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## **Celebrating Women's Month: Generation Equality - Realising Women's Rights for an Equal Future.**

### **The role of a Women's DNA in the workplace**

**By Lungile Mashele**



Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, in her 1976 article about the funeral sermons of Christian women, observed that “well-behaved women seldom make history.” I was reminded of this quote when Millie Odhiambo, a Kenyan Member of Parliament, went viral for telling fellow female MPs to be bad girls, that ‘good girls don’t get the corner office’, and that they should not adhere to African customs of ‘having decorum, dressing nicely, being kind and being nice’ – Odhiambo stated that those traits will never take women anywhere.

A loud woman raised me. My mother and her sisters are loud. Their mother was loud. So, growing up, I always admired quiet and demure, soft-spoken women, who could get their voice across in gentle and hushed tones; women who were seen but also heard quietly. These are the type of women I sought to

emulate as I grew up. I didn't want to be a loud, aggressive, eager black woman that had been presented to me during my formative years.

That was until 20 years ago when I made my first foray into corporate South Africa. In my 20 years of working in corporate, these are the few things that have been encoded in my corporate DNA: Being soft-spoken, demure and a damsel is not a privilege big, black girls have; When you're a big, black girl, people don't encourage you to speak or beg answers out of you; In a world where big, black girls do not speak, it's not considered mild manners, they are viewed as stupid; and In a world where big, black girls are easily confused with help, speaking up, advocating, and fighting for yourself is not a luxury, it is survival.

I've embraced the angry black woman tropes – it means I have boundaries. I know that even my silence is perceived as aggression. I speak up against injustice. I dream. I laugh. I use my voice and keyboard to fight and to have fun, that duality is important. I've come to appreciate that survival in corporate SA looks very different for black women than for everybody else.

Successful women are like wolves, they hunt in packs and leave no one behind. They don't take joy or pride in being the only or the first woman but rather being the woman who opened doors for others. They rise by lifting others. They keep a little black book where they can recommend other women for opportunities and positions.

For the first time in my life, I can say I'm in my soft-girl era. I'm still that loud and damning voice – it's who I've become, just like my mother. So here I am, at the halfway mark of my career – still fighting, but this time for other women who don't have a voice. I'm tired but I don't dare give up. Not when I'm part of an elite group of second-generation women who hold corporate jobs; not when friends and family have been pushed out of corporate by illness, corporate restructuring, discrimination, and racism.

On this Women's Month I resonate with what Nicola Jane Hobbs wrote, "Growing up, I never knew a relaxed woman. Successful woman? Yes. Productive women? Plenty. Anxious and afraid and apologetic woman? Heaps of them. But a relaxed woman? At ease women? Women who aren't afraid to take up space in the world. Women who prioritise rest and pleasure and play? Women who give themselves unconditional permission to relax – without guilt, without apology, without feeling like they need to earn it? I'm not sure I've ever met a woman like that. But I would like to become one. I would like us all to become one."



So don't worry so much about being demure, soft-spoken and well-behaved. Your time on earth is finite so don't try to age with grace or dignity. Age with mystery, mischief, audacity, and a great story to tell. Make history.