

Must be a shape-shifting black unicorn



By [Rebhone Masemola](#)

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"For decades, black parents have told their children that in order to succeed despite racial discrimination, they need to be twice as good, twice as smart, twice as dependable, and twice as talented."



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Many years on, this reality has barely shifted for black people, even more so black women. Even in cases where black parents never reinforce this notion, this stands as an unspoken rule that many of us know inherently. It's implied in the way the institutions we navigate are set up, where there are different rules that we have to play by vs our white counterparts in order to find success.



Importance of culture in creative practice

Zubeida Goolam 30 May 2018



Thus, this was affirmed for me over and over again the other night at an entrepreneurs empowerment and networking event created by women and for women. The only men there were two sound engineers and one videographer (the organisers explained that they failed to find a woman to do the job).

Echo chamber with like-minded folk

The event itself focused on bringing women together who were either already all-in-entrepreneurs or those who had one foot in the space and the other foot in full-time employment because they still need to earn a living. We were to come together in this safe space at the event organiser's offices at the heart of Bryanston (because you need the 'right location' - her words not mine) to share knowledge, practical advice like making sure you get insurance as a business, and just to gather with empathetic people who understand the struggle and hefty price of being an entrepreneur in a space that is still dominated by men.

The founder of the event is a white lady who explained that although it wasn't going to be about male bashing, she felt the need to create a space devoid of toxic masculinities. As an entrepreneur, she explained that she spend years struggling to find a platform that allowed women to come together as fellow business owners to speak openly about their vulnerabilities and challenges without the glaring eyes of men who expected her to lead like a patriarch.

This was something many of us in the room nodded strongly to, we were definitely in an echo chamber with like-minded folk. She also made an effort to raise the issue of white privilege in this country through the lens of unemployment, and an honest interrogation around who still owns the economy and access to resources (white people).

Forced to grow a thick skin

As part of the empowerment experience, they offered optional masterclasses before the main event for the attendees to get some practical tips from some of the speakers, but I was there to see and listen to the main speakers. The women all had some useful nuggets of advice to share from their own lived experience within different entrepreneurial spaces.

We had the pleasure of listening to a live read by Lerato Mogoatlhe, the author of *Vagabond*, and do a Q&A on her book and travels in Africa. She was so witty and powerful in a way that propelled the room to think about their own internalised biases towards the rest of the continent. Challenging us to think differently and question our beliefs, but she also spoke openly about her sexual escapes and the love relationship she has with the body.

The other speaker that left me in awe was Thina Zibi, not just because of her achievements as an incredible storyteller but because she was so unapologetic and spoke with such brutal honesty about her emotionally abusive experience with some white women in the creative industry that were in leadership positions.

“ When she spoke about how she used to go to the bathroom to cry when she was a young creative, I felt that. Like many of us, she learnt the business and the work by being thrown into the deep end and left to swim or drown by herself when she was still only trying to learn. ”

She was forced to grow a thick skin, and assimilate into the sometimes-brutal treatment she received when all she wanted to do was create inspiring work. In this creative business, you learn very quickly that the industry succeeds in killing our creativity instead of providing a platform for the new ideas we have to offer.



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Working extra hard to be better

When she spoke about her journey, I was very inspired because she too sounded like the exceptional black woman with a resume that has rendered her somewhat of a black unicorn. Thina is an educated, self-taught photographer with an

incredible eye for detail, award-winning short filmmaker, an award-winning and experienced art director who secretly writes as well. Did I mention that she is funny, smart and 'speaks well' (her words, not mine)?

She went to a predominantly white school in the Western Cape whereas a black girl, she had to work extra hard just to be **better than** the white kids in order to prove her place. We all learn very quickly that we have to be '**better than**' our white counterparts for half the chance. Listening to her I realised that because of the spaces we navigate, we are forced to be shape-shifting exceptional beings who still need to find ways to make ourselves small enough to fit into pre-designed social moulds so we aren't too intimidating to the mediocrity around us.

“ The irony is that we have to be both larger than life to be credible but play small enough to fit into the confines of the roles created for us but not by us. ”

It's frustrating, emotionally tiring and financially costly because our exceptionalism is not even ours to own. Hence, at this women-led empowerment event, there was a really clear distinction between what it's like to get into business as a black woman as opposed to a white woman. Hence we got to hear from another speaker who said she used to live in South America, got divorced, had to come back home a single parent, worked as a teacher and then started a business that taught young kids how to be entrepreneurs.

It sounds like a great business model, but all she had to do to find financial success was horn in on one thing. Lisa didn't need to be a unicorn in her field to get to where she was. She shared that she ALMOST lost everything a few years earlier when someone she hired led them to lose a R3m deal with a big bank.

Getting fu@ked by the system twice as much

This would have been devastating for any business owner, but she bounced back and continued to thrive. But it made me weary to think that it didn't even take her years into building the business before she got offered the opportunity to learn such an expensive lesson. That despite this financial loss, her reputation didn't take a hit and her business continued to thrive. She could afford to make that mistake without being 'blacklisted' for life, meanwhile, black entrepreneurs and employees are never afforded the same kind of privilege.

When this happened to her, she had a lawyer friend to call for help. Lisa didn't need to be exceptional, her business survived and she came out the other side to tell the story. Lisa just needed to be a former teacher who went into the business of teaching without any business degrees to her name. She didn't need MBA's and years of failure as a startup before she landed the opportunity to lose R3m. Opportunities were and are available to her and failure doesn't have the same devastating effects it would have on an **exceptional black unicorn**.

Yes, sexism is a real thing in the space of entrepreneurship, but it's important to recognise the intersection of race and gender privilege. Lisa maybe gets fewer opportunities because she's a woman, but her whiteness affords her many more privileges that myself and other black women aren't.

“ Black women get fu@ked by the system twice as much just because they occupy two primary identities that fall under a marginalised group. ”

Yes, we gathered in the space to kumbaya on the struggles of womanhood within a systemically patriarchal system, but the discrimination runs deeper for some of us. There has to be some recognition that we are not all oppressed equally.

Unicorn slashers

All the black women who were speakers, and those who attended were all juggling more than one hustle at a time, they were all unicorn slashers in one form or another. There was a young woman I spoke to, Zaza Motha who is a skilled journalist runs an organisation called Pout Movement that helps empower young women living in South Africa's townships through

training, she was on the *Mail & Guardian's* Top 200 list in 2018 and much more.



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Juanita Pienaar 27 Aug 2018



My business partner, Seymone Moodley is also a qualified journalist who worked at CNBC, Forbes Africa, eventually ventured into digital marketing as a self-taught social media specialist, started her own business and she's a kick-ass copywriter.

I know another incredible woman, Thando Hopa who is a qualified lawyer who used to work for the National Prosecuting Authority within the sex crimes division, she ventured into modelling successfully (was recently on the cover of *Vogue Portugal*), she is an inspiring storyteller (writer and speaker), a powerful activist who also dabbles in acting.



Thando Hopa reflects on a beauty revolution

Thando Hopa 30 Apr 2019



I know many black women like this who leave me in awe because I don't know how they do it, so I can go on and on. Our professional credibility as black women is very fragile, and often all we have is our material achievements to build on. We often have to be all things to all people, and still be expected to have modest personalities, not be loud, be funny, relatable, agreeable and lighthearted enough to laugh along and brush away offensive black jokes delivered in white spaces by mediocre white people who have one up on us. Where we are expected to say nothing because it's a small world and our reputation is never set in stone.

Black women have to be incredible

As a black woman, you can't just be good at what you do, you have to be incredible, and at the top of your game and then a little extra just to prove that you deserve to be in the room. In reality, we have to jump through the hoops, tick all the boxes, be extra-ordinary 'clever blacks' only to be measured against white mediocrity.

I don't say this lightly because I've worked at a company where a white woman was in a finance position when all she had was matric, and the CFO had a degree in interior design. Where the young black people with degrees and backgrounds in finance did most of the work with less money, the double standards are very real.

At that event, I sat in a room filled with black women who moonlighted as all sorts of impressive and incredible roles, and even then, most of them are constantly faced with the feeling of not being good enough.

We aren't afforded mediocrity, being regular isn't an option. We can't even afford to fail on our terms. **Our ability to run ourselves thin to do a million things incredibly is both our curse and our gift.** Upon attaining the success we have earned tirelessly, we are expected to have humility about it and be grateful to the white saviours that 'enabled' it.

ABOUT REBONE MASEMOLA

Rebone Masemola is the founder of a digital Feminist platform called the WokeProject, she's a Marketer, and writer who advocates for equality and fair representation. She's a TEDx Speaker who currently works as a Digital Marketing Manager for an international TV Network.
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