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Covid-19: Women

For an equal future
President Cyril Ramaphosa will deliver the keynote address to mark this year's Women's Day, under the theme 'Gender equality: realising women's rights for an equal future'

From bringing medicine to the sick and breaking ground on scientific research, to feeding the hungry and counselling the families of those who have lost loved ones, SA women are making a massive impact in the fight against Covid-19

Women working on the virus frontline

A group of women on the Cape Flats in Cape Town formed Moms Who Care in 2017. They work in the city's poor areas, among them Hanover Park and Manenberg. The women help to feed residents in need, care for the frail and help create awareness of the dangers of drug use. Picture: Esa Alexander

Pushing for reform in patent laws to make medicines cheaper

● Candice Sehoma negotiates with officials, meets pharmaceutical bigwigs, discusses making medicines affordable, then mobilises people and pickets for broader access to life-saving drugs.

A co-ordinator for Doctors Without Borders, she has campaigned to reduce the prices of new tuberculosis drugs and has turned her attention to Covid-19 and to campaigning against profiteering in medicines and vaccines.

Sehoma says SA's patent system is weak and should "allow more manufacturers to produce ... to respond to Covid-19".

She says exclusive licensing is the enemy of public health during the pandemic because it forces governments to rely on a single manufacturer for vital equipment.

"Without competition ... prices can soar," she said. "We are advocating for patent law reform as some of these laws are not favourable to safeguard public health.

"We are pushing for more local investment for the development of Covid-19 equipment, be it testing kits or scarce protective gear. There has to be more political will from the government in order to achieve this." — Sipokazi Fokazi

'It's fantastic to see vaccines implemented based on our work'

● An initial six-month research contract took on a life of it own for Dr Clare Cutland. Twenty years later, the mother of two is now doing research as the scientific co-ordinator of the Wits African Leadership in Vaccinology Expertise programme.

She is among a group of South African scientists playing a vital role in helping lead SA in the global race to find a Covid-19 vaccine. "I got into this work by chance. I took a six-month research contract and have been here for the past 20 years," she said.

"Medical research like this does not just impact one person at a time, but hundreds of thousands of people in the long term.

"It's incredibly rewarding to run trials and studies where the results end up being used for World Health Organisation guidelines. It's fantastic to see the implementation of vaccines globally based on the back of the work we have been involved in."

She said she was one of a number of South African women playing important roles in the vaccine trial.

"South African women, many of whom have to balance life as mothers, home carers and medical scientists, are definitely helping to lead the charge in the Covid-19 fight." — Graeme Hosken

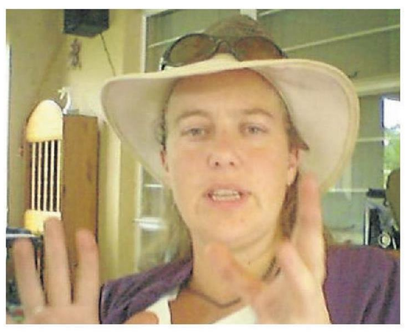
'It is the most challenging moment in our professional lives'

● It is the women who came before her that motivate advanced life-support paramedic and critical-care operations manager Charlotte Pillay.

"Women of colour like myself continue to tackle gender bias and inequality in our workplace and many other facets of society. I draw strength and resilience from the strong women who have paved the way and inspire me to unlock my strength and motivate me to make a difference in a male-dominated environment," she said.

"I aspire to be an example of a powerful female role model as we have a lack of senior, visibly successful females in our industry and workforce."

Pillay, 30, who lives in Joburg, says the pandemic has brought new levels of anxiety for frontline workers. "It is the most challenging moment in our professional lives as health-care workers. Our volume of work has increased, the concentration and deliberation of preparation [putting on masks and gowns] wears on you — one mistake could be fatal ... The ability to make a patient feel better emotionally and psychologically is all the more difficult from behind a mask." — Lwandile Bhengu



Half a million meals served in lockdown

● When lockdown began, Hanneke van Linge, 49, and her team prepared 350 meals a day from a Johannesburg soup kitchen she took over when a friend retired. Now they are up to 1,000 meals daily.

Through her NGO Nosh Food Rescue, Van Linge receives excess food donated by restaurants. But with the pandemic, which forced restaurants to shut their doors until recently, she had to widen the net.

Using her connections in the food industry, she harnessed the skills of chefs who were unable to work. The owners of Thava restaurant opened up their Norwood kitchen to cater for the increased demand, and every day was a surprise packet as they never knew what would be donated from farmers, producers and businesses.

"It's terrifying to see how the lockdown has affected people," she told the Sunday Times this week while in the southern Cape, which she hopes to include in the project.

Van Linge's team have managed to prepare more than 500,000 meals in lockdown. "I didn't do all of this alone. It is chefs, restaurant staff and Tavha Indian restaurant who all opened up their hearts and hands to help with making all of this possible," she said. — Belinda Pheto

Always tough for a woman in funeral sector

● More often than not, the challenges that plague Julie Mbuthuma in her job stem from the fact that she is a woman.

Mbuthuma is a funeral parlour owner in KwaZulu-Natal. There is a challenge "when it comes to things like culture in the rural areas. When you have to set up the lowering device at some grave sites, you are not allowed to come near there because you are a woman," said Mbuthuma.

Five years ago she started Tonnys Funeral Services with her husband in Harding, after leaving her job as a paralegal. She has since opened several funeral homes throughout the province.

"Consulting with people that are role players in the industry really helps. People like *izinduna* [headmen], in rural areas, really help.

The pandemic "has been a challenging time", said Mbuthuma. — Lwandile Bhengu

Scientist who says 'what needs to be said'

● HIV researcher professor Quarraisha Abdool Karim works in a male-dominated area. "Gender inequality has always been there, but I've tried to rise above it," she said.

The mother of three serves on the Covid-19 ministerial advisory committee. She has never hesitated to speak out for humanity.

"If you look at gender equality, when I began my career against where we are now, great strides have been made. But even today there are many forums I participate in where I am a minority and I interact with men who are sometimes 20 years my senior, and that has always been the context within which I have been a scientist," she said.

"I say what needs to be said and do it in a way that moves everyone forward."

This year she was awarded France's Christophe Mérieux Prize for her research into infectious diseases. — Jeff Wicks

Helping families grieve without their rituals

● Bereavement specialist Dr Nelia Drenth is busier than she has ever been, but wouldn't have it any other way.

"I love my profession. People ask how I can work with death every day. I am not working with death. I am working with people who are going through a crisis and the positive side for me is seeing how people claim back their lives," she said.

Drenth, 67, used the first few weeks of lockdown to develop online courses on bereavement, then reopened her practice. She has worked in hospital trauma units and military hospitals and for the past 15 years has run a private practice in Pretoria.

Drenth said the hardest part for families is being denied the opportunity to properly say goodbye. "It is also very hard for families not to be able to adhere to customary rituals, a very important part of how we grieve." — Lwandile Bhengu

Producing PPE while empowering women

● Before the Covid-19 pandemic, Phumeza Langalibalele's health-care business was already the sole supplier of surgical gloves to private hospital group Netcare.

Now Mlungisi Healthcare has diversified its product range and started supplying a wider range of personal protective equipment to more private and public hospitals — and has tripled profits.

After struggling financially at the start, Langalibalele said she got her big break when Netcare offered her a bridging loan to help grow her business.

Mlungisi Healthcare employs only women and tries to develop talent wherever possible. "I believe that when you empower women you empower the whole family,

and that is the reason that our business only has women," said Langalibalele. — Sipokazi Fokazi

Finding the opportunity behind the crisis's mask

● The Covid-19 pandemic has changed fortunes for Ruth Abrahams, left.

Unable to find work for the past three years, she found an opportunity opening up for her and her mother, Irene Dooms, right, during the pandemic: masks.

The pair run The Craft-I Hub from their home in Eldorado Park, Johannesburg. The small business started out making masks and has expanded into headscarves, gift hampers and baked goods.

Dooms dusted off her sewing machine to start making masks for her children, grandchildren and neighbours. Abrahams sourced material and mask patterns and convinced her mom to make more. They've sold more than 800 since March.

"My confidence was so low with not being able to find a job but after starting this business I have been doing so much better," Abrahams said. — Leonie Wagner

In the zone, getting a field hospital built

● East London Industrial Development Zone executive manager Ayanda Ramncwana is leading a team that is converting a warehouse into a field hospital.

Her Covid team includes stakeholders like Mercedes-Benz SA, Buffalo City metro, health and public works provincial departments and a number of companies in the zone.

Ramncwana, 39, has spent most of her career building corporate brands.

Growing up, Ramncwana said, her father would always remind her that as the eldest of her siblings, she had a responsibility to set the bar high and achieve the impossible.

She has learnt to always know what she wants to achieve, she said, and to position herself to achieve it and persevere through any struggle until she reaches the finish line. — Mpumzi Zuzile

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