



LOCAL BUSINESSWOMEN TAKE THEIR CUE FROM JAPANESE PEERS ON “CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT”

*The role of **women in society** has steadily evolved, with a significant transition from being confined to household chores to being at the forefront of **multi billion-rand enterprises***

Modern women have attained success in juggling roles as wives, mothers, caregivers, change agents and economic contributors. Women have overcome traditional barriers in fulfilling leadership roles that were previously earmarked only for men.

Today women also hold positions

of power. Global examples of inspirational women include former American First Lady Michelle Obama sporting an impressive academic background and Senator Hillary Clinton running for the USA's Presidency in 2016. Back home, women are also “doing it for themselves”, such as former Public Prosecutor Thuli Madonsela, who's renowned for her strength and honesty, and entrepreneur Khanyi Dhlomo, CEO of Ndalo Media.

The Japan International Co-operation Agency (JICA) imple-

ments Japan's co-operation with developing countries across the globe, with many located in Africa, a continent that continues to face severe developmental challenges. This year, JICA is celebrating 20 years of inclusive and dynamic development in South Africa, with multi-sectoral technical assistance directed at people and institutional development to empower and enrich lives.

Just over a year ago, JICA hosted the Africa Japan Business Women Exchange Seminar, which was one of the commitments from the Fifth Tokyo International Conference on African Developments. The seminar was held in Yokohama, Japan, and was aimed at helping women in business overcome everyday challenges that restrict growth. The gathering focused on starting a conversation between businesswomen from both Africa and Japan, affording them a platform for sharing challenges and interrogating solutions. As Japan was keen on improving work structures and ethics in African countries, JICA deemed it necessary to solicit African businesswomen, which led to the selection of two exceptional South African women to participate in the seminar.

Team South Africa saw a clever public-private mix comprised of Dikeledi Moema, Chief Director of Gender at the Department of Social Development and Mpumi Maesela, founder and Chief Executive Officer of Servicios Empresariales (SE) Holdings, which focuses on agriculture and textiles. Moema and Maesela, along with women from other African countries, set off to expand their knowledge and learn Japanese business practices that focus on how the Japanese lifestyle impacts business operations and work ethics. Their visit introduced them to the work practice known as "*kaizen*", whereby the Japanese ensure the delivery of services and the production of goods with standardised quality through efficiency.

Moema and her colleagues, Nyameko Madikane and Sadi Motsuenyane, were inspired by success stories of *kaizen* being practised in women-run businesses in Japan. This led to the trio initiating community development training manuals for businesswomen, regardless of their business sizes or fields. This initiative is scheduled to start at a government summit in March this year.

Through mentorship and development, Maesela also found a way to share with young black female entrepreneurs not only business skills like financial education and technical know-how, but also soft skills such as effective negotiation. "Coming from a service sector and working in and with civil society, it was vital for me to be able to apply *kaizen* to this sector, integrating the continuous improvement process into the small businesses that I support," she says.

The teachings to which Moema and Maesela were exposed

in Japan sparked the need for them to share this with other South African women involved in small, medium and micro-enterprises (SMMEs) for business improvement. To reward their passion, JICA hosted the Women's SMME Business Development Seminar on local soil in November 2016, inviting women from and associated with Women in Development Business and the Businesswomen's Association.

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Japanese *kaizen* expert Koichi Ieki, who has substantial experience gained from working in renowned Japanese factories, facilitated the seminar. Ieki has trained a number of enterprises in African countries in *kaizen*, with successful outcomes in Egypt and Jordan.

Adding value to Ieki's teachings were first-hand accounts from Moema and Maesela's applications of *kaizen* in both their offices and homes. Ieki engaged participants in conversation and games for a better understanding of *kaizen* and "5S", a principle that improves business efficiency through simple activities such as regular cleaning of working environments for timeous identification of problems. *Kaizen* focuses on the importance of discipline and encourages businesses to make small changes for long-term success.

Moema explained that although the seminar was intensive and required hard work, inherent to the Japanese character, the knowledge acquired was invaluable. Japanese businesswomen owning or managing SMMEs shared good practices for potential application back home.

Coinciding with the World Assembly for Women in Tokyo in December 2016, Moema and Maesela, as JICA alumni, were invited to speak at a JICA-hosted side event on emerging women entrepreneurs in local development, considering community-based business. The event united female entrepreneurs who had business relations with JICA and the Nippon Foundation. Japanese communities and female entrepreneurs in Japanese rural areas shared their experiences of owning and running successful businesses.

JICA will continue to explore opportunities to improve the lives of African citizens, with the Africa Japan Business Woman Exchange Seminar one of many ways of sharing knowledge and experiences between Africa and Japan.