



THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

As South Africa celebrates Women's Month 2025, the country has a opportunity to reflect on the powerful role women play in business and economic development.

This year is particularly significant as South Africa assumes the G20 Presidency and engages with the Women 20 (W20) initiative which places the spotlight on women entrepreneurs as essential drivers of inclusive growth.

WOMEN, BUSINESS, AND ECONOMIC GROWTH IN SOUTH AFRICA



WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE COUNTRY'S ECONOMY LANDSCAPE

Women are stepping into leadership and business ownership across South Africa, especially in industries that were once male-dominated. Today, women own nearly 57% of businesses, mostly small enterprises, and hold about 47% of senior management roles in mid-sized companies. These businesses support millions of jobs and contribute around R175 billion to the economy each year.

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Women's impact goes beyond entrepreneurship. In corporate leadership, women hold 35% of CEO roles, 53% of CFO positions, and 57% of HR director roles. In the public sector, they make up 45% of senior management. Female labour force participation has grown from 50.9% to 55.8% over the past decade.

But challenges remain, many women start businesses based on personal skills or passions, but without access to proper training, funding, markets, or networks, it's hard to grow. This is especially true in manufacturing, a sector crucial to South Africa's industrial growth and global trade ambitions. Manufacturing accounts for roughly 11% of the nation's GDP and employs about 14% of the workforce, yet women are underrepresented, particularly in technical and craft roles. In 2023, women held only 24.4% of trade positions, highlighting the need for targeted initiatives to ensure equitable participation.





W20 INITIATIVES AND GLOBAL ADVOCACY

Integrating youth into industrial value chains can enhance their economic participation

The Women 20 (W20) initiative, part of the G20, focuses on advancing women's economic empowerment. It promotes access to finance, encourage women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematic (STEM) and leadership roles, and works to remove barriers to trade and business. These goals are especially relevant for manufacturing, which needs technical skills and innovation.

By building partnerships between government, industry, and women entrepreneurs, W20 helps open doors to supply chains, training, and global markets.





GOVERNMENT LED SUPPORT AND FINANCING

South Africa has implemented several targeted government programs to accelerate women's economic participation. The Department of Trade, Industry, and Competition (DTIC) leads initiatives to support women entrepreneurs in manufacturing, agro-processing, and export-oriented industries through skills development, market access, and enterprise support. The National Empowerment Fund (NEF) offers dedicated funding for women-owned enterprises, providing both start-up and expansion capital, as well as guidance for navigating regulatory requirements and accessing broader supply chains.

Complementing these programs, targeted financing mechanisms including blended finance models that combine public and private investment enable women-led businesses to scale more rapidly. These initiatives are reinforced by South Africa's Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) legislation, which incentivizes corporate procurement from women-owned businesses, promotes ownership and management participation, and ensures that women benefit from industrial and commercial opportunities. Together, these frameworks create a supportive ecosystem for women to grow enterprises in manufacturing and other sectors





THE OR TAMBO SEZ: A MODEL FOR WOMEN-LED GROWTH

The OR Tambo Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Gauteng offers a promising model. Located near Africa's busiest airport, the SEZ supports manufacturing and export-oriented industries, creating a gateway for small, medium and large enterprises to access regional and international markets. Women-owned businesses are increasingly integrating into supply chains here, particularly in jewelry manufacturing, agro-processing, and niche manufacturing sectors.

The SEZ offers programs that provide skills training, business development support, and help with export readiness. These tools give women the confidence and resources to grow their businesses and compete internationally.

South Africa's progress shows that when women get the right support through policy, infrastructure, and enterprise development they can lead the way in industrialisation and economic growth. This Women's Month, the message is clear: women are building businesses, creating jobs, and driving inclusive growth across the continent.

For more information please visit the www.ortambosez.com

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