

Empowerment begins with equality

By [Goobisa Ntshona](#), issued by [LexisNexis](#)

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Gender diversity, inclusion and equality in the workplace are no longer just nice-to-haves. They are business imperatives. Research already shows them to be socio-economic imperatives, because where women and other minorities are empowered, societies are shown to become stronger and to achieve greater economic success.



South Africa thankfully has a progressive Constitution which, together with the Employment Equity Act, No. 55 of 1998, sets out to promote women's participation in the private and public sectors. Owing to King IV the boards of companies listed on the JSE are now required to publish their gender diversity strategy and to report on progress achieved in meeting voluntary targets.

Yet, despite this solid foundation and framework for fostering gender diversity and inclusion in the workplace, the most senior ranks of corporate South Africa still remain dominated by White males.

There is only one female CEO among the top 40 JSE-listed companies, Phuti Mahanyele-Dabengwa, recently appointed to lead Naspers South Africa. Prior to this Maria Ramos of ABSA was the only one until February 2019 when she decided to retire.

While the [2018 Grant Thornton Women in Business Report](#) reports that South Africa hit a new high of 80% of businesses with at least one woman in senior management and the highest proportion of senior roles held by women in a decade at 29%, or close to one third, it also said that one in five local businesses (20%) still have no women at all in senior positions. Another statistic puts this figure at 31%.

The latest Businesswomen's Association of South Africa (BWASA) [census on women in leadership](#) further indicates that 22% of board directors are women, but only 7% are executive directors and only 10% of South African CEOs are women. The track record for having non-white female leaders is even more pitiful.

LexisNexis South Africa is determined to help rewrite the narrative. The company has appointed its first female Managing Director, Videsha Proothveerajh, one of the country's leading women in technology.

Videsha has succeeded Billy Last who led our company phenomenally for 26 years. We are immensely proud to have her heading up our team and look forward to forging new paths under her leadership and unique perspective. I have no doubt that she will bring her unique attributes to this exciting field, helping us to craft innovative ways of work and serving our customers.

Presently only 23% of tech jobs are held by women in South Africa, representing only 56 000 of 236 000 ICT (tech) roles. Technology is built into the fabric of all we do at LexisNexis and has been central to our evolution from print to technology-based content solutions. We will continue to create opportunities for a growing number of women to shine within our tech department.

At LexisNexis South Africa we are passionate about diversity and inclusion, which are embraced throughout our global parent company, RELX, which boasts a cross-business Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) Advisory and Working Group.

Make no mistake. There are clear benefits to having organisations that reflect and embrace diversity. Organisations that are more equal and more integrated – across backgrounds, ages, experience levels, gender, race and income – perform

better, on average, than others.

Diverse perspectives help companies craft and implement better solutions to meet the needs of their stakeholders. Diversity boosts employee satisfaction, increases innovation, and enables companies to perform better.

When it comes to gender diversity specifically, according to [McKinsey & Company](#), organisations that rank in the top 25 percent for gender diversity in executive leadership are more likely to outperform on profitability (21 percent) and value creation (27 percent) compared to their less diverse peers.

Gender diverse boards are more likely to adopt proactive social and environmental policies, practices and reporting. Women directors are said to deal more effectively with risk and are adept at considering and juggling the varied interests of customers, employees, shareholders, and the local community, while tending to focus on long-term priorities.

Gender diverse boards report financial performance in a more transparent and accurate manner than male-dominated boards.¹ Female directors often bring new perspectives and offer alternative solutions for complex problems.² Female leaders also tend to have a more collaborative leadership style than men³, supporting open communication and allowing everyone's voice to be heard. This constructive atmosphere for sharing ideas and knowledge enables more innovative decision-making.⁴ There is also a growing body of international research that suggests that companies with gender-diverse boards are better corporate citizens, complying with legislation and meeting their shareholders' and stakeholders' social and environmental demands.

As South African companies, we must build environments in which women can thrive and we are able to tap into the full potential of diversity. Women in South Africa who aspire to reach senior leadership have the added pressure of balancing work and family life with deeply embedded societal norms which continue to dictate that they be the primary caregivers in the home.

We cannot address these imbalances without due consideration of intersectionality, because the experience of one woman is not the reality of all women, especially given South Africa's past. We must continue to confront our conscious and unconscious biases around race, sexuality, language and religion as these all impact on our workplace experiences.

Representation matters and as LexisNexis we cannot wait to see where the future leads us. One thing is for sure, that future is not only female. It is bright and it is beautiful.

¹Gul, F.A., Hutchinson, M. & Lai, K.M.Y., 2013, 'Gender-diverse boards and properties of analyst earnings forecasts', *Accounting Horizons* 27(3), 511–538.

²Bart, C. & McQueen, G., 2013, 'Why women make better directors', *International Journal of Business Governance and Ethics* 8(1), 93–99. Torchia, M., Calabrò, A. & Huse, M., 2011, 'Women directors on corporate boards: From tokenism to critical mass', *Journal of Business Ethics* 102(2), 299–317.

³Konrad, A.M., Kramer, V. & Erkut, S., 2008, 'Critical mass: The impact on three or more women on corporate boards', *Organisational Dynamics* 37(2), 145–164.

⁴Ritter-Hayashi, D., Vermeulen, P. & Knoben, J., 2016, Gender diversity and innovation: The role of women's economic opportunity in developing countries, *Working paper, Institute of Management Research, Radboud University*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gcobisa Ntshona, Human Resources Director at LexisNexis South Africa, is accountable for driving the Human Capital strategy for the company. She has a proven track record of delivering business results through her strategic focus on value creation. She is a passionate and engaging leader with the ability to balance both strategic and tactical people management aspects. She has worked with different business executives across various sectors in South Africa and abroad. Her visionary approach will drive employee engagement and talent management with the aim of establishing LexisNexis South Africa as an employer of choice.

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