

# Women in Dentistry – realities, challenges and opportunities

SADJ August 2018, Vol 73 no 7 p434 -p435

**Y Solomons**



South Africa commemorates **Women's Month** in August as a tribute to the more than 20 000 **women** who marched to the Union Buildings on 9 August 1956 in protest against the extension of Pass Laws to **women**. The Government of South Africa declared **August as Women's Month** and 9 August is celebrated annually as **Women's Day**. This was a case of women being the heroines of their own story – stepping out of their comfort zones, taking risks, but effecting positive change. Accordingly, this Guest Editorial hopes to bring in focus the Women in Dentistry.

It is a fact that women dentists tend to juggle more in life than do their male colleagues. Let's stop to think about that. Not only do these ladies have to handle the responsibilities of being somebody's doctor, they are quite likely managing the formidable contexts and responsibilities of being somebody's wife or significant other, life partner, housekeeper, cook, family caretaker, social secretary, and/or general runner-of-things. If they are one of the legions of women dentists with children, they are also handling the superhuman demands of being somebody's mother. Talk about "Mission Impossible!"

So, what's the difference between the experiences of men and women in dentistry? From my own personal perspective: from early childhood, boys were raised and trained to focus on financial or professional success. As girls, we were socialised differently, more around relationships and nurturing. Just look at our previous social roles and experiences – supportive sister, doting daughter, loving wife, adoring mom, true friend ... fixing problems and running rings around home, workplace, and community to keep everyone happy. Even though this makes the world a nicer place to live in, it is perceived differently in the how-to-manage-a-dental-staff department. Although hardwiring might separate the girls from the boys, staff members and patients, as well as colleagues, often perceive similar personality traits differently, making bias a reality. It is acknowledged that socio-cultural influences do play a role. However, as women, we not only have the greater number of challenges, but must possess a greater range of skills to meet these challenges.

Putting courtship, marriage, and family aside, let's

focus on our professional role ... the challenges of being somebody's boss, of minding professional matters, of liaising with other colleagues around governance as well as multi-disciplinary matters:

I look back at the time when I studied and I am amazed at how few of us there were – ten percent of the graduating class were women. Today, our profession and society have come a long way with many changes. The rise in the number of women in the profession has brought, and continues to bring many positive changes, slowly, but surely. Certainly, challenges do remain for women dentists, such as addressing the lack of representation in leadership roles and education, improving ergonomics and closing the wage gap. As women become more engaged and integrated into the profession, culture and sensitivity will improve.

It remains an issue of concern that, whilst women are now represent more than 50 percent in the graduating classes at dental schools, they are still not equally represented in the number of continuing education speakers, in the number of professors teaching at dental schools or being offered tenured positions, and in leadership roles in organized Dentistry. Indeed, it is not just Dentistry where this situation obtains.

We can no longer submit to our own or imposed stiletto ceilings and remain apathetic or on the periphery asking "why me?" It is time for "TRY ME!"

Change is happening and we cannot afford to find ourselves left out. In his book "Thanks for being late: An Optimist's Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations", Thomas L Friedman argues that we are living through the greatest inflection points in history, paving the way for Reformation. The three largest forces on the planet – technology, globalisation and climate change - are all accelerating at once. As a result, so many aspects of societies, workplaces and geopolitics are being reshaped and therefore need to be reimagined. When the pace of change accelerates in so many realms all at the same time, as we are now experiencing, it is easy to be overwhelmed by it all and to feel uncertain and uncomfortable. But, fact is, we are in that state of acceleration and the recommended option is to pause and reflect, rather than to panic and withdraw. It is not a luxury or a distraction – it is a way to increase the odds that you will better understand, and

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engage productively with, the world around you.

In our current professional climate, we have so many challenges and disencouraging experiences. Enough to deter our enthusiasm! However, we have to remain focused on living on purpose. To this end, the words of Marie Curie never rang more true or felt more relevant to me: "Life is not easy for any of us. But what of that? We must have perseverance and above all, confidence in ourselves. We must believe that we are gifted for something and that this thing, at whatever cost, must be attained. Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, to embrace change, so that we may know who we are, where we are going, and fear less."

When you work in alignment with who you are and your gifts, it is not work. A job is a vocation only if someone calls you to do it *for them* rather than for yourself. And so, our work can be a calling only if it is reimagined as a mission of service to something beyond merely our own interests.

*Thinking of work mainly as a means of self-fulfillment and self-realization slowly crushes a person* – Timothy Keller.

Make every effort to discover your authentic flow and you will find yourself energized to effortlessly attract opportunities from both expected and unexpected sources.

It is time to approach change and productivity like welcome friends rather than scary intruders. All the scares and scars of gender bias or "missions impossible", should never make us bitter or jaded but must become badges reflecting our tenacity that we can wear proudly.



To the younger women joining the profession, remember that if you have personal transformation in mind, you will never be disappointed. Prepare to be a life-long learner. Learning is as important as breathing. In the words of Alvin Toffler: "The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and re-learn." Unlearn and transform those unproductive mindsets and re-learn what is futuristic. The power of our values and beliefs advise and shape the form of our organizational structures, systems and strategies.

Always think positively – optimists live longer than pessimists. When you encounter an obstacle, go over it, under it, around it, or through it. Being rolled over by it is not an option. Turn it into a stepping stone. Don't only think "survive"..... think "sur-thrive"!

## NOTICE OF 19th ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING (AGM) OF The South African Dental Association NPC ("SADA")

Notice is hereby given that the 19th Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the South African Dental Association (SADA) will be held at

**the SADA Head Office, 31 Princess of Wales Terrace, Parktown,  
Johannesburg on Thursday 14 March 2019 at 18:00**

followed by snacks and refreshments.

The Agenda for the meeting will be posted on the SADA website.

***SADA is your Association and your voice counts.***

KC Makhubele  
Chief Executive Officer

