



RISE.

On the anniversary of the Equal Pay Act this year, experts from around the world highlighted that the devastating impacts of the coronavirus pandemic could have set women back decades. However, we as women have faced challenges throughout history, and we've come together before and we came together on 21 August 2020- to Rise. To Reset. To Reimagine and to Recreate. This year's Women in Business Conference celebrated women who aren't just breaking proverbial glass ceilings but are also empowering others in their wake. However, at the beginning of lockdown if you'd have asked me if a few students could pull off a conference that has been taking place in person for 20 years and make it all happen online- my answer would have been a bit fat NO.

But 2020 hasn't been ordinary in any sense of the word, so why would it be for the 21<sup>st</sup> Annual UCT Graduate School of Business' Women in Business (WIB) Conference?

Last year I had the great honour and privilege of serving on the WIB Committee as the Sponsorships Chair. All around, it was a smashing success and left me with a sense that this event would definitely become a fixture in my life, even after I finished my MBA. So when the WIB Committee asked me to MC the event this year, I was ECSTATIC!

From the outset, the team of students and staff at the GSB pulled miracle after miracle, getting sponsors and attendees despite the COVID-19 challenges, and for the first time in the history of the Conference, the event went entirely digital. One of the team members expressed it so poignantly when they stated this would be the most accessible WIB ever. And it sure was. Women (and men!) from across South Africa and even the world- yup you heard that right- tuned in, from their home, in their PJs, babies, fur babies and all other responsibilities in tow. Over 250 attendees were online at any given time with nearly 500 attendees registered.

One of the biggest advantages of the event being online was the line-up of speakers. To be able to have the most influential female (and male) leaders from across the country would not have been possible without the magic of Zoom. The conference opened up with a word from the GSB's Interim Director, Professor Hugh Corder who has been active in civil society, in the pursuit of social justice, the protection of human rights and is an ardent supporter of the conference. His words echoed the sentiment and theme of the conference and set the scene for the day.

Professor Corder was followed by the first segment of the day, on the *Inclusivity of Women in Emerging Economies*, brought to the conference by speakers from UN- Women and UNIDO. The most impactful story from this session for me personally was hearing about Euodia Naanyane-

Bouwer's [sanitary pad outreach project](#). She shared how young girls and women in rural areas were using "millie tips" during menstruation due to a lack of sanitary pad availability. She highlighted how, in her many conversations with Policymakers, they simply did not understand why sanitary pads must be funded for young women, presumably because of gender disparity amongst Policymakers.

Next we heard from Suzanne Ackerman-Berman, Transformation Director at Pick n Pay Group on Authenticity and Leadership. The session was in a casual conversation setting where Suzanne took questions from the audience and shared lessons on female leadership through her own life experiences. She shared the journey of a failed marriage and her overcoming COVID-19 stating "it is through adversity that you learn your true purpose". She also shared stories of being a mother and finding her voice, literally and figuratively. In closing she shared a few gems when an audience member asked her how women should deal with being labeled as "aggressive" when fighting for their spaces in the workplace. Suzanne shared "never be aggressive, be forceful, be direct and be courageous". However, my favorite quote from her session was "you don't need courage to be vulnerable, you need vulnerability to be courageous". Suzanne's raw authenticity was electrifying and got the morning off to a banging start!

The session was followed by VP of Human Resources for Unilever Africa, Mechell Chetty who shared what the future of recruiting and talent looks like and how women can occupy these spaces. She was followed by Rajes Pillay, Head of Talent Acquisition and Brand Discovery Ltd. who shared the most amazing insights around implicit biases referencing how the advent of blind auditions in Orchestras led to more women being selected than ever before. She also shared the results of a meta study on leaders evaluating themselves and being evaluated by their subordinates. The study found that while most male leaders noted themselves as being effective leaders, subordinates often voted female leaders more effective. Her presentation shared many poignant studies around the differences between men and women in the workplace, with the goal to not peg one gender against the other, but to highlight unconscious biases and also to encourage women to celebrate these differences and use them as tools rather than roadblocks.

The lunch break was jam packed with additional messages from Clare-Louise Knox, Founder and Director at See Her Thrive who shared the importance of Inclusion and Women's Health in the workplace. This was followed by a beautiful rendition of Thuma Mina by the UCT Choir in honour of frontline workers and those battling with COVID-19. The lunch break was concluded by Shiela Yabo, Programme Manager at GSB's Solutions Space where they are empowering women through entrepreneurship.

The second half of the conference showcased Ntwani Shilubane, Head of Talent Management at ABSA who shared her personal transformation and leadership journey as both a woman, and a person of colour, battling stigmas to emerge on top. Her session was made up primarily of questions from the audience as women looked for inspiration in an industry that can often seem homogenous. Dr Leila Fourie, CEO at the JSE followed shortly after sharing her outlook of the future of South Africa and the economy as a whole. However, David Scott, Human Resources Director at RCL Foods was not to be outdone as the only male headline speaker. David took to the stage to passionately share the stories of four female leaders who inspired him and why this journey cannot be women's burden alone to bear. His stories brought many to tears as the comments poured in with many from the audience thanking David for being a mentor and champion in their own careers.

The conference came to an end with words from the GSB's own wonder women, Kumeshnee West, Director of Executive Education, and Dr. Catherine Duggan, the GSB's new Director.

The conference could not have been possible without the support of the amazing Women in Business Committee, a student run organization at the GSB who put on the conference every year. Additionally, it was through the kind and generous support of the speakers, sponsors and audience that the event was once again a success in raising money for a scholarship that funds a future female business leader at the Graduate School of Business.

**End.**

*Shivani Ghai*

*Shivani is a recent MBA graduate from the University of Cape Town's Graduate School of Business. Formerly an Engineering Consultant in the Energy Sector, Shivani is now looking to sustainably impact the world, one emerging market at a time. Having leveraged her people and project management skills to support clients globally, Shivani now spends her time combining these skills with her passion for social development to contribute towards the empowerment of the disadvantaged, through the founding of Vitrus Consulting. Vitrus Consulting provides independent consulting services to NPOs, NGOs, Social Enterprises and Foundations.*

*Shivani had the honour of serving as Class President and the Positive Impact Rating point of contact for the Graduate School of Business's 2019 Cohort. She also represented the GSB at the Oxford-Aspen Leading with Purpose seminar held at the Said Business School. Additionally, Shivani was one of three candidates to spend a day shadowing two different CEOs as part of Odgers Berndtson's CEOx1Day competition. More recently, she also had the opportunity to represent as the first African Business school to take home the prestigious John Molson International Case Competition trophy. Finally, Shivani was shortlisted as AMBAs Top 6 MBA students globally in 2020.*

*Shivani has lived and worked on four continents and values learning from diverse people and cultures.*