



"The biggest challenges are no longer with the women, but with the men", says 32 year-old regional manager Babalwa Teka from Port Elizabeth.

Photo: Jens Wejsmark Sorensen

Gender equality has far to go in South Africa

By Jens Wejsmark Sorensen

In 1996 the South African government presented one of the world's most liberal and modern constitutions thereby making women and men legally equal. But legislation will not do it alone. Poverty, unemployment, HIV/AIDS, gender-based violence and crime are just some of the obstacles for women on their way to obtaining real equality.

By hosting a very successful FIFA World Cup South Africa showed itself as a modern and highly developed African nation. A nation that has come far since apartheid ended in 1991, since all women gained the right to vote in 1994 and since one of the world's most liberal constitutions in 1996 made gender equality into law. But there is still a long way to go and it's still the women that suffer the most in a nation facing major challenges in dealing with poverty, unemployment, HIV/AIDS, gender-based violence and crime. When South Africa in 1996 presented a new constitution – regarded as

one of the world's most modern and comprehensive – it affirmed the responsibility to ensure women's equality by making it official that the state must not, directly or indirectly, discriminate when it comes to race, gender, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, skin colour, sexual preference, age, disability, religion, culture and language. The constitution also gave birth to a number of committees and commissions with the main purpose to secure women's equality. Nonetheless South Africa is in 2010 struggling with several factors that keep society unequal when it comes to

gender and race. It has, for example, one of the world's highest unemployment rates. Out of a workforce consisting of 17 million, almost seven million are unemployed and the latest official figures show that black and coloured women account for more than half. According to professor and gender researcher Sheila Meintjes from the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg the main reason for this is that black and coloured women still rank at the bottom of the social ladder in South Africa. Society still does not treat men and women equally and women are still being treated differently in regard to the colour of their skin.

"One of the things that must not be forgotten in the discussion on women's rights is the importance of social class. Society does not address all women equally, and you simply cannot ignore the massive unemployment, which particularly affects women", says Sheila Meintjes.

A rape every third minute

Sheila Meintjes points out, not surprisingly, that the high number of people without jobs is a crucial factor when it comes to explaining the high level of violence, which often involves women. It is a common perception in South Africa that a woman is raped every third minute. In a study by the South African Medical Research Council in 2009 every fourth man interviewed admitted to having committed rape. Furthermore many women live voluntarily in an abusive marriage or relationship.

"Many women have the perception that if her man beats her, it's because he loves her"

"The figures for gender-based violence are so high that they are virtually meaningless. However, scientifically we operate with a standard saying that two out of three relationships between men and women in this country are in one way or another violent", says Sheila Meintjes. The high figures give a good indication to the extent that South Africa is still a male dominated society.

"Although we have a lot of progressive laws and regulations for the safeguarding of women's rights and interests, it is also a fact that South African society is extremely conservative and norm guided. Many women have the perception that if her man beats her, it's because he loves her. Physical punishment of women and children are simply an accepted part of everyday life", Sheila Meintjes stresses.

She points out that in many parts of society men are still regarded as the main breadwinners and decision makers. Although women do have some power the authoritarian power still belongs to the men. Although real equality does not seem to be immediate, things are after all moving in the right direction in a society where democracy is relatively new.

Progress is too slow

32 year-old Babalwa Teka is a good example that it is possible in the new South Africa to become a business executive as a black woman. She grew up in Kwazakhele Township in Port Elizabeth together with two siblings. Although she lost her father early in life, the family was considered privileged because her mother had work. Despite a tight budget, it was her mother's wish that Babalwa should have an education. She wanted to study law but that was beyond their means. Instead she was educated in sales and marketing. After proving her abilities and ambitions in several different areas and functions she ended up as a regional manager in one of South Africa's largest banks.

"It's a dream job and I regularly pinch myself! It's certainly not common for women to become executives – let alone black women. However, by establishing a 'fast track' system to get more women into management our bank has chosen to take active part in the many challenges related to both gender and race equality", says Babalwa Teka. Currently, however, only one in five with a management role in the bank is a woman. By comparison, every third Member of Parliament in Pretoria is a woman. As more than 50 percent of the population in South Africa is female, the government's ambition is that at least half of the members should be women. The many positive actions and intentions have in general increased optimism among women in South Africa.

"More and more black women feel that it actually does matter," says Babalwan Teka, who nevertheless still believes that progress is too slow.

"We have not come far enough since the end of apartheid. Furthermore, it is a big problem that most women do not feel they can trust anyone in a distinctly male-dominated society", says Babalwa, who is also Chairwoman for a professional forum working for the creation of a safer society for women.

"In my eyes the biggest challenges are no longer with the women, but with the men. They will have to accept that their woman may earn much more and that they might have greater social influence", says Babalwa, adding with a big smile that fortunately her partner is very understanding.

White feeling of guilt

From the viewpoint of Victoria Farquas, the situation in South Africa is a bit different. She's a white woman born 50 years ago in White River northeast of Johannesburg. When she was four years old her father died and she moved south to Cape Town with her mother. She's a trained French and Italian translator, but currently unemployed. Victoria Farquas believes that women and especially black and coloured women receive preferential treatment when it comes to recruitment.

"It's like everyone, regardless of gender or race, makes a special effort to be responsive in a positive way"

"The recession has made it even more difficult to get jobs, but because of positive discrimination, however, it is an advantage being a woman when it comes to looking for work. And I have no doubt that if I was an educated black woman, it would be easier for me to find a job", says Victoria Farquas. As a white woman of English descent she has always been conscious of apartheid.

"But this consciousness also gave me a feeling of guilt, so when I began my studies at university I compensated by engaging myself in a lot of social work", says Victoria Farquas.

She feels that South Africa has made enormous social progress since the end of apartheid.

"There is in general a really good feeling. It's like everyone, regardless of gender or race, makes a special effort to be responsive in a positive way".

Victoria Farquas believes that the biggest challenge facing South African women regardless of background and colour, will be to maintain decent family values.

Protected from the truth

Rhonda Savage-Julien is a 52-year-old coloured woman. After many years as fully employed she has recently started her own company as an independent tour guide. She grew up with three older siblings in a colored township on the Cape Flats just outside Cape Town. Her father worked as a fisherman, which meant that the family was considered to be rich. During adolescence her parents protected her from the truth about apartheid, and it was not until high school, where she experienced the first white teachers that the proper context dawned upon her.

"It was my first real personal contact with whites and the first time I visited a white home. Suddenly I realized that there was another world out there", says Rhonda. After her graduation in 1983 she was employed in a bank, where most of her female colleagues were white.

"Getting employment in the bank was something of a miracle. Although, I worked in an office where customers could not see me, my parents were very proud".

In 1991 she was promoted to a position where she had direct contact with customers. After having witnessed (and survived) the massacre at St. James' Church in 1993 where four black men with rifles and grenades killed 11 and wounded 58 members of the congregation, she became so disillusioned with the increasing violence in the new South Africa that she moved abroad. Returning to South Africa and the bank in 1995,

she was pleasantly surprised to see that many of her former coloured and black female colleagues had been promoted.

“It was an incredible development. Before white males were always considered first and coloured or black women didn’t have much chance of promotion”. Rhonda feels that although women have made great professional progress, the challenge getting more women into management is still huge.

We are not bogged down

South Africa has taken many political and legal steps to promote the equality of gender, but many obstacles prevent the progress from smooth sailing. The apartheid legacy, massive unemployment combined with high crime rates, poverty and HIV/AIDS are all factors, which slow down progress. When South Africa officially became democratic in 1994 the governing ANC (African National Congress) inherited a country that was bankrupt. Since then the South African government has put a lot of energy into stabilizing the economy.

“The country has achieved a lot economically since the end of apartheid. The downside, however, is that economic and social inequality has grown year by year”, says professor Sheila Meintjes. Apart from the increasing poverty, HIV/AIDS is the greatest disaster for South Africa. The disease has in some way or another affected every family. Even before apartheid was abolished, there was considerable focus on HIV/AIDS. A focus pursued by the ANC when they came into power in 1994.

“The government's vague approach to the HIV/AIDS problem under former president Mbeki had extremely negative effect”

“But the government's vague approach to the HIV/AIDS problem under former president Mbeki had extremely negative effects. Measures were unfortunately very slow to be implemented, which affected women in particular”, Sheila Meintjes explains. But she also stresses that she would hate to give the impression that South Africa is bogged down.

“That we are certainly not. Our society is very dynamic”.

Referring to her own academic world Professor Meintjes points out that in 1994 black students only represented 43 percent of all pupils above college level – half of these were women.

“I’ve been teaching at the university for 22 years, and my classes have changed beyond recognition. When I started there was on average only one black student in each class. With only three white pupils today on average per class it’s completely reversed. This also has to be seen in the context that the classes are now twice as big”, says Professor Meintjes. While diversity has been more or less accepted in the new South Africa, society is still largely based on race and gender. In fact it has been partly reversed in recent years. It’s no longer uncommon that white men are passed over.

“At a professional level the years after apartheid has for me as a women been the best in my life while my white husband, who’s also an academic, has experienced the opposite”, notes Sheila Meintjes. She points out that it is obviously important to focus on the laws, rules, regulations and other bureaucratic actions that can increase women's status in society and social equality in general.

“But in a society with huge economic and social challenges, it does not make any sense, nor is it possible, to force everything through in 15-20 years. Real change will take at least a generation”, concludes Sheila Meintjes.

The 2010 FIFA World Cup has without a doubt reinforced South Africa's image as a modern nation. But the greatest football tournament in the world is already history and now life and work continues to make practical use of one of the most liberal and modern constitutions in the world.