

It was never meant to be a Man's Game

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This chapter is dedicated to the women who are changing the world, one moment at a time – our forebears known and unknown. This is an ode to all the women – diligently doing things big and small – to advance the world for the better.

Here's to my legion of change agents, all of them an incredible part of the tapestry of my life. My late grandmothers, Mme Tabane le Seapei, the late Mam Winnie Ngomane, the late Mme Betty Matlhare (my kindergarten teacher), Mrs Carol Ashman (my childhood speech and drama coach), Tselagale Mafoyane (my queen and mother), my small but distinctive tribe of sister friends, my nieces, and every woman who has positively touched my life.

In many African households, children are supposed to be seen and not heard. However, I was the antithesis of that from as early as I can remember. I've always been fascinated with rules and conformity – especially the reasons why we follow the norms we do. As a child, this meant that I asked a lot of questions and was never happy to readily accept the “rule set” That is so often spelled out for children. My mother as the stern disciplinarian in our home had the worst time with my inquisitions and sadly, often saw them as a challenge to her authority. As an adult, I can appreciate how challenging it must have been to have me in the home along with three other siblings and whatever other life challenges my parents were dealing with at the time.

This crazed inquisitiveness in my childhood would later impart upon me the desire to critically analyse and understand things. In High School, my interest gravitated both towards the Performing Arts as well as to the Sciences, though my natural choice in tertiary education was the science field.

When I was younger, I didn't consider my parents' compatibility or what they drew from each other in raising me and my siblings. My view of them was based primarily on how I experienced their personalities and so, in judgement, I viewed my father as the more amenable, patient parent and often mistook my mother for the judgemental and less pliable of the two. In retrospect, their partnership offered me all of the makings of a great childhood, structure,

accountability, and consideration for those around me – which is literally like gold when living in a household with six people in it.

My mother is one of the strongest people I know, a strong woman who was raised and surrounded by strong women herself. My maternal grandfather left his family when my mom was only six years old – a political exile separated from his country and family for many years. So, the circumstances which were implanted in our country's painful tapestry, caused by apartheid, made my grandmother a single parent and for all intents and purposes, a widow when she, along with her children were very young. That separation, along with her sheer stubbornness, invoked the type of strength which is best described by an expression in Setswana, my mother tongue, which goes, "*Mmangwana o tshwara thipa ka fa bogaleng*" which loosely translated means "a mother protects her family, even in the face of danger."

My mother and aunts, having come from a home made up of four women and an estranged father, embraced the notion of self-reliance. In our home – taking some lessons from my mother's upbringing – my parents embraced an early version of a gender fluid home, assigning any and all chores to us – my brother and the three sisters. My parents' mechanism for assigning these was based on age, not on gender and so for a good long time, I believed that every household functioned in this way. From around the age of four, my parents were encouraging us to read and write, and even though we were reading children's books, we were still reading. Each of us was expected to learn how to write their names and learn to count, all before we started Grade 1. The achievement of learning to hold a pencil or crayon and master the spelling of one's name, even if some of the letters were facing the wrong direction, was rewarded with a promotion to the task of washing one's own socks and polishing school shoes from Grade 1.

Like army sergeants, our parents continuously drilled us, while all the while letting us believe that this growing task list was a great achievement in life and so we all strove, each of my siblings and I, seeking the validation and applause. Polishing our shoes would move us over to sweeping our bedrooms, then in time the kitchen, mopping and polishing the floors, washing dishes, and eventually cooking and cleaning like absolute masters by the time we were in our early teens.

In all of my formative years, my parents habitually held us to a life standard based on self-reliance, high achievement, and distinction. These standards were anchored by their love, support, selflessness, and faith in God.

What I remember most about my childhood is that I absolutely mastered those things that were dear to me, like singing, dancing, reading, and writing, and never for a single moment considered that my ability would somehow be linked to me being male or female. In much the same way, I performed very poorly at those things I wasn't good at. I could never run fast as a child – well, I still can't. Although I would have loved to be a prolific sketch artist, my artistic ability was and still is non-existent and even then, I never associated these shortcomings with my gender.

High School was one of those defining periods for me in the clear demarcation of personal ability by gender. From sport to academia, the school system enjoyed the distinction in the celebration of performance by gender. Across the different sporting codes, there was always the best girl or boy swimmer, athlete, gymnast, or even archer. As a child and as most children do, I fell in line and followed the rules – well most of the time – and never paid attention to any of the limitations or privileges that the separation would have on how I saw my place in the world.

Entering the corporate world was a combination of generations of dreams coming true, all at the same time. As children, my parents had never coddled us and so we were probably more independent than children should be, sooner than we should have been. We took on more responsibilities than some of our peers would, purely because our sense of duty was stimulated very early on in our lives. I left home for boarding school at the age of 12 and so any puerile attachment that 12-year-olds still have to home was considerably diminished. By the time I got to first year at university, I wasn't only dreaming about the all night partying that some of my peers would have been – although that didn't stop me indulging in it. I yearned for financial freedom, progress, and greater independence over everything else in order to liberate my parents from what I still feel was the noble and generous investment in a great education for my siblings and me.

This sense of duty made me feel right at home once I entered corporate South Africa. I may have been a novice in my humble job, but I was immensely proud of the modest living that it afforded me and the freedom my parents could begin to enjoy. The initial assessment that my analytical mind undertook in that first job was the leadership. I scanned that environment as I wanted to know two things: First, who was in charge, and second, what I needed to do to rise up the ranks. I quickly identified my team leader, divisional manager, general manager, and director, and established two things with that assessment:

One was the sobering realisation of just how low I was on that corporate ladder, and second, how very masculine and untransformed my leadership team was.

Some of the generous benefits of youth are the innocent ignorance it is often veiled in and the overzealousness that one may have about their own capabilities at that age. Not only was I employed in the richest square mile in Africa, but I was persevering – a small-town girl with big city dreams. In my mind, I was simply unstoppable! I was employed in what was then a small division within a new age financial services company in the health sector. Their leaders were young, the energy prodigious and that was fertile ground for a young and determined girl. I scanned my division and the odds appeared to be stacked against me. There were, in my assessment, too many of us in the entry level roles. I was concerned about getting lost in the system and becoming part of the furniture, so I set off to distinguish myself.

Within my second month of work, I resolved to remain at work well after the close of business. There was really no work to do, at least nothing intricate, given how junior I was at the time, but still, I stayed back after everyone had left. I had nothing to rush home to and hated the scramble for public transport at peak times, so I would simply sit in the office and stare at my computer. On the odd occasion where there'd be admin to complete, I was more than happy to take it on. What I soon realised is that the leadership team would also reappear from their engagements and meetings at that hour. That excited me.

I didn't have to sit and stare for long before one of these leaders walked up to me one day to make small talk. In these ten minutes that it took for us to get acquainted, he had inquired about my background and was excited by the fact that I held the same undergraduate qualification as the divisional manager. By the end of that evening, he'd introduced me to his peers and the very next day, I was assigned to working directly with him on special projects. That was my first step towards corporate distinction and away from the crowd. I couldn't have been happier.

That divisional manager would become one of the most significant influences in my life and to my career. His name is Stephen Mitchley, and he became my very first corporate mentor. He coached and I listened, he instructed, and I did – I moulded my behaviour around his. I observed him and kept a mental note for myself. I strove to anticipate his requests, to do more than he asked, to think how he did, which was often three steps further than I would in resolving a problem. That earned me the privilege to walk into meetings which I ordinarily would not have been able to have access to. I gained a seat at the table,

albeit as an observer and became the quiet but ever-present young female voice in those sessions.

It was great to get a seat at the table, but no one ever told me that there'd be more to be expected of me once I was there. While I was confident and expressive around my mentor, I wasn't always vocal at the management and strategic meetings that he'd let me tag along to. It wasn't long before my input was being sought around the table and I came to the realisation that a seat at the table comes with the responsibility to add value.

I had a lot to say in the company of my friends, and my parents had encouraged us to speak up when required to, but I was uncertain about the terrain that a boardroom presented and whether my voice would carry. In those early years, I often limited my input to responding to questions when asked and reporting back on tasks to which I'd been assigned. It didn't take long for me to realise that simply showing up and fading into the background wouldn't suffice. It sounded simple, but transitioning from being a university student and debating ideas with my peers in class to leading and potentially challenging the ideas of people with more experience than me, was daunting.

In my first job I experienced a lot of my professional firsts and that prepared me for the spirited career that would follow. My meander through corporate South Africa may appear to be ill thought from the outside – well it may be muddled, but it's been organised chaos for me. It took me six years to summon the courage to leave my first job – one of the toughest decisions I have ever made in my early working years. I had little to complain about. I was in a wonderful job and had risen up the ranks quite impressively in those six years. I was well regarded among my peers and leaders (that's what I tell myself) and had even won an annual company-wide Star Award in recognition of my performance.

For all intents and purposes, I could have drifted into cruise control and continued to do "just fine," but I've never been one for averages or safe spaces. The yearning to distinguish myself was once again surfacing and it was loud. At this stage, I had two internal mentors, one of whom was a member of the group executive, and they both cautioned me to "stay the course," To "be patient" while all my internal panic signals were sounding. I was in my mid-twenties, had enjoyed a relatively good career with a clear path towards stability but again, I was displeased at my own achievements.

I didn't just want to enter those spaces which I was given permission to occupy, I wanted to be trusted to chart new territory. Once I made the decision

to seek new paths, they came out to find me. I was invited to interviews with two different financial services companies and inside I felt alive again. I hadn't a clue about finances or financial management, but that insecurity fuelled the desire to learn. I enjoyed great satisfaction from my periods of learning. Those moments which required me to first admit that I'm in over my head because once that humility sets in, my curiosity is awakened, and in those moments, I learn a tremendous amount.

The one institution had quite a celebrated brand and the other was regarded as slower, older, and perhaps less agile. In all honesty, I could have gone with either one, except that the former extended an offer to me after a single coffee meeting with their Africa Executive, while the latter had been putting me through their rigorous selection process for four months. In my mind, the choice was simple, if they hadn't seen in four months what the other one had seen over one sitting of coffee, they may never have seen it – and so off to the Jurassic I went with my mouth shut and my ears and eyes wide open. That Africa Executive would become and remains one of my most trusted mentors and voices of reason today.

One of my most sobering engagements at “the Bank” was a meeting to which I was invited by my director within my first month on the job. I had been given the Basel Accord as my induction read, the most intimidating piece of literature for someone with my sparse knowledge of the banking sector, and was supposed to understand it well enough to consider its impact on my division. My parents raised strong girls. If they hadn't, I may have gone running for the hills. I had gone through the Accord at least twice before the concepts started to make very basic sense to my scientific mind. Armed with my rudimentary knowledge, I braved this first director's meeting, while I wasn't even a head of a department, thus another invitation to the table. I rushed into the meeting when all the other participants, all better informed, all with more experience, had already taken their respective seats at the table. I scanned the room and once again staring back at me was a room full of only men. I greeted and took my seat, exchanging a brief smile of acknowledgement with my director. Just as the meeting started, one of the other directors who clearly had no idea who I was, made a head gesture at me and asked if I was going to take the coffee orders!

The what? I was confused at first – coffee and Basel. Had I perhaps missed this reference in all my nervous reading? I'd never imagined that in a room full of very knowledgeable men, all of whom I was hoping to learn from, I'd be mistaken for the tea lady. I didn't know whether to be annoyed or impassive.

Suddenly the voices of all the naysayers were ringing loud in my head – perhaps joining “the Bank” would be a regrettable mistake.

I could have easily chosen to let the annoyance derail my plan at work. I could have also allowed myself to feel victimised by a single individual's bigotry, but when you've had to fight for everything you have, you learn to roll with the punches. This close-minded encounter and some of the disapproving stares and glances at meetings made me determined to work through the aggravation. I was in a new environment and all my previous glory from my first job was long forgotten. I had to start all over again and prove why I could be *young* and *female* and *black* and *deserving* of my seat at their privileged table.

My parents had taught us to work hard from an early age and the rewards of a good work ethic were evident in the stable life they'd been able to create for us. Having received a scholarship in High School and spent a long time around children from different countries, cultures, and ethnic groups, I'd imagined that I was better prepared than some others for my place in the world. However, I wasn't. School had provided an incredible opportunity to appreciate the differences between us, while celebrating what we had in common. Within my school system, all intolerance and any intransigence were weeded out. That may have made for a great place for school children, but created a pseudo-culture which I learnt was quite unrealistic in the real world.

Ursula Burns, the 1st African American Woman to head a Fortune 500 company once said, “Keep your eyes on what's important and everything else will fall into place.” That's exactly what I started to do. I was in a place that was more narrow-minded and less welcoming, but it was when I simply stopped paying attention to those annoyances and started carving out my own space that I felt more comfortable. I hadn't ever let a little discomfort derail me before and I wasn't about to start, so I stopped expecting the welcome, the greetings, or the smiles. It was great if I got them, and just as great if I didn't. I found my own tribe, those people who encouraged my growth and I leaned heavily on them. I asked questions, I tried new things, I worked long and I worked hard. I was relentless.

I was also a little older – I hoped I was a little wiser – but I was more confident than I had been all those years ago in my first job. No amount of nerves could keep me from taking my seat at the table, no matter who was unsettled by my presence. I realised that I had to be me at all times and that the world had to adjust. I may not have known everything about financial services, but I was learning more each day and I wasn't afraid to ask. I was determined

to do everything that I needed to enable me to add the value that I was certain I could add.

To be fair, the corporate world is not homogenous. No one company is exactly like the next. With each move I've made, there have been great lessons to learn. Sometimes, you may have to take up a torch and crawl into the dark because people may not always be forthcoming or excited with the idea of supporting you. That's okay. What my responsibility was and always will be is to stay the course, to understand the requirements, and to add value.

Over the years, I have celebrated with admiration, just like those women who have walked boldly into spaces which women have previously not occupied. The limitations in what we're able to achieve exist most loudly in our minds. Women have said so much about how our interests have not always been well represented across different spaces. We'd do better to inhabit those spaces ourselves and represent our own interests.

Practice may not necessarily make perfect, but practice will refine what you're good at, so that you can learn to focus on that. I know that practice will never make perfect because if it did, I'd be a world-famous artist. As a child, I had the greatest admiration for artists like my brother. They'd think of something or simply take a look at something and then with simple strokes on a piece of paper, manage to translate that into something magnificent to look at. No, I didn't become a great artist, but I grew very comfortable in the sound of my voice.

There's an interesting thing that happens when you learn to trust the sound of your own voice – it's called confidence. Once that is realised, you learn to take charge of your interactions, to not only listen while at the decision-making table, but to also add value. I have learnt to trust my conviction, to be open to learn from others around me, but to take full charge of my own thoughts. I've also learnt that I have at least one thing in common with my male colleagues at the table, and that was to see the company or task to succeed, and if we can all equally focus on that, then the route by which we get there can be a matter of compromise.

"I didn't learn to be quiet when I had an opinion. The reason they knew who I was is because I told them" – Ursula Burns said that about her journey to chairperson and CEO at Xerox, and my heart had said it a million times over. My opinion of myself is more valuable to me than the opinions that others hold of me. I appreciate that while some may look at me and see the world, there may be others who see only ruins, so instead of yielding to these yo-yo views of me, I

have chosen to focus on building a life based on how and what I want for my life. I speak openly when I have something to say and at the same time, I keep quiet when I have nothing to say. I know that always having something to say, even when it adds no value, can be as wearisome as never having anything to say at all – especially when you occupy those spaces in which your input is expected.

What I didn't know when I started working was just how generous life would be in the experiences it would bless me with. In that first job, when I felt like I was facing an uphill battle to the top, I couldn't have imagined what my view would look like over 10 years after starting in corporate South Africa. In 2012, I was invited to meet with two gentlemen who were looking to appoint a seasoned professional onto their board of directors. This was one of the most exciting undertakings of my career. It's that excitement that almost split me in two: The one part of me was enthralled by the opportunity, while the other was wanting to run for the hills as I was nervous about messing it all up.

What made that encounter more nerve-wrecking is that one of the two gentlemen that I met with, is quite a household name. He had enjoyed a remarkable career and very public profile, so not only was I nervous, I was also a little star struck. A wonderful friend recommended me for this opportunity, and I remember sitting down to lunch with her and trying to draw out all the information I possibly could to prepare me for this meeting. I may be confident, but this would be taking my corporate exposure to a completely new level, and I was certainly anxious.

I remember rushing to go and buy the newspaper on the day that the SENS announcement was published. I stared at my name in the paper, sitting in my car at the petrol station in awe and excitement. My foot had once again made it through the door and although I've made it inside, I'd have quite a task learning the ropes. My first ever board meeting was in September 2012 and by then I was no longer surprised at the representation inside the boardroom. My esteemed colleagues were primarily men, while the women, including myself, made up about 30 percent of the room.

At the *Women in the World Summit* in 2016, Christine Lagarde, the previous chair of the International Monetary Fund and now president of the European Central Bank, said, "For women to get to the top, you need skin as thick as a crocodile." This is ever true of a journey of women in any sphere. As I've kept on learning, it's not enough to just get your foot through the door. Once inside, accepting a seat at the table will also not necessarily keep you there. The only

certain way to own that place deservedly is to keep performing at the highest level, every single day.

I've come quite a long way since the butterflies that I felt as I took up my very first board role with a JSE listed entity in 2012, but the importance of what I'm doing is not lost on me. My career has taken me on an incredible journey of gratitude. I have met many incredible people on my travels and realise that the human connection is about much more than one's gender. When I opened myself up to the possibilities, I have been well received by good people and invited to speak on their stages at home, on the continent, and abroad.

The very first nerve wrecking opportunity opened up many others. In many instances, it has been my very male colleagues in corporate corridors who have reached out to me when other opportunities have arisen. For them, it has been their experience of me over the years. The combination of the value that I bring and the congenial way that I have approached even our greatest disagreements, have prompted their regard of my contribution.

As I reflect on my almost 20 years' experience in corporate South Africa, I realise that my career has been well supported by incredible human beings – both men and women – along the way. I choose to believe in the ubiquitously affirmative human spirit which thrives in spite of the opposition it faces. So, while it's evident that the place which women fill in the corporate space is still small, I can also comfortably say that we must never stop putting our names forward. We need to take the chance on ourselves that we wish others to. We must knock on the doors, walk the corridors, take the seats, and do absolutely everything we can to make our voices heard.

Women cannot in one instance or with a single action end the incredibly constrained way in which the world continually deals with them. We may not be able to stop it, but we should impede it. We also should not accept it, nor should we tire because our work is far from over. It was never meant to be a man's game when women have, for generations received, carried, and brought forth life. Rupi Kaur says it most elegantly, "Our backs tell stories no books have the spine to carry."



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