

# Township women: Invisible, formidable

Many don't have a formal education or business literacy but they support their families and create opportunities for others

COMMENT

Catherine Sofianos

**T**here are women in our townships who have ambitions that nobody really knows about," says Ishara Maharaj. After polite greetings and a sip of water, she launches into a passionate conversation about women entrepreneurs, a subject that has preoccupied her for the past seven years and is the subject of her doctorate.

"Like their parents before them, they see entrepreneurship in the informal economy as the only viable pathway out of poverty," she says.

The female entrepreneur in the township is the white whale of the economy. Little is known about them, even though many are formidable figures.

Maharaj has been training and supporting businesswomen since 2015, some of whom are residents of Philippi and Khayelitsha on the Cape Flats and Imizamo Yethu in Hout Bay. Like them, she grew up in a township and has experience with the problems, strengths and advantages of their position.

A significant problem is education. Many women in the informal economy have not finished high school. They do not have financial literacy or an understanding of even basic business concepts.

There is an explosion of business support programmes in the Western Cape and in the rest of South Africa. But what is the effect of these programmes?

Support for small and medium enterprises do not take cognisance of the unique and additional obstacles that black women running businesses in townships face. Their colour and gender frequently puts these business owners at a double disadvantage, meaning they are often the last to benefit from small business support programmes.

The obstacles they face — as women without skills, education and SMME support — can lead to significant emotional and psychosocial difficulties.

Theirs is a path fraught with all the vulnerabilities faced by both business owners and black women in township life, including poverty, crime, fragile to no support system, hunger and social distress.

Added to this is xenophobia for those who are not originally from South Africa or are stateless.

But the women township entrepreneurs, whose lives Maharaj is exploring for her PhD in women's entrepreneurship at the University of Cape Town, are not beaten. Through her research, she aims to give voice to millions of women from low-income areas.

"I am constantly amazed how women can hold multiple ventures at once, and adapt to them in times of crisis. They are always seeking opportunities to grow their income and diversify their skills," says Maharaj.

And while they are doing that they are also uplifting others and using



**Personal experience:** Ishara Maharaj is doing her doctorate on entrepreneurial women in townships such as Philippi (above).  
Photo: David Harrison

partnered with a male, but not on their own. They have a conscious or unconscious bias against lone female founders. She was forced to abandon her business.

She took a different direction — training and supporting black women in townships to run their own businesses. She's on a mission

to make a more supportive policy and programme environment for them. But, as so many other African scholars experience, the voices of African researchers in the field of business and entrepreneurship are all too often neither heard nor heeded.

At a recent international conference on entrepreneurship, Maharaj was the sole African scholar.

"There are a lot of assumptions about Africa — that everyone is necessity driven. There is questioning: is entrepreneurship really good for these women? We can't be that binary — it's both necessity and opportunity-driven, and it's often on a continuum.

"What we should be asking instead, is 'how can we make business support more accessible for these women who have such big plans and aspirations for their community?'"

This article was developed as part of the blog project, Troubling Power: Stories and ideas for a more just and open southern Africa, which marks the 40th anniversary of the Canon Collins Educational and Legal Assistance Trust. Catherine Sofianos heads the communications portfolio at the Canon Collins Trust. She is a writer and creative projects director, who has worked in development communications for 17 years

their income to support and educate their children.

During the Covid-19 lockdown of 2020, one woman, who had been running a tour-guiding business in the township, found her enterprise falling flat. Nobody would take township tours and all her "Airbnb experiences" fell by the wayside. The tour-guiding business was not her only venture. She had first established a youth development programme, which she focused on when the pandemic hit South Africa. She also managed to get a Covid-19 grant for tourism businesses and used that funding to train youth from her development programme as tour guides.

Another woman built the online aspect of her business to overcome the lockdown. She is a masseuse and produces organically made soy candles from her shack. Today she continues to export her candles to Kuwait and Germany.

"The entrepreneurial drive keeps going and finds new ways to make money," Maharaj says. "They don't just involve themselves in their own business; they are hiring unemployed youth. One woman was selling clothes from her house, but she also trained to be a coffee barista. During lockdown she opened a coffee shop and hired and trained youth to run it with her."

These women's paths mirror the path that Maharaj took. Her parents were a model for her own entrepreneurship.

**'They don't just involve themselves in their own business; they are hiring unemployed youth'**

After she graduated with an honours degree in industrial psychology, she struggled for years with unemployment and multiple miscarriages. Eventually, she gave birth to a daughter.

"It was a crisis moment that made me ask myself, what do I want to do?" Maharaj recalls.

She decided to start her own business, developing a business concept that would allow her to matchmake unemployed youth with companies, based on the company culture and the youths' strengths.

In going out to raise funds for her start-up, Maharaj found herself confronting biases about the fact that she was a single woman of colour.

"The discrimination triggered me ... Is this what other women experience?"

Research into entrepreneurship internationally revealed the same trend: male investors might consider funding female founders if they are