

Woman in leadership and their Resilience in times of Crisis



The Community Chest hosted, on 26 November, 'A Women in Leadership, and their Resilience in times of crisis' webinar. Dr Claire Kelly, Head of Transformation at Stellenbosch University, acted as the programme director.

The key aspects and talking points that subsequently flowed after each of the panel members addressed the attendees included knowing and understanding your own value, the idea of owning your voice in an environment which is not necessarily welcoming of that voice, the importance of having male allies and their role, if any, in advancing the position of women in leadership and the burden of transformation or social change, without certain spaces.

Proudly donning the academic activist mantel, the following speaker, Professor Nadine Bowers-du Toit, an associate professor in the Theology & Development Faculty at University of Stellenbosch addressed the space that women leaders need to occupy oftentimes is one that needs to take rather than waiting to be given.

“University spaces, and specifically historic white universities, are still notoriously untransformed spaces,” eluded a very passionate Prof Bowers-du Toit. “Academia was never built for women or people of colour and more especially not for women of colour. Across the world these spaces are known to be patriarchal, hierarchal and they are racist in origin. In historic white universities the system was created to serve and perpetuate normative white patriarchy, in other words it was not created for us. In my own faculty, which is one of the most quantitatively transformed faculties within the University (of Stellenbosch), we only appointed our first full female professor of colour last year (2019). In many ways, women of colour who are taking up leadership position in this particular sector we are doing what the Spanish proverb says, we are making the path by walking it, and the majority of us, if not all of us, are actually first generation university graduates.”

“One of the things that I have done, is to claim this space, this is my space and sometimes I get asked why do you look so at home in this space, but when you see women of colour in this space looking comfortable it is because they have had to assimilate, they had to begin to perform whiteness, perform in patriarchal. Sometimes when you want a space at the table you need to bring your own cutlery, something my mother taught me, bring your own cutlery and your own chair if needed and make that space,” said Prof Bowers-du Toit.

I am the Director of the University of the Western Cape (UWC) Centre for Entrepreneurship and Innovation and the chairperson of the Community Chest board. I made strong mention of how important women in leadership roles should not adopt a token mindset.

“I am only working in academia for the past seven and a half years; a lot of my experiences is based on my work in the corporate sector. I worked at the Medical Research Council (MRC) as an executive manager at the age of 28; I was the youngest woman in that environment. From there I was headhunted to go and work at ABSA and again I was the first black woman in the boardroom looking after the Eastern and Western Cape.”

“Part of me wanting to share my story and my experiences from the past 15 years, is to empower women who need hand-holding, and who are facing similar challenges. As women, we do not do a good job at supporting each other, holding hands, and helping each other to navigate difficult

spaces. We need to be honest these challenges do exist, but we need to have a plan. Have a plan; be clear in your head about how you are going to tackle the space that you are in, one of the things that I found to be important that I needed to know what my strengths are.

“Embracing your strength as a woman becomes a very important strategic component. Understand how you are going to navigate the institutional barriers that are created to keep woman out. Learn to trust your intuition and ensure you have a support structure. Don’t undermine the value of a coach or a mentor and always be authentic and maintain your integrity in everything that you say and do.

“People often asked me how I created a balance - home and work - and very quickly I got to learn that it is not about balancing but about a blend. How you blend those two areas of your life becomes important, and again it is a very individual approach.

The final speaker of the webinar was Ms Zandile Siwali, the director of the Etafeni Day Care Centre Trust based in Nyanga, made strong comments about the role mothers and grandmothers play in raising women to be self-sustainable leaders in their communities.

“I was raised by my mother and grandmother. My grandmother was a domestic worker who held the family together,” Ms Siwali reflected in her opening statement of her address. “My mother had to stop studying and go work to help my grandmother. They were able to create values that would uphold the family, they created a path for us, the younger generation in the family, to grow in. Our mothers, grandmothers and aunts have raised us to be strong not by saying what we should do but by showing us how it needs to be done and they have continued to do this.

“Women are constantly evolving and reaching new milestones with a wide spectrum of community activities. My experience as a woman and a leader, is that woman is more transformational, we function as role models especially to our subordinates, we inspire and spend a lot of time coaching the teams we are leading. Women inspire teamwork, specifically for me – I am a very inclusive leader. I ensure that all the people that I am leading know where we are going.

“With all the challenges that we as women leaders encountered, we continue to achieve the desired results and impact in our communities. Women leaders continue to struggle for space in leadership positions and they deserve the respect they have earned in the community they work in. The development sector is primarily powered by the labour, the vision and creativity of women.”

In closing, Ms Taryn Bell, Leadership Academy Training Manager at the Community Chest, thanked each speaker for their raw, unfiltered and "naked" approach to addressing the issues and challenges that not only women in leadership positions are facing, but women in general in all facets and industries of our society in South Africa.

“I start, I ask was there ever a time when women were not in crises, I answer was there ever a time when women has not stepped up and prove themselves to be resilient and overcomers. The road of injustice remains long, painful and never ending,” Bell concluded.