

Business continues to pay for gender gap

With the advancement of women's representation in the top echelons of management advancing slowly, the gender pay gap continues to be a reality.

According to the World Economic Forum (WEF) Global Gender Gap 2009 report the gender pay gap in South Africa stands at 33.5%.

While women in Brazil are worst off in relation to their male colleagues at 38.5%, followed by Mexico at 33.5%. Globally, the average gender pay gap is 22.4%.

The report revealed that South Africa made great strides in labour force participation to reach sixth position globally - up from 22 in 2008.

Gains for women in parliament and women ministers helped close the gender gap.

"Analysis of women's representation as leaders shows a slight correlation between political representation and representation in the top levels of business," said Sandra Burmeister, CEO of the Landelahni Recruitment Group.

"In South Africa, quotas called for by black economic empowerment also resulted in significant increases in women in leadership," she added.

According to Landelahni, female representation in top management grew from 13% to 17.8% between 2001 and 2008, and in senior management from 21% to 27.8%, while women in mid management slipped from 43% to 37.8% over the same period, indicating a decline in the pipeline for potential leaders of the future.

Burmeister said that the gender pay gap exists in both developing and developed countries, but developed economies show a smaller pay differential.

A United Nations report on the current financial crisis indicates that women bear the brunt of the crisis because of the paradigm of the male bread-winner that prevails all over the world across cultural divides.

"When job retrenchment takes place, the tendency is to protect employment for men and compromise on women's jobs," noted Burmeister.

In the past, research attributed the gender pay gap largely to differences in the skills and experience that women bring to the labour market, differences in education and the career choices made by women, along with family status.

Discrimination was also shown as a major factor.

Burmeister says that the gender issue should be looked at more broadly and that there are several progressive, yet practical options that exist for the 2010 organisation in narrowing the gender gap.

"The business case for diversity must be recognised and supported from the very top and organisations must take action to counter even subtle forms of discrimination and train managers to recognise the value of diversity and to identify prejudices that affect decisions," Burmeister said.

"But this is not a one-sided matter, it is important for women to differentiate themselves, by going beyond their expected output requirements.

This demands that women aim high and focus on the problems and solutions that will determine how they are valued," Burmeister concluded.

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