



Gestalt Growth Strategies (Pty) Ltd

RPA Centre, Top Floor, 116 – 5TH Avenue, Fariland. Ranburg.

PO Box 4425, Randburg, 2125, South Africa

Tel: +2711 482 9967 | Fax: +2711 482 8041

info@gestaltconsult.com www.gestaltconsult.com

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OPINION: Who Should Bear the Brunt of Empowering Women?

By Deon Oberholzer

In the world of internet memes, the difference between a social activist and a social justice warrior is simple. The assumption is as follows: Upon entering a building and noticing the absence of a wheelchair ramp, the social activist is inclined to go into action by ensuring that such a ramp is built. The social justice warrior, however, will insist on having the stairs removed so that able bodied people cannot get into the building either.

With 2018 trying to get out of the holiday spirit, and last year's Women's Month is long forgotten the pertinent question remains whether enough is being done for the empowerment of women. Considering the opening statement, the point one wishes to draw home is perhaps that the empowerment of women does not exclusively mean the disempowerment of men. That said, wherein does the responsibility to empower women lie? Does it lie with women themselves or with men?

Utilising two generic companies, Gestalt Growth Strategies interrogated the Amended BEE Codes to determine the extent to which they attempt to empower African women. This yielded surprising results.

If a hypothetical company brings an African woman in as shareholder and ensures that 10% of every level of management has representation from African women and the same percentage of total procurement awarded to an African female owned company versus doing the same with African men, the difference is staggering.

A company supporting women stands to get 27.52 scorecard points compared to 15.82. This is a 74% improvement, just on gender alone. If the women are under the age of 35, this increases to 34.47 points. In effect, the introducing a mere 10% of African women at every level of an organisation can contribute more than 1/3 of BEE scorecard points. Furthermore, the inclusion of a properly managed enterprise, skills and economic development strategy to the above plus the 10% objective will secure a level 4 BEE compliance.

If everything remained the same sans for the replacement of African women by African men the same company will, interestingly end up with a level 8 score.

That BEE legislation has African women's best interests at heart is clear. This would therefore imply that this group is getting the lion's share of benefits, correct? Unfortunately, that is not the case. A closer look at the participation of top, senior and qualified women in the workplace reveals a dismal picture.

If we look across all industries, African men are slightly ahead, with a 10% advantage over African women. However, Coloured women are doing twice as better and Indians ten times more. A comparative analysis of the African women's representation in state owned & private enterprises shows a significant gap with all other groups. Up from a 6.1% representation in 2007, African women make up only 17.3% of top management in 2017. In the public sector, where government has the power to make recruitment decisions, African men are 22% more represented than African women.

But, has anything changed? Although coming from a very low base (Indian women +36%, Coloured women +19%, White women +73%, African male +38.5% & White men -31%), an 122% increase in the participation of African women over the past few years indicates that there is some headway.

Should women empower women or is it a man's job, you may ask. Can the disempowered empower themselves? In a world that belongs to men, as James Brown once sang, women are still critical players in the creation of balance &



growth. It is proven that companies with women at the helm perform better. However, when so many doors remain closed to women (African women particularly), who needs to take responsibility for changing the status quo? Should feminists be raising their voices higher? Would the voices of previously privileged women lend more credence to challenging this? Or could the adoption of a different approach to women's empowerment by men from all walks of life be the solution?

Who should bear the brunt of empowering women? "We all should", says Oberholzer.

ENDS.

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