

Gender equality: Implementation of SDG 5 not a simple matter

By [Lia Labuschagne](#), issued by [SAICA](#)

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The words 'the first woman to...' are still often included in news headlines or photograph captions - indicative of an issue that remains relevant and sensitive: one - that still requires laws and regulations to eradicate misconduct and unfair historical practice. In business, gender equality remains a thorny issue with often unwritten rules, and where sensitive yet fair implementation is still at issue.



Gender equality affects every other sustainable development goal, because it affects both men and women in all circumstances. Correcting the related wrongs has a tortuous history with many implications internationally and locally: from cultural, political and religious practices and voter's rights to abortion laws and workplace issues, it still gives rise to disputes, even after debates have raged on for decades. Reports of practices that are accepted by some cultures and religions but hidden and defined in a different way by others, fill many columns in newspapers and hours on television newscasts and discussion programmes, while both women and men march in city streets waving placards. Gender issues has become a university subject: It fills libraries of books, continues to be the material for intellectual debate, and triggers shock around issues like female circumcision, sexual violence or prostitution. Even the value of something like Women's Day, a seemingly

uncontroversial concept, is debated as outdated by some, and as a means of creating awareness by others.

So it's little wonder then that interpretations of the clear United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (UN SDG 5) statement to 'achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls' are not necessarily universally agreed – despite the many relevant international or national guidelines and laws in existence. Indeed, even here in South Africa, where our Constitution is clear about women's place in society and promotes freedom from unfair discrimination based on gender, sex, pregnancy and marital status, much work remains in terms of practical implementation of the law.

In the workplace, for example, issues around fairness to both genders persist: questions about retrospective recognition for female scientists whose work had never been recognised are still being asked, while there are many 'glass ceiling' and equal treatment discussions at individual companies. So while, the implementation of gender equality principles in the workplace is not necessarily a simple matter, there is little reasons why it should not receive priority attention. Barbara-Ann King, chief commercial officer for Investec Wealth and Investment, recently told City Press that the Covid-19 pandemic had shown that those companies that take their responsibility to their employees seriously are the ones that thrive. She said this was because gender equality intersects with environmental, social and governance issues. 'Promoting gender equality is not a women's issue. It is a global issue, a financial issue and an essential issue.'

'From a business perspective, we believe a number of actions can be taken right now to start working towards this goal,' argues Damian Judge, CA(SA), the CFO of Trelidor South Africa. 'UN SDG 5 challenges all individuals and organisations to take a stand against gender inequality and make meaningful steps in empowering women and girls.'

The UN Women Website states that 'gender equality by 2030 requires urgent action to eliminate the many root causes of discrimination that still curtail women's rights in private and public spheres... 49 countries still lack laws protecting women from domestic violence, while 39 bar equal inheritance rights for daughters and sons. Eliminating gender-based violence is a priority, given that this is one of the most pervasive human rights violations in the world today. Based on data from 87 countries, one in five women and girls under the age of 50 will have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an

intimate partner within the last 12 months. Harmful practices, such as child marriage, steal the childhood of 15 million girls under age 18 every year.'

They also quote the 2017 UN Secretary-General Economic and Social Council report: 'While more women have entered political positions in recent years, including through the use of special quotas, they still hold a mere 23.7% of parliamentary seats, far short of parity. The situation is not much better in the private sector, where women globally occupy less than a third of senior and middle management positions.'

Judge says the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) provides guidance on some of the steps that businesses could consider when tackling this SDG: It includes 'embedding the principle of gender equality in policies and processes for both employees and governing bodies throughout its operations and supply chains, including recruitment, remuneration/benefits, training, promotion, and development reviews. It also means paying equal remuneration, including benefits, for work of equal value.'

According to Judge, it requires that businesses take an honest look at themselves and assess whether or not they are living up to this goal. With the pay gap being one of the most burning workplace issues relating to gender equality, he refers to the Gender Pay Gap Pilot [Report](#) released by the National Business Initiative (NBI) earlier this year.

The pilot, which the NBI undertook in partnership with the University of Witwatersrand's Southern Centre for Inequality Studies (SCIS), aims to develop a methodology that measures the pay gap within South African companies – one that can be applied across all sectors and develop solutions to correct the gap.

Having obtained data from five participating firms, the 'anonymised data was categorised according to gender, race, age, education level, occupational level, number of hours worked monthly; employment status, whether the individual is employed full time or part time/permanent or on contract, wages paid monthly, and any contributions made by the employer, as well as any other remuneration made in that given year, for example, bonuses.'

The researchers define the gender pay gap as 'the difference between the average hourly median earnings of a company's male and female employees. We distinguish between two types of gender pay gaps. In the first, men and women who have similar characteristics, except gender, earn different wages ... The second type of gender pay gap is defined as vertical wage inequality. It arises when men and women earn different wages ... Although there are variable justifications for these differences, gender is often the common denominator.'

The data generated from the study shows the gender pay gap across the firms researched in the pilot ranges from nine to 35%, which results in a quantifiable amount of R72.44 earned by women to every R100.00 earned by men. In addition, one should overlay this with the fact that 42.6% of households are headed by women and these households have a higher dependency ratio.

The NBI states that 'companies not only have a responsibility to transform as part of national and global development objectives, but also to resolve income disparities in South Africa.' The organisation also confirmed that it will develop an online tool using the econometric methodologies from their pilot. This tool will 'assist companies to track and measure income disparities. The secure platform will enable companies to submit employee datasets, without limits on size or sector.'

Judge notes that while there is a need for businesses to increase their understanding, there are already many steps that can be taken today, including:

- Performing an assessment of payroll by gender and where there are gaps, closing them as soon as possible.
- Reviewing recruitment strategies and processes to ensure they are gender neutral where possible.
- Reviewing training programmes to ensure that skills upliftment is spread equally across the workforce regardless of race and/or gender.
- Assessing promotion and review systems to remove gender bias.

- Challenging suppliers and service providers to assess their contribution to gender equality and share best practice.
- Ensure that company codes of practice, public statements, and general communication are brought in line with UN SDG5 where this is not already the case.

Useful links:

- UN SDG5: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5>
- UN Women website: <https://www.unwomen.org/en>
- NBI Gender Pay GAP pilot report: https://www.nbi.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/NBI-GPG-Long-Paper-Outline_March-2021-FINAL1.pdf
- Barbara King on workplace equality: <https://www.news24.com/citypress/business/gender-equality-in-the-workplace-is-still-a-challenge-20210511>

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