the training and advancement of women;
- ▲ repealing all discriminatory rules and practices. The office has already embarked on this programme, women can now participate in the home allowance scheme, all women receive maternity benefits (in the past benefits were limited to two births) and discriminatory practices with regard to pension funds have been eliminated;
- ▲ taking positive action over the next ten years to improve employment opportunities for women; and
- ▲ creating a central database in the next year to do gender disaggregated research and identify employment practices in need of improvement.

Many government departments have put forward concrete proposals on how they are going to implement their commitments to promoting and monitoring women's equality. Government departments have thus made impressive plans for working towards gender equality by putting programmes in place to advance the position of women. They have indicated that they are to mainstream the empowerment of women within the policies and programmes of their departments. Some departments have already established gender forums which monitor women's empowerment. While most departments are striving to increase the number of women in senior positions, the only one that can claim to have reached parity is the Department of Arts and Culture, Science and Technology in which women hold 33 of the 66 senior posts.

The Commission for Gender Equality has also been established. It is intended:

- ▲ to give teeth and muscle to combat discrimination and abuse against women;
- ▲ to ensure that women's issues don't drop off the agenda;
- ▲ to ensure that the rights of women will be respected and implemented in SA;
- ▲ monitor and review the policies and practice of state and statutory bodies at all levels;
- ▲ develop educational and information programmes on gender equality;
- ▲ review all laws and recommend legislative amendments to Parliament; and
- ▲ investigate all gender-related issues.

The Human Rights Commission, Public Protector, and Constitutional Court will assist the Commission for Gender Equality by providing the political, administrative, legislative and judicial environment which will enable women to exercise and defend the economic, social and political rights on an equal basis with men. At the same time the establishment of the Commission for Gender Equality will ensure that Government and the private sector dedicate themselves to eradicating discrimination against women and actively promote equality between men and women.

Conclusion

The potential of women in South Africa has only begun to be realised. Although the first step in the direction of empowering women in South Africa has been taken with the entrenchment of a non-sexist society in the constitution, and the establishment of the Commission for Gender Equality, it is clear from the discussion above that we have a long way to go to achieve gender equality in society and hence in the corporate world, as the status of women in South Africa is largely subordinate.

It must be recognised that:

- ▲ women's oppression as a social injustice must be overcome;
- ▲ it is necessary for women to organise to overcome our oppression; and
- ▲ that the struggle for gender equality is an integral part of, and not in contradiction to, the struggle for overall change in South Africa.

Women need to take the knife by the sharp edge and face the challenges to struggle against all forms of oppression. We must be more active in the formulation of our demands. This is the first step towards women empowerment. Empowerment for us in the final instance should mean having a real choice in what we want to do, whether this is to:

- ▲ have children;
- ▲ pursue a career;
- ▲ have a seat in parliament; or
- ▲ establish a society that affirms and values that choice.

PM

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