

Hats off to working mothers in the 'always-on' retail industry

Many women juggle the role of both worker and matriarch, playing an integral role in society by not only taking on the responsibilities of raising the next generation and being the cornerstone of the family; but also by playing an active part in South Africa's economy.



Marine van Brakel, chief operating officer at RCS. Source: Supplied

This is according to Marine van Brakel, chief operating officer at RCS, who says that as we close in on the last half of 2022 (and properly adjust to the relaxing of pandemic restrictions), the country should reflect on how the onset of Covid-19, now two and a half years later, sent the lives of working moms into a state of absolute disarray – especially those working in retail and the operational staff that support them – and what has been learnt from the pandemic.

A complex role

Van Brakel explains that in South Africa, the role of women (and mothers and daughters as bastions of the family structure) in particular has become increasingly complex over the years as it requires more juggling than ever before – especially when factoring in a pandemic and all the changes that came along with it.

“Research shows that 60% of children in South Africa have absent fathers, and that as a result approximately 40% of mothers and mother figures in South Africa are raising children alone, or looking after extended family, which makes the situation that more challenging.”

She says that as South Africa grappled with the pandemic – along with the hybrid working and childcare difficulties that came along with it – mothers in the local retail sector faced a particularly difficult time. “Retail is an ‘always on’ industry, with the demand for high level service a constant. Due to these requirements, retailers and the industries serving them, like call centres, had to get creative in adapting to hybrid or remote work, flexible working hours and supporting family responsibility.”

Working in the retail sector was especially challenging for mothers and those supporting families during the pandemic, says van Brakel. “They were on the frontline with customers, with the constant threat of contracting Covid-19 and spreading it to their children and family. In the retail environment, employees with direct customer exposure were five times more likely to test positive for Covid-19.”



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Risk of burnout and exhaustion

In addition to the health risks, burnout and exhaustion are just as concerning for women in the retail space. Van Brakel points to PWC’s [Women in Work Index 2021](#), which revealed that prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, women spent on average six more hours than men on unpaid childcare and caring for families every week.

“During the pandemic years, working women took on an even greater share and spent 7.7 more hours per week on unpaid childcare than men – all in addition to their full-time jobs. This ‘second shift’ equated to 31.5 hours per week, almost as much time as an extra full-time job.”

“These statistics illustrated that working moms and cornerstone of their families make significant sacrifices to accomplish their career aspirations while providing for their families. Research published by [Forbes magazine](#), underpins that the most commonly cited sacrifice mothers make when building a career is giving up time with their loved ones.”

Van Brakel explains that working mothers often don’t have the flexibility to devote as much time as they would like to family relationships, and often must miss out on daily routines such as bath time or dinner with the kids.

“It’s well documented that mothers in the retail space are particularly well-known for having to make these personal sacrifices on an even greater scale. Not only do they avail themselves to the needs of their children and their families, but they also avail themselves to the needs of their customers, whether in-person or via a call centre, which often entails long working hours and overtime.”

Well-honed emotional intelligence

With all of that being said, she says that [studies](#) show that juggling wider family responsibilities provides an ideal training ground for developing skills that are highly advantageous in various industries, especially for those working in the retail sector.

There is plenty of evidence that points to the benefits of employing working women and those that play a bigger role in their

families and communities. For example, they tend to have well-honed emotional intelligence which they bring into the workplace.

“Matriarchs have an acute sense of empathy and compassion for their fellow workers due to their hands-on experience when it comes to catering for their family’s emotional and development needs, while balancing their own personal and professional responsibilities at the same time,” explains van Brakel.

“They are therefore well-equipped to handle challenging situations in the workplace, both with colleagues and customers. And as a result of juggling the demands of work and home, mothers are by nature uniquely skilled at multitasking and time management, both of which are highly sought-after skills in the retail environment.”



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Van Brakel concludes by saying that South Africa should acknowledge and celebrate the working mother, who isn't able to be at every school event because she is busy looking after consumers’ needs or because she simply wasn’t able to work from home during the pandemic due to in-office responsibilities.

“Here’s to the women who fight traffic every day to drop the kids at school by 6am, then head to work for her an eight-hour workday, before heading back home to fulfil family duties again. They really are the real superheroes.”

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