

# Prioritising Women in Male-Dominated Sectors Through Targeted Job Creation Initiatives

29th August 2024

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South African women face significant challenges when entering the job market. Despite being more educated – women in South Africa are 10% more likely to pass matric and 70% more likely to have a degree compared to men – they are 6.5% less likely to be employed. Even when they do secure employment, they earn 6% less on average, resulting in an annual earnings penalty of R3,240 for a starting salary of R4,500 per month. Over a lifetime, this wage disparity amounts to R129,600—a sum that could cover two years at a top university in South Africa or nearly 10% of a down payment on an average house.

In male-dominated sectors where women have been historically underrepresented, the barriers to entry are even more pronounced. In industries such as financial intermediation, transport, trade, construction, manufacturing, mining, and agriculture, women are often squeezed out of medium-skilled work and relegated to low-skilled jobs that pay, on average, 12% less than high-skilled jobs.

Empowering young women through targeted employment initiatives in these male-dominated industries is crucial for creating a more inclusive and diverse workforce. By setting specific gender targets, we can challenge stereotypes, break down barriers and open doors for women to enter and excel in fields long dominated by men.

One of Harambee's key initiatives within the agriculture sector that is starting to see results is the Roots Agripreneurial Project. Launched in September 2023, the project aims to empower young people from rural communities to start and sustain agricultural businesses. With support from partners such as First Rand Empowerment Fund, Umgibe, and Kwanalu, the project provides training in technical farming, agribusiness, climate-smart agriculture, financial literacy, and life skills.

The Roots Agripreneurial Project has a target of onboarding 130 participants, with at least 60% being women. Currently, the project has achieved an impressive 72% women's participation, reflecting the success of its gender-specific focus.

Women in the Roots Agripreneurial Project have demonstrated remarkable resilience, often driven by a strong commitment to supporting their families and communities. However, they face significant structural barriers in the agricultural sector, such as limited land ownership and access to financial support. Cultural norms often restrict women's land rights, forcing them to rely on family or marriage connections for access to land. Despite these challenges, these women have shown a powerful determination to succeed in agriculture. Their success highlights the potential of women to transform the agricultural sector, provided they receive the necessary support and opportunities.

The agriculture sector in South Africa offers a beacon of hope for women. Over the past 10 years, the industry has seen some of the highest growth in female youth participation, rising from 27.9% in 2014 to 32.26% in 2024. This growth not only reflects the potential for additional job creation but also offers secondary benefits, such as enhanced household food security and improved family livelihoods.

Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) are vital for economic growth and sustainability, particularly in the agricultural sector. Promoting GESI ensures that women and disenfranchised groups have equal access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making processes. This inclusivity is not only a matter of social justice but also an economic imperative.

Nonhlanhla Joye, CEO of Umgibe Farming Organics, emphasises the importance of GESI: "When you invest in capacitating youth and women, you are truly building the future. Their resilience, community-mindedness, and drive to create positive change are invaluable assets that can transform the agriculture sector. Gender equality and social inclusion aren't just the right thing to do, they're key to driving innovation, productivity, and lasting impact in this industry."

Dr. Kathy Hurly, Project Manager at Kwanalu, adds: "From our Agripreneurs project, we have noted that financial success removes barriers and opens up opportunities like access to land. The youth are slowly moving away from enterprises associated with traditional gender roles. Once you have made money as a female entrepreneur, you can operate independently of gender barriers like patriarchy. Your status improves in your community, and you gain a voice and agency."

Another standout initiative is the BluLever Education Artisan Development Programme. This project, in partnership with BluLever, focuses on developing skilled artisans through apprenticeships and business incubation. Starting with plumbing, the programme has expanded to include electrical apprenticeships and will soon launch its first cohort of automotive mechanics in late 2024.

The BluLever programme has set a 36% women's participation target for its apprenticeships, a significant step toward gender parity in the skilled trades. The programme also includes GESI training for all participants, ensuring that young women receive the support they need to succeed.

Sherrie Donaldson, Sector Lead for Water and Plumbing at Harambee, emphasises the importance of setting gender targets: "It takes dedication and determination to create space for young women in technical roles, but young women have repeatedly proven they are willing and able to match and, in many cases, outperform their male counterparts."

One key learning from the BluLever programme is the importance of creating inclusive workplaces. Women in the programme have shown exceptional commitment and resilience, however, there is still work to be done to convince employers to take a chance on young women and offer ongoing support.

Harambee's latest Breaking Barriers Report highlights the importance of targeted interventions in male-dominated sectors, showcasing how intentional efforts can drive up female participation. For example, in the digital sector, 65% of placements on Harambee's SA Youth platform are young women, while in the automotive and utilities sectors, women make up 56% and 60% of placements, respectively. These successes demonstrate that when gender targets are set and supported by inclusive policies, women can thrive in industries that have long been dominated by men.

Beyond specific sectors, women in South Africa face broader barriers to employment, including spatial exclusion, limited mobility, and the burden of unpaid care work. Women with a matric in metro areas, for example, are more likely to have jobs, while those without a matric or in non-metro areas face the most severe employment challenges.

Mobility is a critical factor impacting women's access to better-quality jobs. Restrictions on physical mobility not only limit access to employment but also hinder women's ability to participate in essential activities like education and healthcare. Initiatives like Gobuddy, which offers flexible earning opportunities in the last-mile delivery sector, have shown gender inclusivity with 60% women's participation. These opportunities are appealing because they enable women to generate income without sacrificing other roles, such as caregiving.

Another significant barrier is the gendered nature of unpaid care work. Women often opt for part-time or informal jobs due to caregiving needs, limiting their access to higher-status roles and contributing to the gender wage gap. The Early Childhood Development (ECD) sector offers a triple impact opportunity: providing employment, supporting children's early development, and enabling primary caregivers to re-enter the labour market.

Targeted interventions are vital to closing the gender gap and ensuring that women have equal access to opportunities in all sectors. The progress made through projects like the Roots Agripreneurial Project and BluLever's Artisan Development Programme is a testament to the resilience and determination of the women involved. These initiatives are not only about creating jobs but about dismantling the systemic barriers that have long prevented women from fully participating in the labour market. By setting gender targets and promoting GESI, we're not only enabling women but also building communities and a more diverse workforce for the future.