

African Bank Limited press release

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Investing in women is a priority

Many women are now the main breadwinners in their families, educators to their children and form the support structures of their communities.

“For these and many other reasons, we believe that investing in women will have major long term positive effects on our economy, communities, family structures and values,” says African Bank’s Group Executive: Sales, Branch Network, Mellony Ramalho.

Ramalho herself has experienced the effects that opportunities, mentorship and hard work can have on a person’s life. “I entered the workforce in 1990 with my Matric certificate and some casual retail experience but with no degree, no banking experience, no computer skills, no car and no drivers licence. I was thrilled when I eventually succeeded in landing a filing clerk position in a new credit card division,” she says. 27 years later and Ramalho is one of 10 executives at the helm of reshaping African Bank into a retail bank.

“Women, and especially young women, need to be shown that there are possibilities and taught that through hard work they too can succeed. The various initiatives assisting women, supported by African Bank, aim to do just that,” she says.

She highlights the Grade 11 mentorship programme where 12 learners were taken under the wing of African Bank as part of a mentorship programme last year. “The mentees are all female and were identified as the top achievers in the three schools the bank selected as part of this programme. Schools include Umqhele Comprehensive in Ivory Park, and Ingqayizivele Secondary and Thuko Ke Maatla Secondary in Tembisa.”

The programme is about ‘life after Grade 12’ and the aim is to equip these learners with various skills to help them prepare for the challenges ahead. This will include assistance with choosing a higher education institution, entrance requirements, fees, bursaries, etc. but another component involves soft skills like managing your finances, public speaking, etc. “Where necessary, we will offer financial assistance to enable these girls to attend university.”

The now Grade 12 learners have already met with experts based in fields that they are interested in, received tutorial lessons prior to exams and had career guidance assessments. “We are currently in the process of assisting the girls with university and bursary applications and continue to meet with them on a monthly basis,” says Ramalho.

With one in five girls in South Africa missing approximately five days of school every month due to the lack of access to sanitary products, African Bank also supports the drive to supply sanitary pads to young women in need. “We host and support several events throughout the year where we visit schools and invite speakers to offer mentoring and career guidance as well as information on personal hygiene. We also hand out goodie bags and sanitary pads to the young women. We believe every girl in South Africa deserves access to safe and hygienic sanitary products. If we can help make a small difference and make a positive impact on these young lives, we can eliminate many of the taboos that still exist and help reduce the high number of school absenteeism and drop-outs which still exist in many schools around the country,” she says.

Sport is also a great way to reach girls and women and nurture talent. With this in mind, the African Bank programme, Let’s Play Netball, was started four years ago with primary and high school girls in the townships of Uitenhage where extra mural sports and activities are almost non-existent. It is now a successful upliftment programme with the teams dominating the scene in the Eastern Cape.

“Another initiative and perhaps the most important, is the Early Childhood Development (ECD) programme we support through [Early Inspiration](#). ECD is possibly the biggest blindspot in our education crisis,” says Ramalho.

Foundational teaching in social skills, spatial and motor abilities, cognitive development and nutrition, amongst other developmental processes, are the building blocks on which schooling stands. ECD provides the foundation on which to educate a child. Without ECD, basic things such as holding a pencil, peer-to-peer interaction and the ability to play can be compromised.

“We recognise that there is no point in putting money into education when the foundation isn’t there. We have therefore committed to invest in this area so that other interventions don’t have to be remedial, but rather progressive,” adds Ramalho.

[Early Inspiration](#) proved to be just the investment African Bank was looking for. “Early Inspiration is successfully training hundreds of women to be qualified ECD practitioners. As with all our projects, we invest in people, not just projects. We have very close relationships with all our project leaders, and in the ECD space we developed a relationship with Dr Lauren Stretch, the Managing Director of Early Inspiration. Dr Stretch is a young, dynamic woman passionate about ECD and her organisation,” explained Ramalho.

African Bank has been involved with the project for five years and covers the costs for the education of 24 women in the Eastern Cape, and 24 women in the Western Cape, who were formerly unqualified crèche teachers. The programme takes these women from



being basic child minders to be qualified ECD practitioners. “We also support the Home Visit Programme and Parent Support intervention where children in Nelson Mandela Bay are visited twice monthly for one-on-one support and guidance is provided for their parents,” she says.

The ECD practitioner training model is sustainable as these women will keep on investing in the development of children year-on-year. It also empowers them as these crèche and primary school child-minders are upskilled and equipped with business skills.

“One of the biggest life lessons I’ve learned is that success depends on the choices you make and the actions you take. The key is to learn from those choices that failed and move forward. Don’t look back or ponder on what you cannot change. Move forward and choose to make a difference. I believe that by investing in these women through all these initiatives we are supporting and enabling them to make choices that will make a difference,” concludes Ramalho.

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