

Transforming the tourism industry into a women's world

 By [Velma Corcoran](#)

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There might be significant representation of women in the tourism industry as a whole, but it is clear that this is not being seen at top levels. Women continue to struggle to reach senior management in corporate tourism. This can, in part, be attributed to the fact that the industry is still very much entrenched in traditional management formulas: trade shows, networking events and little black books of contacts. Unfortunately, there is little flexibility to help women succeed in the industry.



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The tourism industry is one of the biggest contributors to revenue and job creation in South Africa. In fact, the industry has been recognised by the Department of Tourism as a pillar of economic growth and a social unifier.

Within the industry, women make up nearly 70% of the workforce. However, women hold fewer than 40% of all managerial positions, fewer than 20% of general management roles and between 5 and 8% of board positions. Of these senior positions, according to a 2017 report, only 11% are filled by black women.

The industry has a long way to go in terms of transformation for women and people of colour. It can be a difficult industry for women to break into, but I believe that a fresh, modern approach to business can bring about significant change in this regard.

However, we are seeing great change in the entrepreneurial space. This can be seen on a number of levels, from the women operating small businesses through platforms like Airbnb, to those spearheading innovative brands and companies. With women driving their own opportunities in the entrepreneurial space, we are seeing significant transformation. There are some pretty incredible female entrepreneurs creating innovative products and really redefining the tourism industry. They are making their own rules and forging a new playing space instead of trying to break into the established industry to try and change it from within.

For example, Cherae Robinson is the founder of Tastemakers Tours and her company is redefining how Africans see travel in Africa. Brittany Hawkins started Explore Sideways Tours, which creates beautiful bespoke tours exploring wine, food, art and culture in the Cape.

And this change is not necessarily just being seen in the tourism space, if we look at the phenomenal success of SweepSouth, which was founded by Aisha Pandor, as just one great example. We are definitely seeing inspiring female leadership from the wider entrepreneurial space.

On the more corporate side of the tourism industry, however, there is much that can be done to support women. There are many measures companies can implement to create more opportunities for women in all levels of management: flexible hours, equal pay, great maternity benefits. If you really want to attract female talent, you have to embrace things that are important to women.

On another level, technology is making the industry more accessible for women. Digital platforms like Airbnb are attracting people from different sectors into the tourism space, and have also disrupted the industry as a whole and changed the rules, making it easier for women to access the market. In fact, an incredible 65% of Airbnb hosts in South Africa are women. This way of working is not reliant on those old-school networks so typical of men in business, and offers a great deal of flexibility. People with no formal tourism background are now active in the tourism space and coming out with great products.

Transformation is happening at the fringes. In order for real transformation to happen, though, women in leadership roles have a responsibility to champion other women. This can be done by ensuring that we support women in junior and mid-management roles in order for them to progress to senior roles, and not just by looking out for women already in senior positions. This means fighting for equal pay, championing progressive maternity policies, and introducing flexible working hours and conditions. Women in senior roles have the power to influence and change things and create debates around these topics - they should use this power.

ABOUT VELMA CORCORAN

Velma Corcoran is Country Manager for Airbnb in South Africa and former executive marketing manager for Cape Town Tourism. She has been involved in the tourism industry for many years and has become a leading female figure in the business. Velma was a speaker at the Africa Travel Summit. This three-day event took place in Langa, Cape Town from 11 to 13 September and has been organised by home-sharing platform Airbnb to further the dialogue around inclusive and sustainable tourism in Africa, and as part of the \$1 million through 2020 commitment that the company made to promote and support community-led tourism projects in Africa.

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