

I am woman

Yolanda Cuba, ex-CEO of the Mvelaphanda Group and recently appointed Executive Director, Development and Decision Support: SABMiller, joined an illustrious panel of female speakers at the recent Women's Forum in France to debate the topic "Being a Woman: Different Perspectives From Different Countries/Regions"

Of the five panelists, Cuba's the only one who beamed throughout the 90-minute discussion. It's evidently a promising time for women in SA.

"It's up to the people who currently hold positions of power, in politics and in business, to keep the momentum going," she says. "In SA we're definitely further along the gender equality path in politics than in business. It's also one of my personal ambitions in my new role at SABMiller to get more women in to the industry," she adds.

"If you want a certain future, go out and create it," she explains. "Start with the end in mind and engineer your way towards it."

The best advice she can offer other young women? "Be clear about what you stand for, what your personal mandate's going to be. I'm very clear about mine. Firstly, I want financial security so I can provide for my family [Cuba and her three siblings were raised by their single mother]. Secondly, I want to be in an environment in which I can make the greatest impact. I want to make the impossible possible – not just for myself, but for everyone."

Cuba's belief in engineering the future is also the reason she left the Mvelaphanda Group. "I'd achieved what I'd set out to do: create maximum value for the shareholders. As CEO, you should never fall in love with your job. Your first loyalty should be to the shareholders. My job was done. It was time to move on."

When SABMiller MD Norman Adami approached her, she jumped at the opportunity. "I'm excited about getting to know the beer industry. I want to make beer more accessible to women. Not just the product, but the industry."

Making beer more female-friendly may sound unlikely, but Cuba's unfazed. "Obstacles are what you see when you lose sight of your goals," she laughs. "You have to have a game plan and execute it with focus and determination."

"Anything you want to do, you can do, but there's no substitute for competence. Education, opportunity and experience help create competent people. We need to give women the opportunities and empower them to achieve their goals. The rest is up to you."

Cuba exclaims. "You could liken it to surfers in a competition. They paddle and paddle to get where they want to be. Then they wait, watching carefully as the waves roll in, until they spot the perfect wave and focus all their attention and energy on catching it. Success in business," she smiles, "is pretty much the same."

– SABINE CLAPPAERT

