

DRIVING SYSTEMS CHANGE, RESEARCH AND LEARNING

Sharmi Surianarain, chief impact officer of Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator, leads this not-for-profit social enterprise on systems change, research and learning as it works to “build African solutions for youth unemployment”, as she puts it. She has masters’ degrees from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of management.

GENDER STEREOTYPING AND UNEMPLOYMENT

Despite all the initiatives by government, business and civil society to address youth unemployment, almost two million young South Africans (15–35 age group) have given up hope of finding a job, as reported by Stats SA in its *Quarterly Labour Force Survey* for the first quarter of 2022. Women, in particular, are the worst affected. They were triple-disadvantaged during the pandemic – they worked in the

hardest-hit sectors and carried significant additional burdens, including greater caregiving responsibilities. On average, women are more qualified, but less employed, according to research into the gender gap in education and employment conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Even if they have the right qualifications, gender stereotypes stand in the way.

“While we’re making progress in getting the gender balance in youth training and employment right, a lot still needs to be done,” says Surianarain. “We need more initiatives that consciously address gender stereotypes, such as the multistakeholder partnership for plumbers (with the Institute of Plumbing South Africa) for recognition of prior learning training, where thirteen per cent of the cohorts are female compared to an industry average of just three per cent.

“For young women seeking work, the barriers are higher and harder to overcome. Young women have more caring responsibilities, but less money for printing, mobile data and transport, and less time to volunteer and network. And they risk harassment if they do get the job interview. We must ensure

women are at the heart of solutions to youth employment. Designing for their lived reality can help address these issues: allowing for flexible timings/hybrid work, safe transport, and a targeted focus on dismantling gender stereotypes at the workplace,” she explains.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUES

The SA Youth network, powered by Harambee, comprises over 2.7 million youth and is part of the Presidential Youth Employment Intervention. In the past decade, Harambee has worked hard to address gender barriers. “SA Youth is over 63 per cent female and designed to address those barriers, especially transport, data, and time-poverty,” Surianarain says. “Our platform – sayouth.mobi – is free of cost and data-free, and factors in geographic location in job matching to reduce transport costs.

“Gender equity isn’t only about getting young women into jobs – inclusion in the labour market is just the first step. Our data indicates that there’s a pay gap across every single job profession for young women. So, advocating for pay equity is vital.

“Many sectors have huge gender biases – for example, in the plumbing industry, there are perceptions that women can’t and aren’t suited to do the job. Our partnerships have proven otherwise – women are just as capable, if not more so in many instances. With targeted support and interventions, we can address these imbalances. Women with care responsibilities are often perceived as being ‘uncommitted’ to work. My own experience has proven otherwise – women who have to juggle responsibilities are often even more committed to excellence and delivery. It’s a question of designing for and creating workspaces conducive to this reality.”

ADVICE FOR WOMEN WANTING TO GET AHEAD

Surianarain offers the following advice for women entering the work environment. “Don’t be afraid to ask for what you need. Actively support other women, their voices, and their choices by creating opportunities and advocating for their growth and leadership. And let’s not forget the importance of men as allies in this conversation. Harambee has initiatives such as WeMen, to promote comradeship.

“Listening to and collaborating with my peers and my reports, amplifying voices that don’t get enough airtime, and creating safe spaces for women and other socially excluded groups helped me get ahead in my career. Always keep an eye on the end goal: building pathways to the employment of young women has a ripple effect in society, leading to better development outcomes for all,” she advises. ■

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