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The Imperative and Opportunity of Building Gender Diversity and Women Empowerment through Bold and Conscious Leadership in the Workplace

Every year, August presents a key opportunity to reflect on the momentous strides that have been made towards women's empowerment in the South Africa. As we close out Women's Month, a tribute to the more than 20 000 women who marched to the Union Buildings on 9 August 1956, the **National Business Initiative (NBI)** believes it is more important than ever to use bold and conscious leadership in the workplace to advocate for building gender diversity and female empowerment.

This is a key focus area for us, as part of the larger call to address discrimination and exclusion of women. Applying an organisational and societal lens, we aim to understand and address the barriers to systemic societal change. It is crucial that we, as individuals and society, are able to honestly reflect on our power, privilege, and positionality as it relates to unjust systems. Our socialisation and position in society means that every decision we make is informed by a whole host of conscious (explicit) and unconscious (implicit) biases that can either support or challenge exclusionary systems, more especially for women in the economic value-chain. As leaders, we can decide to support or disrupt these systems.

In an exclusionary society like ours, understanding how these biases manifest as prejudice and discrimination within the workplace is fundamental for addressing the barriers to transformation and gender diversity in the workplace. Implicit and explicit preconceptions inform key decisions such as the hiring, promotion, procurement, measurement of income disparities and a host of other critical processes that continue to unfairly disadvantage women in the workplace.

One of the ways the NBI seeks to understand, and therefore begin to dismantle gender inequality, is through the diverse discussions that take place in our **CEO Thought Leadership Dialogue series**. Our recent CEO Thought Leadership Dialogue was with **Imperial CEO, Mohammed Akoojee and Executive Vice President: Corporate Affairs and Investor Relations, Esha Mansingh**. The dialogue explored the importance of gender diversity and the advancement of women in the workplace and why this is both necessary and pivotal for organisations to grow,

succeed and be sustainable in challenging economic circumstances. This dialogue was an opportunity to explore both the challenges and opportunities, lessons, and best practice vital to our economic recovery, as well as co-created approaches and interventions that drive transformation within workplaces to strengthen the role of business in society.

The enlightening conversation unpacked different understandings around the importance of gender equity being driven from the top, in order to ensure commitment and create an enabling environment for change. We examined the critical role of mentorship in creating an enabling environment and supporting women in navigating their career progression. This is particularly important in male-dominated industries.

Mohammed and Esha gave first-hand experience and guidance as to what having a visionary leader means in spearheading women's progression in the workplace and the resultant changes in ownership, transparency and building a sustainable succession plan. The impact seen has seen a thoughtful and concerted effort to address the challenges of gender inequity across Imperial's business and the communities in which it operates.

Key insights that emerged in the conversation include:

- Leadership drive and commitment from the top down is critical to support gender equity
- Organisational culture has to enable and support the change in attitudes
- The business case that women in leadership improve performance and increase productivity is clear and supported
- Strong mentors and champions are important in supporting the advancement of women in the workplace

Bold and conscious leadership requires understanding, empathy and acknowledging exclusionary systems and taking deliberate action to drive change. A fundamental start that was reiterated by Mohammed, is to drive transformation urgently and deliberately by setting clear goals for an organisation. This requires a combination of both holding employees accountable, as well as creating a space for those employees who have been negatively affected to speak up about their subjective experiences, without the risk of victimisation, discrimination of gender biases.

In order to forge a new social contract in our societies and organisations, we need to fundamentally address the aspects of the current contracts that are broken and fundamentally outdated. To do this, we have a responsibility to contest the status quo, by challenging our own personal beliefs and assumptions towards women in leadership. It is no longer acceptable to hide behind the banner of our unchallenged biases. Changing corporate cultures of exclusion to transformation begins with one bold and conscious decision at a time.

Call to Action:

We call on CEOs to act and prioritise transformation and equity as a key focal area in driving business commitment to advance transformation as a normative culture in the workplace. This commitment should be driven by a realisation that addressing gender equity and inclusion is not a competitive issue, but a societal and economic imperative.

To find out more about the NBI's CEO Thought Leadership Dialogues, please contact: Bridgette Mdingayi (Programme Manager Social Transformation) at BridgetteM@nbi.org.za

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The National Business Initiative (NBI) is an independent and voluntary coalition of South African and multinational businesses launched in 1995 by the then President, Nelson Mandela.

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