



Media release

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The Science, Engineering and Technology for Women (SET4W), a sub-committee of the National Advisory Council on Innovation (NACI), hosted a symposium on 25 June 2008 on "*Changing perceptions of women in Science, Engineering and Technology (SET)*". The symposium was held at the CSIR International Convention Centre in Pretoria.

The overall aim of the symposium was to discuss and solicit input from representatives of the government, higher education, science councils, industry and private sector on the findings of a commissioned research on successful role models in SET. These discussions together with the outcomes of the report will form the basis of advice to the Minister of Science and Technology.

The symposium was opened by the Director General, Dr Phil Mjwara, on behalf of the Minister of Science and Technology, Dr Mosibudi Mangena. An international speaker, Dr Barbara Boucher Owens, from the South-western University in Georgetown, Texas, gave a presentation on Pathways and Journeys: Educators Oral History Project. P

The research findings

Prof Cheryl De la Rey, the Chairperson of SET4W committee, highlighted that one of the challenges encountered was to obtain a shortlist of diverse group of female role models in terms of race, upbringing (cultural differences) and different careers within SET.

"We were very disappointed to find that black women in particular were not represented in many SET careers, such as in electrical engineering. This is a concern and it is something that we should look at with partners in higher learning institutions and the private sector," she says.

The findings can be classified into three broad themes:

1. The role of parents, family members and teachers

"Each role model that we interviewed was able to point to a parent, family member or teacher as someone who played a direct role in them taking up a career in science," de la Rey says. The findings also indicated that those people also played a role in changing the perception of the way the respondents feel about themselves. It is these people that are able to instil self confidence and self esteem to pursue a career in science.

The role of teachers has both been positive and negative. The majority of the role models did not have a positive influence from teachers in their lives and this is a critical issue that can be taken up by government to ensure that teachers play a positive role in their learners' lives.

"A lot of these teachers have no idea just how much power they have and how this power can be used as a positive drive in the learners to encourage and nurture them when they start displaying an interest in science," she adds.

2. The importance of having a strong support network and a stable home life

The study has found that a stable home life does not necessarily have to do with functional aspects of running a home, but rather on messages that are either encouraging or debilitating from the home environment.

"We have found that the level of stability in the private arrangements have a significant role to play for women in SET," says de la Rey.

3. The ability to face adverse circumstances

The one commonality that was found in the role models was their ability to have a positive mindset about the challenges that they face and their level of commitment to staying in their careers. "It is for this reason that we have encouraged all role models to consider doing some motivational speaking and encouraging the learners and emerging SET professionals as well as possibly acting as mentors," she adds.

The programme also allowed for interaction by delegates and an opportunity to be able to pose questions to the role models about their experiences and further interrogated and debated the findings of the study.

As part of advocacy and marketing, the South African Agency for Science and Technology Advancement (SAASTA) was commissioned to compile an attractive booklet profiling all the identified role models and their career histories

“The biggest motivation for producing the book is that even after the symposium is over, we still want to be able to provide successful female science and technology role models to look up to and to demystify science careers for learners and the general public,” says Beverley Damonse, Executive Director of SAASTA.

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Science, Engineering and Technology for Women (SET4W) is a permanent national advisory committee of the National Advisory Council on Innovation (NACI). The SET4W aims to achieve greater equality between women and men by bringing a gender equality perspective into everyday policy-making, and by complementing the more traditional approaches of promoting gender equality, such as legislation and positive action.