

Africa needs more women leaders

How will sub-Saharan Africa achieve its Millennium Development Goals without the required 2.5 million new engineers and technicians as estimated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)?



Image by 123RF

In the developing world, far more young minds need to be attracted to engineering and in particular women, who are underrepresented in many fields, must be part of the solution.

Global engineering and infrastructure advisory company Aurecon is attempting to help address Africa's problem of underrepresentation of women, which is particularly prevalent in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) careers and Entrepreneurship.

The company recently hosted 25 female Grade 10 and 11 learners from schools in South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe, at its Tshwane office as part of a STEM promotion programme. The fast-paced seven-day programme is run by Taungana, a movement that seeks to empower rural African high school girls by providing them with the opportunity to access and explore STEM careers. This year marks Aurecon's third successive year of supporting the movement.

"Aurecon is committed to becoming a more innovative organisation that provides unique solutions to our clients' challenges," said Sonja Jansen van Rensburg, a member of Aurecon's Africa leadership team. "This is being achieved by creating a work environment where everyone, regardless of gender, colour or culture, feels valued and is willing to contribute. Similar to positively shape Africa's future, we have to change the composition of its leaders to become more gender equitable and that change starts today."

Design thinking

One of the key aims of the week-long programme is to help the girls identify potential entrepreneurial projects in their communities and to develop these ideas into a business case. To support this, Aurecon took the girls through a design thinking session, a human-centred methodology that necessitates innovation and creativity to solve critical problems.

The learners were required to ideate; a process that encourages the exploration of different possibilities and solutions for the challenges they encounter in their respective communities – specifically in the spheres of agriculture, health, public transport and education.

Building on Aurecon's theme for this year's programme, #digitalinmylife, they then explored how technology and digital solutions could alleviate some of these day-to-day challenges.

"Giving the girls exposure to the process of design thinking and using it to build a solid business case for the projects they identified has been an interesting and educational process for both the girls and our participating employees," added van Rensburg. "The young minds are bright and inquisitive and there will undoubtedly be some future leaders from this year's group."

Charlotte Mpenyana, quality, environmental and sustainability regional manager at Aurecon and this year's Aurecon Champion, stresses the importance of such initiatives, saying, "Working with Taungana during Women's Month was a great experience. We are helping to empower a generation of African girls to change their lives and contribute significantly to sustainable development on the continent through exposure to STEM careers."

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