



Breaking Gender Stereotypes from an Early Age Can Improve Women's Empowerment

In his Women's Day speech, President Cyril Ramaphosa said that South Africa needs a movement that includes every woman and man in the country, that brings together every church, mosque, temple, and synagogue, and that involves every workplace, school, college, and university. "We need a movement that extends to every town and village, every farm and homestead, every home and hostel. No one can be left out and no one can be left behind." While welcoming this statement, Deb Zelezniak, CEO at [Santa Shoebox Project](#) adds that this movement should also include early childhood development (ECD) in order to tackle gender stereotypes from a young age.

Considering the theme of this year's Women's Month, which shines a spotlight on women's socio-economic rights and empowerment, as well as on how we can create more opportunities for women's inclusion, she notes that ensuring quality foundation phase education for underprivileged children will break gender stereotypes and help to empower young girls for the future.

Strategies towards achieving this have been put forward by UNICEF in a paper titled [Tackling Gender Inequality from The Early Years](#). These include developing gender-responsive quality standards and indicators and assessing these periodically as a measure of accountability; reviewing existing teaching and learning materials to assess how they promote or hinder gender equality; and redesigning a gender-transformative pre-primary curriculum framework.

"With [studies](#) showing that children begin to have an understanding of their gender by the age of two or three, gender transformative education at this level can play a significant role in tackling gender inequality right from the start by addressing gender stereotypes and harmful gender norms at the stage that they are being formed," shares Zelezniak.

This is reflected in a [report](#) released by Moving Minds Alliance which found that the quality of ECD services can have a significant impact on closing the gender divide and reducing the negative impacts of gender inequality later in life. "With this in mind, it is imperative that practitioners are equipped with the competencies to deliver positive gender socialisation and support children's learning and growth," she highlights.

The UNICEF paper also suggests introducing improvements to pre-primary staff employment conditions, such as setting wages that allow for a decent standard of living, providing teachers with adequate training, and setting limits on staff-to-child ratios to support the ECD workforce and improve the way the profession is viewed. "These are critical as ECD practitioners – [95%](#) of whom are women - play a vital role in developing the minds of our children. Moreover, these improvements could help to attract even more women to the field, thereby adding to women's employment, and consequently their socio-economic emancipation and empowerment."

"Policymakers are [increasingly](#) recognising the vital role of early education in children's cognitive and emotional growth, as well as in their overall well-being," notes Zelezniak. "Quality early learning fosters improved education outcomes, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds with limited home-based skill development opportunities. It is, therefore, crucial to ensure that girls are placed in early education to not only start building their educational foundations but to close the gender gap in years to come."

It is reported that [66%](#) of children from the poorest backgrounds compared to 36% from the wealthiest are not attending ECDs. "The main reason for this is that parents cannot afford to pay monthly fees," she explains. "It is therefore crucial to not only increase the number of ECDs in rural areas of the country but to also make it easier for these facilities to qualify for grants from the Department of Basic Education (DBE) in order to remove the financial barriers preventing more girls from attending."

Zelezniak adds that while the DBE has recently highlighted [concerns](#) about the funding available for ECD programmes, perhaps this is where the private sector could step in to help the Department achieve its aims of providing 'all children in South Africa with access to opportunities for learning through standardised, quality early learning programmes (ELPs)'.

"I encourage everyone to join this movement to ensure that we empower young girls and those who shape their minds so that we can not only close the gender gap by creating jobs now, but also by creating equal opportunities in the future," she concludes.

About the Santa Shoebox Programmes

Traditional Santa Shoebox: Over the last 17 years, 1 152 587 Santa Shoeboxes each containing eight specified items of treats and essentials have been given to underprivileged and socially vulnerable children throughout South Africa and Namibia. From 01 September each year, Santa Shoebox donors choose their beneficiary child/ren by name, age and gender and are given the child's clothing size. Each personalised shoebox reaches the very child for whom it was pledged. Using the Santa Shoebox app, donors are able to track their shoebox from the moment it is pledged to the magical moment it is handed to the child.

Virtual Santa Shoebox: These shoeboxes are purchased online by donors and are available year-round, meeting the needs of donors who live too far from drop-off points, are too busy to shop or have health issues. Components are chosen by the donor on the Santa Shoebox website, the shoeboxes are packed by the Santa Shoebox Team and delivered to children attending far-flung rural facilities. A Virtual Santa Shoebox contains the eight specified items, as well as additional items, such as a lunchbox and books. A Virtual Santa Shoebox costs R450 plus an optional delivery fee of R30.

Santa Shoebox Legacy: All Santa Shoebox Project operating costs are covered by corporate sponsors. Privately donated funds have been accruing under the SSB Legacy Fund which are now being used to bring permanent change to the lives of Santa Shoebox beneficiary children and the impoverished communities in which they live.

Fiduciary information: As a Level One Contributor to B-BBEE, the Santa Shoebox Project earns 100 points on the generic scorecard, and with Section 18A status, is able to provide a tax-deductible receipt in recognition of donations. The Project is an initiative of the JOG Trust (IT2671/2009). The Trust is registered as a Public Benefit Organisation (PBO-930031301), a Non-Profit Organisation (NPO 102-098) and holds a current ICPR in support of 100% SED compliance.

Social media:

TikTok: @santa.shoebox

Facebook: /SantaShoebox

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Instagram: /santashoebox

YouTube: The Santa Shoebox Project

Pinterest: /santashoebox