

Don't blame women for leaving fields like engineering—blame bad attitudes

August 24 2018, by Amanda Gouws



Credit: Liza Summer from Pexels

There are reasons why feminists use the slogan "the personal is political", especially when men make arguments using the age old idea that "biology is destiny".

Manglin Pillay, the CEO of the South African Institution of Civil Engineering, recently resorted to these types of [arguments](#) about the dearth of [women](#) in engineering.

Citing some [research](#) Pillay essentially argued that women were better suited to care for children than to work in the Science Technology Engineering and Maths (STEM) field. He said this explains the under-representation of women in the engineering field. He wrote that: "The fact that more men occupy high profile executive posts is tremendous not because of gender but because of appetite for work load and extreme performance requirements at that level..."

He further noted that women do not occupy high positions in the engineering fields because they "choose to have the flexibility to dedicate themselves to more important enterprises like family and raising of children..."

The article caused an uproar. Pillay has since [apologised](#) for his sexism after an outcry from many women including the Minister of Science and Technology, [Mmamoloko Kubayi-Ngubane](#), also a woman.

Regardless of the apology, we need to understand what kinds of attitudes inform Pillay's thinking. He is not alone in this thinking and an apology doesn't mean that attitudes have changed. And there is a chance that Pillay misused the concerned research as experts in the field come to different [conclusions](#).

Pillay's arguments boiled down to blaming women for the fact that there are so few of them in engineering field.

This is nonsense.

The results of a [study](#) on the experiences women face as engineers in the

workplace in the US sheds light on the factors that explain the situation. The study, published in *Frontiers in Psychology* in 2017, involved a sample of 1464 women engineers who had left the field. It showed that their decision to leave jobs in the engineering field were related to a number of key factors.

Firstly, poor and unfair working conditions. This included inequitable compensation as well as inflexible work environments that make work-family balance difficult. Secondly, dissatisfaction with effective use of their math and science skills, and lastly the lack of recognition at work and adequate opportunities for advancement.

These findings show that work life balance and the glass ceiling for women are indeed the problems – not a lack of ambition or a biological need to mother children.

The problem therefore is not with women, but with the workplace and fairness in the family. If companies attend to these problems women will stay, and progress.

The numbers tell a story

While reproductive rights apply to both men and women, pregnancy is often viewed only as a woman's "problem". It's left to women to fight for [maternity leave](#), often against incredible odds given that many companies see it as a costly imposition.

Labour legislation in South Africa [now provides](#) for paid maternity leave – six weeks paid leave, and a total of four months unpaid. But many companies adhere only to the prescribed minimum, and also often make it [difficult](#) for women to take this leave.

But research shows that companies that take a more generous approach

reap the rewards.

Take the US experience. The 100 best companies in the US listed by [Working Mother magazine](#) shows that companies that offer up to 16 weeks of paid maternity leave have a much higher retention rate of women. And they have lower staff turnover.

Accenture, a company that has doubled its maternity leave to 16 weeks saw 40% fewer women leave the company within a year after the increase. [KPMG](#) increased its maternity leave from 8 to 18 weeks and its retention rate of women also increased. KPMG states that it is cheaper to pay an additional 10 weeks of leave and coaching for new parents than paying for a new staff member which is the equivalent of 78 weeks' salary.

There is therefore a business case to be made for maternity leave. Young couples now look at what companies offer when it comes to childcare arrangements and those with good maternity leave policies are more attractive.

Flexitime is another important way of keeping women in certain professions and making it easier for them to combine childcare responsibilities with work. [Forbes](#) magazine calls flexible [working conditions](#) a non-negotiable for engineers.

How to retain women

Important [lessons](#) can be learnt from successful companies that have achieved high retention rates of women and increased staff morale and productivity.

Apart from increasing paid maternity leave, these companies have successfully develop policies that support women when they return to

work. They have done this by developing values that recognise the long term gain of having women stay, and move up the management ladder. But these values have to be modelled at the top management level, such as the position in which Pillay is an incumbent.

What shouldn't be happening in 2018 is that men in Pillay's position continue to send the message to women engineers that they can't measure up because they are women.

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