

# Promoting women as agents of change in STEM sectors

By [Yershen Pillay](#)

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We are in an era where significant action must be taken through all phases of education to ensure that women are represented at every level of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and maths) careers. In commemorating the United Nation's International Day of Women and Girls in Science this month, we as CHIETA added our collective voice to the call to change the narrative and celebrate women and girls who are leading innovation and to remove barriers that hold women and girls back.



Source: Supplied

CHIETA initiatives that are contributing to this aim include a project that introduces cost-effective, basic chemistry kits to learners in rural schools, most of them girls. These kits provide hands-on experience, which is identified as a bottleneck to school-level science studies. They are designed to ignite an interest in chemistry among girl learners in disadvantaged communities so that they are encouraged to consider it as a career choice. This project, to the value of R1m, launches next month.

## 12-month learnerships

Another partnership that will continue contributing to rectifying the gender imbalance in the chemical sector is with Aspen Pharmacare. This project entails occupationally directed 12-month learnerships for 50 people with disabilities, 50% of whom are women. The beneficiaries are gaining skills and experience in sales, production and operations management, HR, and management of active ingredients within the pharmaceutical sector. This represents an investment of R2.7m by CHIETA.

The third, is a six-month project in partnership with African Alabaster Square that teaches young women to manufacture beauty products, which will enable them to start their own businesses, producing and selling their products to a range of customers. CHIETA's investment in this project is R948,000.

## Increased employability, entrepreneurial skills

We recognise that bringing more women and girls into STEM careers is crucial for two main reasons. Firstly, the skills that women learn in these projects and other STEM fields empower them, increasing their employability and entrepreneurial

skills. It adds to their creativity and problem-solving skills and empowers them to be creators within science and technology sectors.

Secondly, ensuring an equitable balance of women and girls in sciences will advance our capacity to overcome complex challenges. Women bring a wide range of experiences and skills that add fresh new perspectives to problem-solving within sciences.



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## Empathy in design thinking process

In terms of empathy, it is accepted that women tend to have a greater capacity for it than men do. In an article titled, "Everyone benefits when we give STEM the gift of girls" on the Teach for America website, the point is made that, "Building empathy is a critical first step of the design thinking process – one frequently used by engineers and scientists to solve complex problems. What women contribute to the STEM field goes beyond diversification. They are capable of driving progress in STEM fields through their unique gifts."

CHIETA's chairperson, Wezi Khoza, is a powerful advocate for an improved gender balance in science sectors. In her message in the CHIETA 2020/2021 annual report, she states: "We have placed huge emphasis on assisting, training and coaching women-run SMMEs which see the much-awaited women advancement in the chemical sector.

"Transformation and progress in this regard has a monumental effect on our communities and the local economy as a whole. Women are seen as the backbone of families and communities. If we succeed in upskilling and providing equal opportunities, our communities thrive, and in turn our sector and economy thrives."

This then is the stand CHIETA is taking – we are promoting women as agents of change and adding our action to the UN's call for equality in science. We can all help to close the STEM gender gap by encouraging schoolgirls to choose STEM careers, creating equal educational opportunities, building awareness that girls can succeed in STEM subjects, and introducing them to strong women role models in STEM sectors.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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