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Women in Safety

“When talent meets passion”

By their very nature, women are caring, compassionate and protective, innate qualities which resonate with the desired attributes of a Safety practitioner. Practitioners in the field of safety, health and environment must be able to show genuine concern for people, their well-being and uphold the fundamentals of sustainability. Women in Safety exhibit a classic example of talent meeting passion.

The journey for women in Safety

Women in safety started as a rarity, but the turn of the 20th century saw women trickling into previously male-dominated territories within industry and commerce. The reasons for their exclusion prior to this era remain debatable but can be largely attributed to the patriarchal society which existed, where women were mainly confined to the home and other roles which society deemed to be menial and subservient. However, these societal pressures did not deter some women in making great strides in the field of Safety. Whilst history is awash with male inventors who made invaluable contributions to the world, we owe a significant amount of safety innovations to the women who not only pushed boundaries but did so whilst facing gender base discrimination and fought legal battles for their work to be recognised. Anna Connelly in 1887 was credited with inventing the fire escape which formed the foundation for emergency response systems and building by-laws which are still applicable in contemporary times. Rachel Carson's Silent Spring in 1962 launched environmental movement and awakened concerns for ecotoxicology. The hope for humanity to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic currently lies with large scale vaccinations and one of the pioneers behind the biotechnology of RNA synthesis is Katalin Kariko.

Success stories

Hard work, networking and an armour of thick skin, has provided an opportunity for some women to become the biggest names in the field of safety, health and environment. Women are actively involved in the Plan, Do, Check, Act cycle of the Safety career as they are playing a significant role in safety, health and environmental innovation, policy formulation, systems implementation, compliance and regulatory management.

The success stories of the following women are an inspiration to the next generation of leaders.

- **Fumni Adegbola:** MD/CEO of Combined Training Solutions Ltd – a leading HSE training and consulting firm in UK and Africa. Founder and President of the Society of Women in Safety, Health and Environment.
- **Dr Eve Gadzikwa:** Director General and Secretary to the Zimbabwe's sole standards and quality assessment and certification organisation Standards Association of Zimbabwe.
- **Theodora Rondoza:** Director of BESA Zimbabwe with over 18 years of experience in ISO systems training, consultancy and auditing.
- **Rumbidzai Kamkazingeni:** SHEQ Manager, Shamva Gold Mine.
- **Juliana Kundiona:** SHEQ Manager, Lafarge Cement



Challenges

Male-dominated industries and occupations such as Safety are particularly vulnerable to reinforcing masculine stereotypes that make it difficult for women to excel. Women working in Safety face a variety of challenges including societal expectations and beliefs about women's leadership abilities, pervasive stereotypes such as the caring mother or office housekeeper who are left to do the administrative jobs compared to their male counterparts.

Mentoring and career development activities are also a mostly a preserve of the male Safety practitioners as leadership roles are mostly occupied by men who easily identify with their fellow male subordinates.

There is a general perception that women should be protected from hazardous environments as they are weak and vulnerable. This ideology presents a challenge for women in safety as they are discouraged from visiting work areas identified as high risk thereby inhibiting them from adequately dispensing of their duties. For example, some women in mining seldom visit areas such as the bottom of the shaft to carry out inspections as these are deemed too risky and unsuitable for them.

Societal pressures still exist and continue to be a major impediment for women in Safety in their quest to break the glass ceiling in their careers. In typical African societies, women are still expected to carry out child-minding and housekeeping chores which makes it difficult for them to work in industries such as mining in which they will be required to be away from home for a significant amount of time. The pressures result in women leaving their jobs in order to satisfy the societal construct.

Women also suffer from what can be termed an "imposter syndrome" in which they are generally viewed as incompetent and that they occupy these roles because of luck, sympathy and being cherry picked for other reasons unrelated to their abilities.

Advice to the aspiring SHEQ Practitioner

My experience has allowed me to be a specialist in SHEQ systems management and a generalist in the industry as I have had a chance to appreciate the mining value chain of different precious minerals. With the support of my mentors, I made it and it is not a glass ceiling for me but a diamond one.

Way Forward

- The girl child should be encouraged to take up a career in Safety through career guidance.
- There is need to harness the support of Captains of industry to take a lead in promoting equal opportunities for employment and career advancement.
- Recruitment policies should embrace gender diversity.
- Creating a conducive environment for and establishing facilities for women to carryout their maternal duties whilst at work, for example, making improvements on maternity leave, establishing lactation camps and day care centres.
- Development of societies and professional bodies for recognising and empowering women in Safety.

Be bold, be attentive, do your best!