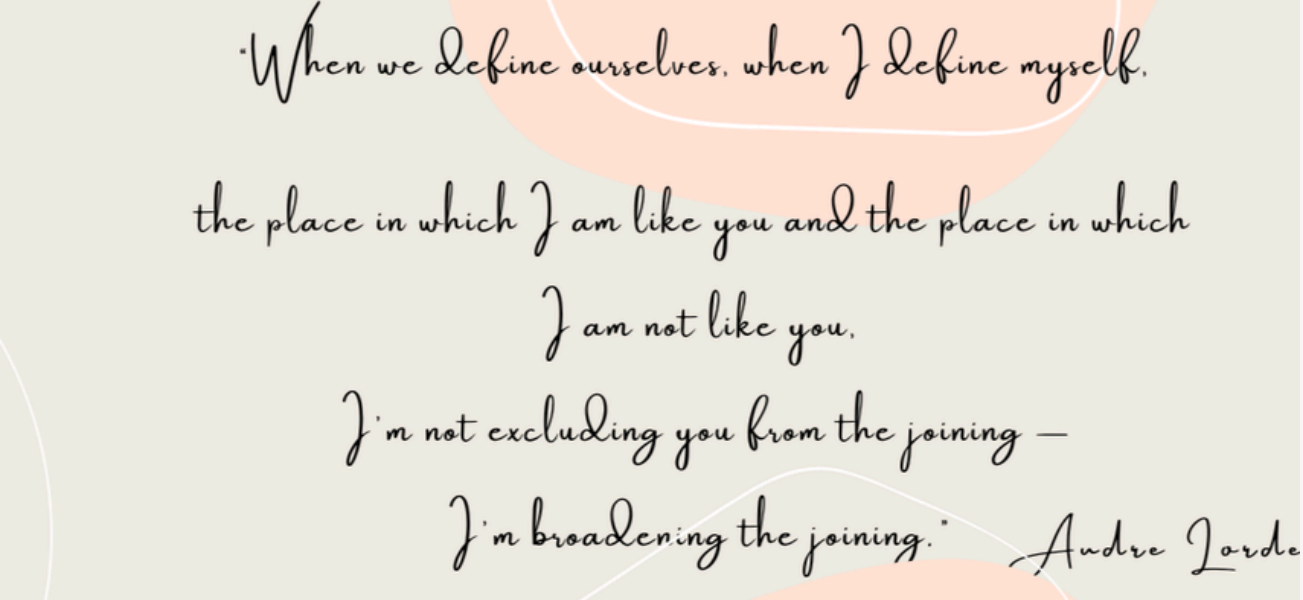


THE INTERSECTION

AN EYEZWE CONSULTING NEWSLETTER & PODCAST



*When we define ourselves, when I define myself,
the place in which I am like you and the place in which
I am not like you,
I'm not excluding you from the joining —
I'm broadening the joining." Audre Lorde*

Series: Why Black Women in Corporate South Africa Fear Visibility – And How We Change It

Post 1: The Invisible Weight of History

Why do many Black women in South Africa's corporate spaces choose silence over visibility? It starts with history.

The Legacy We Cannot Ignore

South Africa's corporate spaces carry the weight of history. While some argue that "apartheid was a long time ago, let's move on," the truth is that its scars remain etched into our workplaces.

Yes, the laws have changed. Our Constitution commits us to address past injustices, and legislation such as the Employment Equity Act of 1998 seeks to ensure representation at all levels of organisations. But systems and structures often still uphold exclusion and separation.

For Black women, the exclusion has always been deeper. While apartheid denied Black people meaningful participation in the economy, Black women bore a double burden: race and gender. That legacy still shapes corporate South Africa today.

Tokenism: When Visibility Feels Like a Trap

The introduction of democracy brought laws such as the BCEA, LRA, BBBEE, and EEA to formalise workplace inclusion. But many companies responded with tokenism—appointing Black people, often women, to roles without proper support, as a tick-box exercise.

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The impact?

- Dignity eroded. Token hires were undermined, fuelling a perception that Black professionals were “diversity hires” rather than leaders.
- Confidence destroyed. When your worth is questioned from the start, it is safer to shrink into the background than risk being seen as incompetent.
- Innovation stifled. Black women often hesitate to share bold ideas, knowing that failure (even from lack of support) could confirm stereotypes.

The legacy of tokenism lives on. The global backlash against DEI has emboldened resistance to transformation locally, leaving many Black women cautious of the spotlight—not out of incompetence, but out of survival.

Historical Erasure Fuels Modern Hesitation

Trauma doesn't disappear with time; it lingers in bodies, minds, and systems. Apartheid's Bantu education system deliberately trained Black people for subservience, not leadership. Black women were confined to invisible roles—domestic work, manual labour—with no pathways to power.

Today, this history echoes in:

- Self-doubt.
- Isolation.
- The constant feeling of not belonging.

We cannot change the past, but we can build a different future by:

1. Amplifying Black Women's Histories – Share stories of leaders like Charlotte Maxeke to restore cultural pride.
2. Creating Visible Pathways – Invest in leadership programs that create real upward mobility for Black women, even if growth happens outside your organisation.
3. Redefining Leadership – Value authenticity over assimilation. Natural hair, accents, and communication styles are not “unprofessional”—they are part of our collective identity.
4. Calling Out Modern Erasure – When Black women's ideas are ignored or credit is stolen, intervene mindfully—calling people in, not out.

As a recent example, recall Coco Gauff's victory over Aryna Sabalenka at the French Open. Instead of acknowledging her opponent's brilliance, Sabalenka diminished Gauff's win as a result of “easy mistakes.” The backlash was swift, global, and supportive of Gauff. This is how collective defence of Black excellence should look in our workplaces, too.

The Trauma of Backlash Against Visibility

Apartheid didn't only exclude Black women—it vilified them for daring to be visible.

Leaders like Winnie Madikizela-Mandela and Emma Mashinini were demonised, harassed, or erased to send a message: a Black woman who refuses invisibility is dangerous.

That playbook still lingers:

- The “Angry Black Woman” stereotype. Outspokenness is mislabelled as aggression. A 2022 study showed Black women in corporate SA are 40% more likely to receive negative feedback about their “tone” than white peers.
- Professional retaliation. Speaking up can lead to being passed over for promotions, excluded from professional networks, or being subjected to gaslighting.
- The burden of representation. With so few Black women in leadership, their mistakes are magnified while their successes are minimized.

This isn't paranoia—it's a rational response to a system that has punished visibility for generations

Breaking the Cycle: From Trauma to Empowerment

To change this, corporate South Africa must act intentionally:

- Name the pattern. Train leaders to recognise how historical vilification shapes workplace dynamics. Ask: “When we label a Black woman ‘aggressive,’ whose voice are we silencing?”
- Create safe channels for visibility. Build leadership programs and enforce zero-tolerance policies for retaliation.
- Celebrate unapologetic Black women. Amplify contributions without tokenising. Honour them as leaders, not exceptions.
- Address the fear directly. Use anonymous surveys to ask what would make visibility safer. Pair Black women with mentors who've navigated backlash successfully.

The fear of being visible is not a lack of confidence—it's a survival strategy rooted in history.

The Bottom Line

Corporate South Africa must dismantle this legacy by making visibility safe, rewarded, and normal.

Reflection question: When was the last time a Black woman in your workplace spoke up—and how was she received?