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Could the tide be turning for women in business?

Evidence indicates that it is getting easier for women to get ahead in the world of work – but only just. This Women’s Month, the UCT Graduate School of Business is seeking to celebrate those women who have blazed the trail and encourage more to follow in their footsteps.

A young woman starting out in business today has every reason to expect that her prospects for success are good. According to the 2017 Grant Thornton Women in Business survey the proportion of women in senior management has reached an all-time high of 25% with developing countries leading the way. This is up 1 percentage point from 2016, and up 6 percentage points since the survey began in 2004.

This is good news, says Kumeshnee West, Director of Executive Education at the UCT Graduate School of Business (GSB). “Companies are responding to the evidence that diversity is linked to better performance and it seems that efforts to enhance diversity in business are starting to pay off!”

However, she cautions that the dial on gender diversity is still moving painfully slowly and the numbers of women in senior management in Africa remain stubbornly low. According to the Women Matter Africa 2016 report from McKinsey & Company, women are still under-represented at every level of the corporate ladder – non-management and middle and senior management – and fall in number the higher they climb. Only 5% of women make it to the very top.

“We need to keep up the pressure in advocating for gender diversity at all levels and make sure we are equipping women with the tools and support that they need to succeed,” she says. “It is also key that we find ways to celebrate the trailblazers.”

Events to celebrate the trailblazers this Women’s Month

West says that as a business school the GSB recognises that it has a key role to play not only in educating and empowering women but in creating opportunities and platforms for them to speak out and participate in vital conversations around growth and development.

And this Women’s Month, the school is dialling up these activities. According to Morea Josias, Head of Alumni Relations and Career Services at the GSB, the school will host several events around the country that are designed both to celebrate alumni of the school who have achieved great things in the world of work and also to encourage more women to consider taking on leadership roles.

Key events planned include two Women’s MBA breakfasts in [Cape Town](#) and [Johannesburg](#) that will connect talented and motivated women who want to pursue an MBA at the GSB, with female graduates of the programme.

On the 18th of August, the GSB will host its 18th annual [Women in Business Conference](#) entitled *Changing Paradigms, Breaking Barriers*. The conference is a student-led initiative that aims to raise funds towards a scholarship to enable a deserving woman to study at the GSB and will feature a strong panel of women leaders including Nandipha Solomon, Head of Marketing for [Citadel Investment Services](#), and the M&G’s Zamantungwa Khumalo.

Also on the 18th of August, Nandi Mandela, Director of Mediclinic International, UCT alumna Dr Kaya Tshabalala, Managing Member at SMDS, and GSB alumna Nerisha Maharaj, International Executive Leadership and Life Coach, will participate in a panel discussion at the Durban Chamber of Commerce on the role of women in nation-building and uplifting rural communities in South Africa.

“We need to do more to empower women and support them in their various roles,” says Josias. “We need to invest in women and help them create and build networks of support and connect to their peers.”

Small interventions can make a big difference

Sue von Hirschfeld, who lectures on the Developing Women in Leadership programme at the GSB, says small interventions can add up to make a big difference. Building confidence and helping women to connect to their peers, as well as giving them the tools to maximise their impact and develop a signature leadership presence, are key aspects of many of the GSB’s programmes for women. The school offers two short courses that are targeted at women who work: the [Developing Women in Leadership Programme](#) and the [Executive Women in Leadership Programme](#).

“Feedback from women who have attended GSB courses points to how our courses have transformed lives,” says West. “This is one of the reasons that the school is stepping up engagements this August. We want to leverage our networks of successful women graduates and encourage more women to put their hand up and assume their rightful place in the world of work. What better place to start than by celebrating those who have gone before us and giving them a platform to share their stories?”

“There is plenty of research that shows a positive link between having a role model and having leadership aspirations. We all need role models to remind us of what we can still achieve!”

For more information on GSB events this Women’s Month please go to <http://www.gsb.uct.ac.za/womens-month>

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