

Keep adapting, be authentic and dance if you want to: Key lessons from inspiring women in business

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Women attending the 20th annual Women in Business Conference at the UCT Graduate School of Business heard powerful stories from women who are disrupting industries and changing the world.

“Don’t mimic men. If you want to lead, then focus on your own uniqueness. You will be memorable because you are different.” Strong words from Ariella Kuper, who knows a lot about leading in a male-dominated space – she is considered to be South Africa’s leading female auctioneer and is the founder of Solution Strategists, an online auctioneering platform specialising in maritime assets. Kuper was addressing the audience of the 20th annual Women in Business Conference at the UCT Graduate School of Business, held in partnership with P&G.

The conference convened exceptional women who are disrupting industries and spearheading innovation across a variety of sectors. Over the day they shared their journeys, discussed their challenges, and offered insights into how women are harnessing the power of the digital revolution to change the world for the better.

Kuper added that her business success was built on turning raw data into intelligence. She said that moving a traditional auction space online took female intuition to really think through what clients want and to give them the best service and value based on the data available. “Know your target audience,” she advised. “Use digitisation to your advantage. Most importantly, don’t stagnate – keep adapting.”

The conference also examined a more personal side to the challenges women face in the working world. Ntyatyambo Ntloko and Riccardo Cele from [P&G](#) debunked some myths about women at work, most notably that tech, finance and engineering are male dominated areas. There is a perception that one of the reasons there are not enough women in STEM, is that there are not enough women in the pipeline for leadership roles in these areas. But, in fact, 50% of scientists and engineers seeking employment are women and the data shows that women have more advanced degrees than men in these areas, in over 100 countries. However, women only make up 28% of actual employment in these fields.

“Data breaks these myths, but people perpetuate them,” said Cele. “For there to be lasting change, companies need to re-wire their talent systems, create equal opportunities and broaden their definition of leadership.”

Mechell Chetty, Vice President of HR at Unilever Africa, echoed the sentiment that women need to stay open to the opportunities presented by the fourth industrial revolution and be ready to overturn stereotypes. “Try to imagine a world where technology enables you. Don’t be afraid of it – embrace it,” she said. She also offered some cautionary words. “Don’t rely on your job description to dictate how you do your job. Rather, think about where you can add value, where you can learn more and what more you can do in your role. Don’t wait for AI to take your job. Be proactive now. Collaborate more and work across functional silos to learn new skills.”

Thato Kgathanye is one woman who has certainly added value through this approach. This young entrepreneur has even drawn the attention and admiration of Bill Gates for her product which combines recycling and solar technology. Her company, Rethaka, makes school backpacks out of recycled plastic bags. Each backpack includes a solar light, which charges as children walk home from school. Then they can use the light when the sun has set – this is much needed especially for rural children who struggle to do their homework without access to electricity. “My business is based on the fact that I have empathy for people. Business needs to be more than making money, it needs to be a driving force for doing good,” she said.

Ultimately, it is up to everyone to do what they can to move the dial on equal opportunities. Many speakers observed that

even if more women are included, the tone of an organisation may still be a male one, making it difficult for women to truly participate. Ntloko summed this up succinctly by offering her perception of diversity and inclusion. “Diversity is being invited to the party. Inclusion is being asked to dance,” she said. Her advice for women – don’t wait to be asked. “If you want to dance, then dance.”

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