



LETHABO MOTSOALEDI, A PIONEER WHO DEFIED SEXISM IN TECH

Her story is a jab at the underrepresentation of women of colour in the tech industry.

By Cynthia Augustine

A troubling narrative gets told to girls about the tech industry, hinting none too subtly that computer science isn't 'feminine'. In a word, tech is not for girls. These stereotypes give young women the message that there is no place for them in the boy's club of the tech realm.

Sexism is hurting the pathway into the tech industry, starting as early as primary school and leading to massive underrepresentation of women in the workplace. Once we begin to investigate the statistics that unveil the harsh realities of gender disparity in technology, it becomes clear rather quickly that this ecosystem has weeded out the most indispensable pioneers of our time: women. However, embedded within this industry are emerging trailblazers who are working hard to tilt the gendered scale. Lethabo Motsoaledi, Chief Technology Officer and Co-founder of a South African artificial intelligence start-up, is one of them.

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics reports that only 23% of Science Technology Engineering Mathematics (STEM) talent on a global scale are women. The figures are worse off for women of colour, with only 3% of black women holding computing jobs in the US according to the National Center for Women & Information Technology (NCWIT). For some, this underrepresentation is demoralizing and many women steer away from such industries that are tainted by sexist ideologies, but for Lethabo such beliefs were shielded by her determination and ambition to start a business. Recounting on her own personal experiences, Lethabo admits, "I almost don't know what it feels like to be black and marginalized because I've pushed it so far back into my experience that I almost don't notice it anymore". With every subtle attempt that the tech industry made to discourage her in her advancement, Lethabo only became more resistant to such barriers. It's what makes Lethabo's story so phenomenal. While all the odds were stacked up against her, she was successful in not only navigating the male dominated industry but also building an innovative startup from the ground up.

The ladder to success for women in South Africa's tech startup ecosystem is not for the faint-hearted, especially when it comes to the tricky task of clinching funding to get a startup company up and running. Venture capitalists, people who invest in startup companies by providing capital in exchange for a return on their stake in the company, are the most important people when it comes to building infrastructure that is needed to grow the business. Sadly, it is here too that gender inequalities exist. According to OECD, female-led startups receive 23% less funding than their male counterparts. The scenes are more somber for women in South Africa, who receive less than 4.5% of all venture capital, as stated by Ventureburn. This drawback has proven to be the reason why there are so few women entrepreneurs in the tech space.

Since the young age of 16, Lethabo had always gravitated towards the idea of becoming an entrepreneur. "Straight out of varsity I knew this is exactly what I wanted to do." It took a couple of failed business ventures, one of them being 3D printing startup, and returns to the drawing board before herself and her co-founder, Matthew Westaway, had finally landed on a promising business undertaking. Trial and error and constant evolving laid the cornerstone of a robust and sustainable business of which Lethabo is at the helm. "We had the drive and ambition to change the world in a meaningful way and kept iterating until we found something". Using their Artificial Intelligence software, Voyc is purposed to monitor and improve agent performance and quality assurance of call centers. From the outset, they have been provided with incredible opportunities such as being selected to be part of Google's Launchpad Accelerator Africa in 2019 and have participated in Techstars.

Voyc is now a globally recognized startup company and has recently relocated their headquarters to the Netherlands.

When Lethabo looks back to the hard work which preceded her success, we see the real challenges that come for women who pursue a career in STEM.

In high school, Lethabo had chosen all the STEM subjects, subjects that have been known not be popular choices amongst young girls in high school because of the various stereotypes and cultural norms that dampen girls' interest in them. She has observed the reservations that girls have towards these academic disciplines and believes that this deterrent behavior begins here, in secondary schooling. "You start seeing doubt, particularly in mathematics and tech, where girls choose not to pick these subjects," Lethabo explains. She also feels that IT subjects were not well publicized in schools and were only subjects taken up by the more academically inclined students. This paints a pretty grim picture of the kind of school environments that young girls are brought up in. But it only gets worse. Lethabo offers a glimpse into how teachers at her all-girls high school had reinforced dangerous stigmas involving girls and their ability to do physics. While being introduced to the chapter of electricity, her science teacher had made a controversial statement saying, "Don't worry if you do badly in electricity, girls just don't get it". Despite this dampening remark, Lethabo recalled her being one of the best science teachers. When these unwarranted negative stereotypes and ideologies are being propagated amongst girls in the classroom, it is no surprise that girls fall out of love with STEM disciplines. Lethabo firmly believes that although the attrition of women in STEM related fields may be true statistically, the mindset that is adopted amongst girls should not be fostered. We will come to know that the teacher's comment stood no chance in deterring Lethabo from this field as she went onto studying Engineering at the University of Cape Town.



Lethabo was charmed by the idea of becoming an engineer and learning to transform our world and improve human welfare with innovation because she believes that they're really good problem solvers. This is what lead her to pursue a degree in Geomatics Engineering, where she first came to grapple with the subject of computer science, a subject that almost became the reason for wanting to quit. The journey into this disciplinary was not entirely smooth at first. Unashamed by her defeat, Lethabo reveals her unfruitful outcome of having received 35% for her first computer science test which was aimed to assess their skills in Python, a computer programming language. However, this minor setback didn't stop her from continuing to pursue her degree, thanks to the reassurance she received from a computer science mentor who consoled her and said, "Don't treat it like you're not smart, treat it like you're learning a new language". The mentor believed that it is only then when one begins to understand how the brain must learn to reconfigure and familiarize itself with this new language. Thereafter, she began to look at it from a new angle. "Computer science was my nemesis for a while until I changed my perspective towards it", she reveals. Not all girls are as lucky as Lethabo in receiving mentorship like she had and are often left feeling demotivated to advance further in their studies. Mentoring matters and is extremely effective in helping women with career progression, especially when it comes from women who have had to navigate the industry themselves.

By the time Lethabo had reached her final year of study, she had found herself to be the only girl left in her degree program.

With an experience like this under her belt, Lethabo has been at the forefront of tech innovations, working hard to make headway and pushing for change within her company. As a part of the Voyc's mandate, Lethabo and Matthew are devoted to ensuring diversity in the company. Lethabo explains, "It's a strategic thing to do because you don't want to wake up one morning and not be diverse and not have different perspectives". Creating meaningful and inclusive products relies heavily on a team that can account for these perspectives and reflect the composition of their customers. While many tech companies fall short of diversity and inclusion, 45% of Voyc's engineering team is made up of women and 45% are people of colour. With these kinds of strategic initiatives and commitment to diversity, Voyc is working towards achieving a balanced workforce.

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Lethabo Motoaledi CTO & Co-Founder of Voyc

Lethabo takes inspiration from Oprah Winfrey and Bill Gates, amazed by their qualities collectively. She is mesmerized by Oprah's philosophy and takes admires the drive and dedication that went into the building of Microsoft. She also expresses her appreciation for the fact that Microsoft remains relevant today despite having started so many years ago. When asked about what she believes is the secret ingredient to succeeding as a woman of colour in tech, she is not as quick to answer. After some deliberation, she responds with the word "resilience". "You need to walk into room understanding what you're bringing to the table. And do not see yourself as a woman of colour because you will always be the only woman of colour of the room. Having that as the premise of entering an environment will completely throw you off." She further affirms that she does not forget who she is, but she also doesn't allow people's perceptions of being a woman of colour meddle with her aspirations.

Against all odds, Lethabo successfully advanced to the global stages of the tech industry, defying all the gender stereotypes that encompass it. This successful journey was grounded on perseverance and hard work, despite it being a notoriously tough battle for female tech entrepreneurs to flourish where gender inequality is far more pronounced than anywhere else. Lethabo may not have come face to face with the micro-aggressions and direct sexism that other women have encountered, but that is definitely not to say that they do not still exist. Her resilience and determination found herself a seat at the table and she ensures to use her position to mentor other young women as well as strive for diversity in her company. To young women who wish to pursue a career in tech she says: **"The only thing you need is the passion to make a difference and drive to make it happen."**