

Acknowledge the glass ceiling, demonstrate how unnecessary it is

 By [Sindy Peters](#)

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Genevieve Naidoo is head of Credit Risk for the Real Estate Sector, Corporate and Investment Banking for Standard Bank. Her vast experience spans residential, industrial, retail and office sectors across a number of African markets.



Genevieve Naidoo

With over 13 years of property industry experience, Naidoo began her career as a junior quantity surveyor in a QS consulting and advisory firm for two years.

Out of curiosity - rather than a push - she applied and was accepted into the Nedbank Graduate Programme. Out of 1500 applicants, Naidoo was one of the 17 chosen. This sparked the realisation that she had to do more than count bricks, which inspired her to commence with a BComm degree. Proving her worth straight off the bat, the one-year programme soon became a mere six-month programme within the Corporate and Capital Markets, when Naidoo was offered placement within the Nedbank Property Finance Division. She moved on to manage the Project Management Gauteng Division, which comprised a team of QS's looking after all the development projects that were debt and equity funded. Here she excelled and was awarded for her exceptional work by being one of the youngest recipients in Property Finance to win the Nedbank Top Achiever Award.

Rising Star Award

Naidoo initiated and ran the Gen-Y initiative within Property Finance, an initiative to bridge the generational gap between Baby Boomers and Millennials and create environments to enhance creativity and thinking differently. She completed the SAPOA Property Development Programme through UCT and a few months later was awarded [Women's Property Network \(WPN\)](#) national winner of the Rising Star Award. At the time she joined Standard Bank to head up the Project Management team for South Africa and Rest of Africa Real Estate portfolio and later also the Commercial Property Valuation's team responsible for Corporate and Investment Banking, Personal and Business Banking, and Wealth and Investments for Standard Bank.

We interviewed Naidoo to find out more about some of the key achievements of the WPN, which she currently chairs, the hurdles women face in the commercial property industry today, and whether a glass ceiling exists for women in her sector.

■ ***What are your professional goals for the next five years within the industry?***

If you asked me years ago when I worked on numerous building sites if I ever saw myself managing credit risk for a financial institution, my answer would probably have been "highly unlikely". So if you ask me about the next five years, I would probably give you the wrong answer. I've loved everywhere that my career has taken me, the people that I have learnt from and every opportunity I have been given. Isn't the world our oyster... so why restrict ourselves?

■ ***As chair of the WPN, could you tell us more about the work that the organisation does. What are some of the key achievements of the WPN since its inception?***

The WPN is a non-profit organisation that is dedicated to advancing the success of women in the property industry, with a presence in the major centres in South Africa. A key focus for the WPN is to help the real estate sector understand the importance of the role of women to their businesses. For those companies not yet ready to invest in women, it is worth noting that gender diversity is critical to bottom lines.

WPN was established in 2000 as a platform for women to empower each other through networking and development initiatives and we currently have in excess of 400 members. It is our intention to provide our members with the tools needed to alter their business strategies, and enhance their businesses in order to be successful within the sector.

The initiatives to which WPN has dedicated a great deal of time and effort over the past few years has been the Education Trust whereby funds have been raised to award over 54 bursaries to female students studying towards a property-related degree, and mentorship. WPN has raised in excess of R2m for students through the Education Trust. WPN also funds as a Two Oceans Marathon Charity and through the Women in Property Gala Awards.

WPN also prides itself on delivering great and diverse networking events at which women in the respective regions are able to get together on an informal basis, to get to know one another, and hopefully set the ground work for future working relationships between the companies they represent.

One of the major highlights in the property industry calendar year is the National Women in Property Awards. Proudly sponsored by Airports Company South Africa (ACSA) and the awards by RICS, WPN celebrates women in the South African property sector. The awards are a collaborative platform dedicated to recognising outstanding leadership, inspiration, vision and innovation in organisations that have stepped up and shaped women's roles within the private and public sectors.

■ ***What do you think is the biggest issue facing women in the commercial property industry today?***

Women need to not be afraid of owning our seat at the boardroom table and change our thinking. We need to acknowledge and own that we bring a unique set of skills and thought leadership to the property industry. This isn't a weakness, it's a

strength.

I have said for many years that we have too few women in senior levels within the industry, and whilst the pool of young talent is growing, we have yet to transform and become a more diverse and inclusive industry representative of the country. We need to push and challenge ourselves to move forward and not be afraid. My advice to women is to back yourself, often our fears are what holds us back. As Lucille Ball once said: "I'd rather regret the things I have done, than the things I have not."

■ ***Does a glass ceiling exist for women in your sector?***

It would be naïve of me to say that women are treated as full equals in the property industry. The comparatively small number of women in senior roles in this industry is testament to this. While this reflects the demographics of senior teams in most industries in South Africa, it also places a lot of pressure on women in senior positions to continuously prove themselves. From a personal perspective, part of the pressure to prove oneself is the belief that if we succeed, it will make it easier for younger women to grow and develop - so that, one day, the presence of women in senior positions in this industry will not be seen as exceptional.

Women certainly do bring a unique perspective as well as different and necessary skills to boardrooms. This supports research that shows that boards with greater diversity are better at managing the various and complex issues that face modern businesses in rapidly evolving multi-cultural economies. Within today's environment, I believe that women at all levels in a business contribute essential perspectives without which businesses are less likely to be relevant to their industries - or particularly competitive in the marketplace. As women in the boardroom, we need to understand the unique perspectives that we bring and use these to evolve the businesses and industries that we are in to better serve modern work and living environments. This will also make businesses more competitive and responsive to current and future market needs.

If we accept that there is a glass ceiling and that there is nothing that can be done about it, it will inhibit our growth. Instead, we need to acknowledge that it is there - and then demonstrate how unnecessary it is. Simply by being there and doing our jobs well we will change perception. By demonstrating how the presence of women in a business improves performance and competitiveness, we will level the playing field for future talent from all walks of life.

■ ***Is there a female figure that has had a positive influence on your life? If yes, who and how so?***

Without a doubt: my mother. We underestimate the sacrifices that women make to nurture and develop their kids, and be great partners. I realised the unspoken sacrifices my own mother made to ensure that she provided to the best of her abilities for her children.

■ ***Do you think, in 2016, it is important having a month dedicated to women in South Africa?***

At the core I think it is a great initiative to create awareness and celebrate women. Hopefully, in years to come, we will continue to see acknowledgement and recognition of what women contribute to the home, family and economy. More than that, I hope we come to a point where it is not necessary to have to draw attention and create awareness about the contributions of women in society and it becomes ingrained in our dialogue.

■ ***What is your message for Women's Month?***

Be brave and mediocrity will become a thing of the past - we too often let fear of the unknown consume us.

ABOUT SINDY PETERS

Sindy Peters (@sindy_hullaba_lou) is a group editor at Bizcommunity.com on the Construction & Engineering, Energy & Mining, and Property portals. She can be reached at sindy@bizcommunity.com
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