

Empowering women and youth for a transformative future

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Standard Bank Top Women Conference day one highlights:



The 20th annual Standard Bank Top Women Conference brought together influential voices from various sectors to address the pressing issues of gender equality, economic empowerment, and women's leadership. With insightful keynotes and thought-provoking discussions, the event emphasised action over discourse.

Call for gender equality and women's empowerment

In his keynote address, Sim Tshabalala, chief executive of Standard Bank Group, emphasised the intrinsic link between gender equality, sustainable development, and human rights. Tshabalala underscored the significance of women's economic and professional success, stating: "If you care about African development, you must care about gender equality and women's empowerment."

Recognising women's unique qualities in leadership, Tshabalala credited strong women leaders within Standard Bank for their contributions, while reaffirming their commitment to achieving a 50/50 gender balance in executive ranks.

P&G's commitment to women's empowerment and impactful initiatives

Alicia Eggington, vice president and general manager of Procter & Gamble South Africa, highlighted P&G's commitment to making a real impact on women's lives through initiatives like 'Always Keeping Girls in School'. This programme significantly increases school attendance for girls by providing menstrual hygiene education and sanitary pads.

Eggington stressed the importance of meaningful action, urging corporations not only to talk about change but to actively engage in making a difference. P&G's Women Entrepreneurs Academy has played a crucial role in increasing the representation of women-owned businesses in their supply chain.

Deputy minister of finance emphasises women's economic empowerment and financial inclusion

Dr David Maseko, deputy minister of finance, addressed the economic empowerment of women and highlighted historical gender disparities in business ownership. He emphasised the role of access to finance in women's economic empowerment and outlined government initiatives to support women entrepreneurs.

The Public Investment Corporation (PIC) is actively working to increase gender diversity in its investment portfolio and leadership positions, employing strategies like quotas for women on boards and investing in women-led enterprises.

Advancing SDG 5: Progress and challenges

A Fireside Chat session scrutinised United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) and its role in advancing gender equity globally. Dr Achieng Ojwang, executive director UN Global Compact Network, South Africa, highlighted the importance of SDG 5, emphasising the need to address persistent gender pay gaps and women-owned businesses' limited share of global procurement spend.

Simone Cooper, head: business and commercial banking SA, Standard Bank, emphasised the financial benefits of gender diversity and the crucial role women entrepreneurs play in economies.

Yvonne Chaka Chaka, a women's rights advocate, addressed persistent gender inequalities and encouraged women to uplift and empower each other.

The conversation called on businesses to recognise the financial advantages of diversity while advocating for societal shifts in mindset and behaviour.

Technology's transformative power for women

Lillian Barnard, president of Microsoft Africa, highlighted technology's transformative power in promoting equity in the digital age. She emphasised the role of technology in supporting women-owned businesses and its potential for accelerated learning.

Barnard encouraged women to embrace AI technology, stressing its importance and the evolving human role in the AI era. She called for women's active involvement in governance to ensure AI remains inclusive and fair.



Youth-led solutions discussed

A discussion on youth-led solutions in Africa's socio-economic development featured Naledzani Mosomane, head of enterprise development at Standard Bank, and Dr Tamaryn Green Nxumalo, medical doctor and Miss South Africa 2018.

The conversation highlighted the critical role of youth in driving positive change in Africa, emphasising the need to overcome challenges in education and employment. Strategies for empowering youth included improving access to quality education, vocational training, and support for young entrepreneurs.

Gen Z's Impact on Africa's Socio-Economic Landscape

Experts discussed Generation Z's impact on Africa's socio-economic scene, highlighting their focus on purpose-driven work, flexible employment, and social justice initiatives. Gen Z's entrepreneurial spirit and innovative problem-solving in the digital realm were recognised, along with their emphasis on mental wellness and tackling global issues.

Empowering women in governance and technology

Hon. Emma Theofelus, Namibia's deputy minister of information and communication technologies stressed the importance of women's participation in governance. She committed to using technology for women's emancipation and called for collective action to ensure women are at the forefront of progress.

Engaging men in women's economic empowerment

Velaphi Ratshefola, managing director of Coca-Cola Beverages South Africa, emphasised the importance of empowering all women across the African continent and highlighted the vital role men must play in this endeavour. He acknowledged historical struggles, shared successes in gender representation, and emphasised the intersectionality of gender and race.

Ratshefola's speech resonated with the conference theme, emphasising the transformative power of gender equality.

The growing importance of women's empowerment in Africa

A panel discussion hosted by Coca-Cola Beverages South Africa explored the evolving landscape of women's empowerment in Africa. Key takeaways included the recognition of women's evolving roles, the importance of cross-sector collaboration, the significance of leadership development programmes, and the need for measurable progress in gender equality initiatives.

Toxic work environments: Enough is enough!

During Nene Molefi's impactful talk at the conference, she delved into the critical issue of workplace harassment and toxic cultures, shedding light on their detrimental effects. Her solutions-focused approach offered practical ways for organisations to combat these challenges. She stressed the power of collective action, urging employees to stand together when confronting microaggressions and discrimination.

Molefi emphasised the need to empower staff with active allyship skills and to hold ethics committees accountable for addressing workplace issues. Identifying and addressing bullies within the organisation was also highlighted as a priority, along with implementing comprehensive anti-harassment policies. Lastly, she reminded attendees of the importance of self-care and recognising when it's time to leave a toxic environment. By implementing these solutions, organisations can foster safer, more inclusive workplaces.

GPF's transformative journey towards gender equity and inclusive housing

Sandra Ruiter, project specialist, Gauteng Partnership Fund (GPF)'s keynote address at the conference was a powerful testament to the Gauteng Partnership Fund's (GPF) commitment to empowering women and fostering inclusivity. Ruiter highlighted the GPF's 21-year journey in transforming housing in the Gauteng province, emphasising their dedication to creating spaces where people can live, work, and pray while eradicating spatial inequalities. She discussed the GPF's impressive track record, including delivering 20,000 affordable rental housing units and managing over R1.7bn in private sector funding for housing development.

Ruiter also showcased the GPF's innovative programs, such as the Entrepreneur Empowerment Property Fund, which focuses on women and youth, and their commitment to inclusivity by ensuring local communities' involvement in developments. She proudly stated that the GPF's executive team is 100% female and 100% historically disadvantaged individuals (HDI), underlining their dedication to increasing women's leadership roles and participation in the property

sector.



Initiatives to facilitate women's cross-border trade under AfCFTA

The discussion highlighted the transformative initiatives led by the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) aimed at fostering cross-border trade among women. Through insightful examples and in-depth analysis, the conversation emphasised how these strategic interventions break down barriers, enhance women's participation, and unlock the full potential of African women in cross-border trade. The speakers shared their insights on the significance of the AfCFTA in addressing trade obstacles, reducing costs, and promoting women's economic empowerment.

The panel discussed the role of cross-border trade in creating economic opportunities for women, with a focus on the challenges faced by women in this sector. They stressed the importance of recognising that women account for a significant portion of informal cross-border trade in Africa, approximately 70%, and highlighted the need for an enabling environment that supports women in business.

The potential impact of the AfCFTA on women-owned businesses was also emphasised, with a recognition that women are often better at managing finances and have a lower default rate on loans. The discussion concluded with a call for policies and reforms that prioritise women's inclusion and participation in the AfCFTA, with a strong emphasis on the African women and youth in trade protocol currently under negotiation.

The evolution of women's roles in African films

A Fireside Chat focused on the evolving representation of women in African films. The speakers discussed the importance of female representation in the film industry, emphasising its impact on providing women with a voice and showcasing diverse roles and perspectives. They highlighted the changing portrayal of women in African cinema, moving from traditional roles to more empowered characters, signifying the need for greater gender inclusivity in storytelling.

The panel also stressed the importance of empowering women within the film industry, including upskilling and training programmes and broadening educational institutions to offer specialised training. They emphasised the need for more women in behind-the-scenes roles and decision-making positions, inspiring young women to aspire to these roles and contribute to the industry's growth and diversity.

Promoting tech inclusivity and innovation

In another panel the speakers discussed the importance of inclusivity and innovation in technology and digital education. They focused on how bringing women and marginalised groups into the sector leads to creative solutions and greater potential for innovations that address gender-specific needs and promote gender equality.

The panellists highlighted the need to increase access to technology for women and girls, combat fear and apprehension around technology, and promote reskilling and upskilling programs. They also stressed the significance of empowering women in Stem fields, both in education and in the workplace, to bridge the gender gap in these sectors. The discussion emphasised that women contribute unique perspectives and creativity to technology and innovation, leading to more inclusive and impactful solutions.

The 20th annual Standard Bank Top Women Conference has shown us the way to a fairer and more prosperous Africa. With influential voices, practical solutions, and a shared commitment to gender equality, this conference has emphasised the urgent need to empower women and youth, not as an option, but as a necessity for a transformative future. The world is watching, and the lessons and actions sparked here will undoubtedly make a lasting impact on the continent. It's a testament to the fact that empowering women and young leaders leads to thriving societies and economies, and limitless progress. This conference is a guiding light for a brighter, more inclusive Africa.

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