

Women in Business Conference set to break new ground in 2020

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For the first time in its 21-year history, the UCT Graduate School of Business' popular annual Women in Business Conference, focused on addressing inclusion, access, and equality in the workplace, will take place online. And organisers are hoping to reach record numbers to raise funds for a bursary to enable future generations of women to study at the school.



The annual Women in Business Conference organised by the University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business (UCT GSB) will this year go digital – *aiming to reach* more people and connect alumni in almost every country around the world.

“This year could be our most relevant yet in terms of impact and reach given the current context of the world,” says Azvir Rampursad, manager of corporate partnerships for the UCT GSB. “2020 has been the year for agility and new experiences and this conference has, for 21 years, always been responsive, with a core focus on addressing inclusion, access and equality.”

“While this is certainly a challenging time, there are many opportunities for women now as well,” says Thielshad Karriem, an MBA student who is helping to organise the conference this year. “With more people working from home, travel time to and from work has been cut down and there is space to study at home. Working from home allows women greater flexibility and many companies have found themselves adapting to different ways of working, which are more beneficial to working mothers, for instance.”

However, recent research from [McKinsey](#) has also highlighted that women may be more at risk during the pandemic as companies are tempted to dial back on efforts to promote inclusion and diversity.

Karriem says a big focus of this year’s conference will be on highlighting the value that women bring to the workplace, especially during times of crisis and finding solutions to the biggest obstacles that they face professionally - the gender disparity that still exists in leadership positions, what can be done about the gender pay gap and breaking down barriers and stereotypes to find ways to promote inclusivity and drive change. For this, men also need to be pulled into the discussion as they can be powerful allies in promoting women in the workplace.

Karriem believes that women sometimes need to know that they don’t have to be more like a man to succeed in male-dominated fields, like engineering. “Women are different and they bring different strengths, which is often precisely what is needed, especially in times of crisis,” she says. A recent survey conducted by [Pew Research Centre](#) found that women are 34% better at working out compromises, 34% more likely to be honest and ethical, 30% more likely to provide fair pay and benefits and 25% better at mentoring.

The theme for the 2020 conference is ‘Rise’, a call to action not only for women but for all who can help empower, educate and promote professional women. Karriem, who is a qualified chemical engineer, says many of her female colleagues were

inspired by her decision to study for an MBA on top of her engineering qualification. “Just hearing of someone else who has achieved something, can help move you towards seeing the possibility for yourself. That is why having role models and mentors is so important. We need to see, and hear, from more female leaders.”

One of the enduring aspects of the annual conference is the fundraiser for a scholarship to the UCT GSB to expand access to the school for financially excluded candidates. Rampursad says organisers will for the first time use a digital platform to raise funds, in addition to funding generated through ticket sales. “This year, fundraising will be crowd-sourced through participants and sponsors, made possible through a digital app,” he explains.

A minimum amount of R50 will grant delegates access to the conference and all the sessions. Delegates are also able to make a larger donation on the app. Rampursad says: “We are excited that the UCT GSB Women in Business Conference will be breaking new ground in a number of ways this year. The event has steadfastly promoted female leadership and access for 21 years and this year, we hope these innovations will allow us to draw in even more voices and expand our impact.”

For more information and to book tickets, visit <http://gsbblogs.uct.ac.za/womeninbusiness/>

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