

A multi-pronged approach to welcoming women into the chemicals sector

By [Wezi Khoza](#)

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Despite decades of effort, the gender disparity in technical fields is still sizable. According to a study by the World Economic Forum, women in the engineering, manufacturing and construction industry are outnumbered - for every ten men, there are just three women. This does not bode well for chemical industries which need all the talent they can get considering the current scarcity of chemical engineers. This restricted talent pool poses limitations to the wider chemical industries.



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Women should be encouraged into the sector, for the benefit of their own empowerment as well as for the progress of the wider industry. Efforts towards this have pointed towards inspiring a culture change, where the patriarchal culture in science and technology related industries is continuously challenged. But it is no easy task due to deep inherent societal and corporate biases against women in these roles.

While progress is indeed being made, we need a strategy where women are leading the change. Rather than waiting for the industry to become more welcoming, we must welcome ourselves into the industry. The question is, how?

Role-models and mentors

There is an African proverb which goes, "When you educate a woman, you educate a community". It is thought that as traditional caretakers, an educated mother will pass on her knowledge to her children. While this narrative is dated and in itself somewhat patriarchal, the essence of the message still rings true in that a woman holds power to act as role model and mentor to others who seek her knowledge – be it her children, her coworkers or community members.

Women in science and technology need to avail themselves as mentors and role-models, and guide others into the chemicals industry. Industry must also collaborate towards this goal. CHIETA, for example, has been focusing on assisting, training and coaching women-run SMMEs with the aim of advancing women in the chemical sector.

There is a Zulu saying, “Igotshwa lisemanzi”, which is similar to Aristotle’s quote of “Give me a child and I will give you a man”. It refers to the incredible capacity for learning which children hold. At a young age, their brains are like sponges, ready to absorb input indiscriminately. At these ages, the significance and potential of science-related concepts should be reinforced and nurtured. The science and technology ‘seed’ must be planted during the early human developmental stages, without gender exclusivity.



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Closing the gender gap

The aim is long-term sector transformation, which would have a monumental effect on our communities and the local economy as a whole. Economists from PWC have forecast that if we close the gender gap by just 10%, South Africa could achieve higher economic growth and a 6.5% reduction in unemployment.

Education is part of a growing movement, one that our country desperately seeks. It is overwhelming to imagine the possibilities for a future governed by education, innovation and equality. We must work together to make this future a reality.

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