

South Africa's Top Women Conference dives into 2021, the post-pandemic gender empowerment agenda

Issued by [Topco Media](#)

13 Oct 2021

This year's [Standard Bank Top Women Conference](#) has brought together over 10,000 thought leaders and delegates from a cross-section of fields from banking to mining, sport and more. Hosted virtually by Topco Media in partnership with Standard Bank, the first day was jam-packed with deeply insightful discussions and addresses with Leanne Manas as the MC.

Stella Tembisa Ndabeni-Abrahams, minister of the Department of Small Business Development kickstarted the day astutely summarising the crux of the current issue: "Women in South Africa still face many structural and social obstacles, which have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, when attempting to advance their businesses."

A thoroughly brave take on the current issues was the order of the day with leaders such as Thabang Charlotte Mampane, commissioner of the National Lotteries Commission, highlighting that, "women in SA account for 67% of job losses that came as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (Feb-Apr 2020)."

Ralf Fletcher, the CEO of Topco Media, the organisers of the conference, explains that the second edition of the virtual conference is an opportunity to reach even more women which is even more critical in light of the current economic situation. "We can't shift the dial away from the critical topic of gender empowerment and lose the momentum that we've achieved as a country. Tackling honest conversations and bringing leaders together to map out the next steps is absolutely critical."

The importance of authenticity

In a forward-thinking departure from the typical conference line-up, this year included creative entrepreneurs like Aisha Baker, CEO and Founder of Baked Collection. Baker started her career in the digital arena and moved to creating her own e-commerce brand. She touched on the importance of authenticity in the digital age, "I've been able to very cleverly monetize my story, and it's an authentic one – it's my real story, my real life."

Her candour resonated with the 14,000 attendees, and that common thread existed in other conversations including with Mariana Moura Santos, founder and CEO Chicas Poderosas, Margaret Hirsch, co-founder and executive director of Hirsch's Home Stores South Africa, Sodfa Daaji, founder and executive director, African Legal Think Tank on Women's Rights Tunisia, and Jenine Zachar, head: Enterprise and Direct Banking, Standard Bank Group.

Women are key to economic recovery

The second day of the conference was not less riveting and jam-packed with talks by some of SA's best and brightest. This included heavyweights in the form of ministers Angela Thokozile Didiza from the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development and chairperson of the African Union, Mmamoloko Tryphosa Kubayi from the Department of Human Settlements, and the star of the moment, Professor Thuli Madonsela from Stellenbosch University.

Minister Didiza opened the floor by discussing how making women agents of change is vital in gearing South Africa towards economic recovery. This was followed by various illuminating panel discussions, and Minister Kubayi, who spoke on opportunities for women in a sustainable nation.

"It is all about providing access to the market. We want women to be able to contribute to legislation and planning that pertain to their role in construction. We want to be more responsive to women in the sector. We want to increase learning

in the sector by supporting female entrepreneurs, and support the establishment of start-ups,” said Kubayi.

“The goal is to change the attitudes away from male dominance, so let's make gender equality fashionable. We need to leave the door open so the women behind us can also enter and enjoy access to the resources that we have now and will put in place in future.”

When women lead, magic is unleashed

The highlight of the day was Professor Thuli Madonsela, who spoke from the heart when discussing the notion of looking beyond jobs to find work in a paradigm shift for post Covid-19 women's empowerment policy.

“When women lead, magic is unleashed,” stated Madonsela right out of the gate. “But we need to address economic parity and accelerate progress.”

“Our constitutional promise is the starting point. We have one of the most highly celebrated constitutions in the world. It talks of the fact that we adopted a foundation to heal the divisions of the past, based on democratic values, social justice, and fundamental human rights. It speaks to the right of equality, which means equal enjoyment of all rights, burdens and freedoms, which should be reflected in the equal, just and fair distribution of resources, etc., to all members of society.”

However, she also stated that the majority of women are actually not to be found in the workplace – only 43% of the workforce in SA are women, and 23% of top South African management positions are filled by women.

“However, this does not mean that women who aren't formally employed don't work; they are always working. We need to look to a future where all women get to be supported, not just the 30% who are in the workplace. Magic happens when business meets women where they are to support small start-ups, and policies are written to see all women,” she explained.

“This requires partnerships between business and societies so that the work that people are already doing is affirmed and scaled, so we can leverage the dynamic power that is latent in the women of this country in every ward. This will make us a resilient country with a resilient economy. The best time to have planted a tree is 20 years ago, the next best time is now. We need to start meeting women where they are right now.”

The powerful talks and discussions of the past two days form just one component of Top Women, so if you know any incredible women, then nominate them for this year's Standard Bank Top Women Awards taking place on 4 November 2021. In the meantime, you can keep up to date with the aftermath of the conference and everything that is still to come by following [@SBTopWomen](#) on Twitter. Simply [click here](#) to find out more.

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