



**The Chief Executive Officer
Mrs. Sibongile (Bongi) Mkhabela**

With an honors degree in Social Work and several graduate diplomas, Bongi has immense experience in development issues nationally and internationally, gained from working in senior positions at the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Education Programme in South Africa and the South African Council of Churches. Bongi served in the office of the then Deputy President Mbeki as programs director responsible for overall programming, with specific responsibility for NGO/Government partnerships and children's programs.

The CEO's Corner

Baronworld Women's Forum

Higher Moral Ground: The new road to celebrated women's leadership
Nelson Mandela Children's Fund CEO, Sibongile Mkhabela's address at Barloworld women's forum, September 10, 2008

IF we want to be inspired, we should take note of the things that depress us and take the initial stand to uproot them in their various manifestations in our daily life experiences.

IF we are sworn to advancing development, we should accept that we stand obliged to finding our way clear to getting rid of factors that arrest development.

IF we want to retain our skill base then we must create conducive conditions that are in tune with justice for the skills to find it welcoming to stay to compete in an atmosphere of equality. I make these departure points on the understanding that it is expected, at least from the correspondence received from CSI head, Jennifer Smith, that we need to begin and end this discussion with a sense that will leave us :

*Inspired;

*Resolved to be counted as keen development warriors; and

*Being alive of the fact that skills are not lifeless and value-neutral things purchased on the counter, but live and die in bodies of people who have a hope for their country, their lives and their future the living expression of which are our children.

All else that happened thereafter, can either be good or bad inheritance for our children and their children's children. So every square inch of goodness that we can advance, will be a celebrated legacy in which every generation will find no reason to point an accusing finger a generation before it.



Where there is hope, it should be appreciated, people always find a way out of their given hardships, to re-establish a new reality that affirms their humanity, accords them dignity, allow for deliberate acquisition of relevant skills, on the basis of which, to seize the given opportunities in order to live their lives to the fullest potential.

While accepting the fact that we are women, we must also come to terms with the fact that we, in a sense, represent half of humanity. As a result, for true humanity to take root in society, the two halves that constitute its wholesome parts must be in harmony for mutual defense and infinite survival.

This is the chain of life and values whose link must not be broken in order that a humane society must be obtained. Only then will the working days of our lives be full of cheerful hours that greet every daybreak with high spirits and bid every sunset with a happy heart for a job well done. That is the inspiration around which societies, its members, institutions including the companies, from which we draw our source of living, should abide with. Otherwise, how would we define the ultimate goal of what normal society should be about?

The most probable answer is that we aspire for a society in which true humanity is a living expression of our daily reality. It is a world as wonderful as told in songs and as felt in real life experience.

But an aspired reality, like freedom, is not a given, but fought for. And if women are to be the evident wayfarers of freedom and change, they too, cannot count themselves out of the fight for it. After all, no tree can yield its fruits unless shaken. Let the shaking of every tree, for this purpose, define the new road towards a "better life for all" as promised in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa.

Once achieved, there should be no debate about women capability to be on the frontline to lead, including the companies that they work for. The women, at Barloworld, are no exception to this aspiration.

But for women leadership to claim its space within the province of their companies, it cannot afford not to be developmental. For all intents and purposes, developmental must simply be understood as the potential to lift those without mobility to stand on their feet and begin to walk with some degree of autonomy.

As social entrepreneurs, forever in combat with injustice, women must not be found wanting to be the authors of other people's misery. They should reposition themselves as development warriors whose thoughts, plans and deeds, spells change towards a "better life for all".

Higher morality, therefore, should be the defining element of women leadership, and be ruled in or out of order on basis of whether or not, it does cause a bad situation to change for the better. In the context companies, this means there must be a felt change due to women leadership. Rather than seeing things deteriorating for the worse, they must improve for the better. If women leadership does not bring about a ring of change, it can only mean they have not learnt to avoid the bad examples set by their male counterparts especially those who thrive in being the authors of other people's misery.

Development, like justice, is confrontational to wrongdoing; it is subversive to oppressive order habits; and has no difficulty to exercise choice or to make a call when it comes to victim and perpetrator. It embraces good exemplary leadership with the same zeal that rejects bad leadership.



In as far as skills retention is concerned we should also accept that skills live in bodies of people whose happiness or unhappiness is largely influenced by the environment in which they find themselves. Skills retention therefore requires a welcoming environment to continue their stay. For that environment to be welcoming, it cannot afford to be a stranger to the cause of justice. To make any environment welcoming, it calls upon those with foresight, of the anticipated consequent rewards, to take the initial step to brighten the corner where they are, since, as the saying goes, charity begins at home.

Our companies may be our immediate places for a common source living, but there can be denying that they are located within communities and a country with a history where there was freedom for some and absence of freedom others. Along with this freedom for some and not to others, so was it designed, by law and in practice, to grant and to deny skills in a manner befitting the political order in place. Similarly, the exercise of skills was allowed to perform in accordance to opportunity provided to some and denied to others. The aim behind denial of skills, to some and not others, was with the clear intent to cheapen labour, to deny it dignity and rob it of deserved reward for exploitative purpose.

Denial of opportunities to some, from exercising their skills, had the discriminatory effect bundling people into a self-sustaining but stratified camps of victims and beneficiaries. And this is how exploitation and discrimination by social status, race, and gender came about.

Any new dispensation expected to turn this reality around, unavoidable has to devise redress mechanisms, first to reverse the legacy of the past and secondly balance the scales for merit to be the order of the day. After all, for any reconciliation to be a lasting feature of our life, within and outside work, justice must be done.

If by skills retention, we mean the inability by some amongst us to embrace redress or correction of past imbalances, then we may be in denial of the changes that our country is called upon by history to champion. There is therefore a need to develop a clear perspective of what is the sum total of our concerns when addressing the question of skills retention.

Are we here being faced with the unhappiness of some, who were previously advantaged with skills being unable to equally see the need for the same skills and opportunities to be extended to others across status, race and gender? Actually, what is the skills retention question about?

We need to recognize that for changes to occur for common good, societal well being and for South Africa's growth and prosperity, it cannot be on the basis of the development for some and not for others since intrinsic to development is change. And those who fear or resist change simply have no moral claim to development.

For change to come about, we need inspiring leadership capable of rising to the challenges of building a safe, just and stable future for our country, its people and the business community that respects the dignity of labour and the environment in which it does its business.

This speaks to what Nelson Mandela Children's Fund Trustee Graca Machel refers to as the mending of "the chain of life, chain values, which was passed from generation to generation" to which business cannot afford to be a stranger. While in politics and business this is referred to as 'a succession plan', in broader society it is essentially about the values that define the human beings that we are and ought to be.



That humanity, though cannot come about out of own volition. It needs brave, determined and strong women leadership and action that can be in subject-to-subject relationship with their male counterparts. In that way, women cease to be `object beings' or objects of desire, but subject beings capable of thought and action in the direction of own redress.

Since the task for change agents is not without resistance, one of Isaac Newton's laws of motion should serve as our guiding inspiration to all determined change agents: "For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction." This means that for every force there is a reaction force that is just as formidable and determined, but in the opposite direction in its resistance to change. Therefore, resistance to change is no reason for change agents to give up the fight.

The burning desire for this change cannot be extinguished until well meaning women leadership steps forward to be counted shoulder to shoulder in the great march to humanize our society, its institutions and our very places of work - companies such as Barloworld.

The Advancement for the Status of Women, a women think-tank group of which I am part is equally strong on women leadership that is forever waiting for things to be done on its behalf: Without sustained reflection and action women's issues and concerns have the tendency to play themselves out as a general complaint against a societal order of things in which the manifest and obscure disadvantaged position that women find themselves in seem to be a direct result of men's action or inaction.

Women must therefore seize the right to offer inspired leadership, offer themselves as development warriors and never give up to retain the fighting spirit.

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SIBONGILE MKHABELA (MS)
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
Nelson Mandela Children's Fund