

Women don't need to 'grow a pair' to be successful

"As women, we are often told we need to grow a pair of balls if we want to succeed in the business world. While it is true that to get ahead, all business people need to be robust, tenacious and tough, women should not buy into the fallacy that they need to mimic men to achieve great success. We bring a different type of strength and value to the business environment and statistics show that women in business contribute significantly to the bottom line," says Jennifer Da Mata, managing director of Strata-G Labour Solutions.



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The statistics also paint a troubling picture however – according to the latest census, women make up 51.7% of the South African population. A 2018 *Women in Business: beyond policy to progress* report by Grant Thornton reveals that while 29% of senior management positions are held by women, 20% of South African companies do not employ any women in senior positions. A 2017 [Gender Disparity report](#) by Bain & Co notes that only 2.2% of JSE-listed companies have female CEOs.

This is in a country where the constitution pegs gender equality as one of its founding principles and the Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill calls for the realisation of at least 50% representation of women in decision-making positions.

So, why do we not have more female leaders in South Africa?

“Women and men are still not seen as equal,” says Da Mata. “Even though more women than men graduate from South African universities every year, they still don’t have equal representation in the workforce.”

She believes the status quo can partially be attributed to conditioning and how girls see themselves as they grow up. “Various studies conducted on children’s books, specifically fairy tales, point to a lack of strong female characters in these stories. If there are females (because many traditional fairytales do not have female characters), they don’t have voices. If they do have voices, they are usually waiting for a prince to show up and save their lives.”

“We have been indoctrinated that men are naturally strong and assertive, while women are the nurturers and caregivers. But, this is not necessarily how all women see themselves. There are many women who want to participate in business and make a difference commercially. And so they should,” adds Da Mata.

She says women need to understand that the corner office does not just get awarded to anyone. “Women need to fight for the positions they want. They need to believe in themselves and be confident that they can accomplish the goals they set out for themselves.”

Da Mata should know. She was made a director at the tender age of 24 and all her business partners at the time were male and mostly much older than she was. “I was lead to believe that you don’t talk about being a woman or think about being a woman when it comes to business, because there is a perception that no one will take you seriously. It’s all about who has the biggest balls and that’s the way life works. Unfortunately, I fell into the trap of playing that game at the time.”

Citing research by Facebook COO, Sheryl Sandberg, Da Mata says in many instances, women “leave” their jobs before it’s their time to leave. “They take their foot off the gas the minute they contemplate having children or getting married. They stop investing the same energy into their careers – and that’s a contributing factor as to why their careers don’t take the same shape that men’s careers do.”

“We need to have the right conversations with the women in our lives – our colleagues, wives, daughters, nieces – and we need to tell them they must not underestimate their capabilities. We need to tell them they have a role to play in the economy, if they so choose. We need to encourage girls to be bold, courageous and resilient. We need to teach them not to be scared to fail – that failure can push them forward – and that fortune favours the brave,” concludes Da Mata.

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