

The Chancellor's Calabash Awards

Keynote Address: Ms Lindani Dhlamini, CEO SekelaXabiso

Chancellor of the University of South Africa, The Honourable Judge President Bernard Ngoepe, Principal and Vice-Chancellor, Prof Mandla Makhanya,

Recipients of tonight's awards, Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, Mr Pravin Gordhan, Professor Mary Metcalfe, and the Reserve Bank Governor, Mr Lesetja Kganyago,

My chairman, Mr Abel Dhlamini and his wife, Mrs Busi Dhlamini., members of my family, Mr Mpume. and Mrs, colleagues, distinguished ladies and gentlemen.

It is truly an honour and a pleasure to be part of this prestigious occasion to salute some of the people who have made such an impressive and enduring contribution to our society and democracy.

Relevancy of this project

The theme of this year's event is "Investing in the First Generation University Entrance", and it could not be more apt or relevant in the context of the recent student protests that have gripped the nation's attention. The student outcry serves as a sobering reminder to us that having attained the political freedom that was our right, we have still to break down the barriers of access to affordable education, or we will never realise economic freedom.

The student events of the last few weeks have brought home to me my own struggles to be heard and recognised when I was a young girl. Many may see me as a confident, successful business woman who has finally reached the top of her profession and can now enjoy the rewards thereof. That belies the doubts that still plague me and I would like to take this opportunity to share with you my experiences in reaching where I am today, and the challenges that I still face.

Early beginnings

Like most black people in South Africa I grew up in a township, in this case in at Umlazi in KZN. Both my parents were ex-teachers and were no different to other parents in the community other than their love for their children and their fierce determination to ensure a better future for them than they had had themselves.

To realise this dream they knew that they had to prioritise education and to this end they endured much hardship and made many sacrifices. My mother gave up her career as a teacher to focus on raising and supporting her children, a luxury that they could ill afford. An aspect of my father that exemplifies what he gave up for us is that he only ever owned four pairs of shoes in his entire career. The compromises of my parents notwithstanding, however, I was still regarded as one of the fortunate ones in my community.

It is thanks to the commitment of my parents and the financial assistance of a scholarship that I succeeded in entering university to qualify for what I am now. I therefore applaud the UNISA project of promoting first generation university entrants precisely because it targets young people of a disadvantaged background who demonstrate leadership skills and academic talent but lack the financial means to continue with their studies. We need the wholehearted support of projects such as this and we need it to be multiplied many times over before we can start making inroads into the educational requirements of the youth.

Under representation of black professional CAs

My story, however, does not end with my having attained my qualification. That is indeed a milestone, as is my successful entry into the male dominated profession of chartered accountants. I, however, feel far from victorious. I know I ought to be proud of being a member of the elite group of only 3800 African black chartered accountants of the total of 39 000 of these professionals in the country. I am even more distinguishable for being part of the small minority of only 1900 black african women in the profession. Far from exciting me, this fact afflicts me deeply because of the implications that this holds in relation to the advancement of black people in South Africa. When we realise that chartered accountants dominate the leadership

positions in corporate South Africa, it is a sad indictment of our country that this sector which drives economic growth is headed by chartered accountants that are not representative of the demographics of our society. What does this say about the inclusion and effective participation of black people in determining the prosperity of South Africa?

The struggle to prove myself

Another issue that I face is at a different level altogether. Whenever I am asked about the challenges that I had to overcome to reach my career goals, I am expected to mention the usual constraints of funding and the attraction and retention of the right talent. These issues, although by no means to be underestimated and addressed, are nevertheless manageable in that they are quantifiable and affect emerging and established businesses across the board. There is, however, another struggle that I experience as a black business woman that is more insidious and more debilitating because it is not verifiable. I refer to the constant battle to prove myself regardless of my achievements. The effect is a subtle and systematic undermining of my sense of worth. No matter the extent of my experience as a professional, every day I have to pick up the cudgels and prove my worth and that of my business. If I make a mistake, it is not only a reflection on me but on the entire black professional population of which I am a representative. I am only as good as my last achievement. I could be right 99% of the time but the 1 % I get wrong will be what defines me and the black professionals that have come before me. The years of sacrifice of my parents and my own hard work and dedication can be wiped out by one error on my part.

This is my struggle as a black woman in business, that twenty years after democracy I am still not good enough! I wake up every day hoping that it will be the day that I am not reminded of all the mistakes that were made by my previous counterparts; that I will be given the leniency of making a mistake that will not be held against me, but that I can learn from.

My challenge as a black business woman was crystallized to me by a conversation I had with a white colleague not so long ago. She said that what characterised her from me was not that she was rich, which she wasn't, but that she had always known

that she would go to university, obtain an education and thereafter find job. She never doubted those expectations. She differed from me in that she knew she was good enough.

It is incomprehensible that despite our achievements as a country with a world class constitution and irreproachable laws and regulations, we still have not changed in our approach and “our way of being”. Why do I as a black woman leader wake up every day and still feel that I don’t quite belong? Why do our children have to take to the streets for their voices to be heard?

Obstacles that persist

Despite the advent of democracy and the changes that this introduced, our nation is still characterised as having the highest levels of inequality. The vast majority of the people in this country continue to operate in the fringes of society.

From my perspective of having obtained a good quality education and experienced the benefits thereof, I cannot emphasise enough the importance of broadening access to high calibre education as the first step of narrowing this inequality gap.

As our students have made so abundantly clear this past month, we need to overcome the obstacle of funding to get into education. Using my profession as an example, to qualify as a chartered accountant is a seven year investment in time and financial resources, and many students do not have these luxuries to complete such a qualification. UNISA has facilitated this process through distance learning, which enables students to earn while they study. This option, however, is not creating enough traction to get people into the profession.

We need to address the problem from as early as grade 10, by encouraging black children to choose maths and science as subjects. Without maths there is no hope of becoming a chartered accountant or pursuing another profession with these requirements. Intervention through career guidance is therefore crucial.

Another factor is the involvement of parents in supporting their children. I was fortunate to have both my parents involved in teaching, but parental support is critical in the advancement of children.

The one issue that is close to my heart is that there are too few women in leadership positions to inspire young girls. We need visible women role models! A recent *Women in Leadership Census* by BWA South Africa reveals that there has been a decrease in the number of women CEOs from 2.5% in 2007 to 2.4% in 2015. Similarly, only 20.8% of directorships in JSE listed organisations are held by women. We need to reverse this trend through interventions at home, at school and at community level.

How do we make a difference?

Every initiative by corporates, institutions and business and community leaders will go a long way in rectifying the situation in our education and economic systems.

The CSI initiatives of my company are targeted at making an impact on education. Our interventions are aimed at school and university levels through making bursaries available, and we partner with other industry organisations through the Thuthuka programme in the raising of funds for bursaries. In addition, we participate in campaigns to raise awareness of the chartered accountant profession.

Conclusion

The issue of education in our country cannot be addressed through sporadic interventions. If we are serious about making the right to a decent education, on a par with international standards, accessible to all and not just a privileged few, then we will need to make a concerted effort involving all sectors and structures in our society. We are honouring icons today who fought against all odds to be educated, but our current children and youth should not have to fight odds of a different nature to access what should be theirs by right, or our icons suffered in vain. May we as society, business and government join forces to give fruition to the ideal that so many fought and died for.

I would like to close by congratulating the luminaries that we are gathered here to honour this evening. Long may their influence inspire us to reach greater heights.

I thank you all for your attention.