



Workplace transformation still slow, but many women are excelling

Caroline Pule

THE country's female workforce has been growing steadily over the past few decades because of legislation and increased access to education.

Many women are finding themselves in an improved economic position because of well-paying jobs.

Better employment opportunities may have empowered women economically but the situation has not resulted in an equitable work environment.

The slow pace of transformation and equity has seen women marginalised and discriminated against on a number of fronts. This holds especially true for women who find themselves in male-dominated careers where they struggle to enjoy success.

Compared to their male counterparts, women push themselves to work harder because of the gender bias that still exists. Women also operate in the same work environment as men while simultaneously running households and having children. To exacerbate the situation women also have to contend

with comments of being too emotional in the workplace.

In spite of this, women are achieving excellence.

The government has created an enabling environment for women to access a range of opportunities in all sectors and to ensure that women take their rightful place in society and the economy. A sector that supports women's economic empowerment is the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) sphere. The annual Women in Science Awards (WISA) hosted by the Department of Science and Technology is celebrating women in STEM who have highlighted the plight of women in the workplace this year.

The 2017 instalment of WISA, is being held under the theme, "Women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work". In line with the theme of the 61st session of the UN's Commission on the Status of Women, held earlier this year.

The STEM environment has produced many successes, which include among others, Professor Tebello Nyokong, a South African



CHEMIST: Professor Tebello Nyokong



EPIDEMIOLOGIST: Professor Quarraisha Abdoori Karim



HIV/AIDS RESEARCHER: Dr Glenda Gray

chemist and professor at Rhodes University and recipient of the Presidency of South Africa's Order of Mapungubwe in Bronze, and pioneering HIV/AIDS expert, Professor Quarraisha Abdoori Karim, an epidemiologist who was awarded the Order of Mapungubwe. She is a professor at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Earlier this year Dr Glenda Gray,

the pioneering medical researcher, who specialises in finding a vaccine for HIV/AIDS, was selected as one of Time magazine's 100 most influential people in 2017. The list of South African women scientists doing amazing work is endless, and their work makes a difference in South Africa and the world.

Specifically looking at the medical sciences research area, women

researchers are excelling, and through their hard work, resilience and determination to improve public health, have had a big impact on the South African economy.

Probing pressing scientific questions, they are conducting pioneering research in areas such as TB, HIV/AIDS, disease medicines and many more, in sub-Saharan Africa that's aiming to make the continent

and the world a better place.

Working as a PhD candidate and junior medical scientist, I am inspired by the women who have come before me and appreciate the enabling environment that has been created to allow women to take leading research positions and head research teams.

The DST and the National Research Foundation (NRF) have made grants available, to assist women scientists to establish research groups and help run laboratories. Initiatives such as WISA, the L'Oréal Unesco Women in Science Fellowship, and the South African Research Chair Initiative (SARChI) support women in the medical sciences research environment and encourage MSc and PhD candidates to continue to excel in their work.

With this in mind, we should focus on educating and equipping young women who have a passion for science, mathematics and biology to follow careers in STEM. We should put ourselves out there as role models and share our knowledge on mainstream platforms in

an accessible manner.

We need to encourage young female students to look beyond just obtaining their degrees but have a vision to do relevant research that contributes to public health and improve the quality of life.

Choosing careers in the medical science research field is not easy. It can be highly competitive and comes with its own challenges.

The work revolves around doing experiments in the laboratory, writing grant applications, research articles for publication (as part of sharing knowledge), literature searches, rendering scientific presentations and conferencing, nationally and internationally.

While it may be an extremely challenging environment, I can say that it is rewarding, and with determination, hard work and the right attitude, one can succeed and be counted among the list of women who have succeeded.

● Pule is a previous WISA winner, a PhD Candidate, Junior Medical Scientist and founder and chief executive of Caroline Pule Science and Literacy Foundation.