



1st for women

August 2025

# Her and Now

Insights into the Women of  
South Africa 2025 Report

Edition 1: The Quiet Revolution

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# Foreword...

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South African women are redefining what it means to be powerful. In a world that demands constant productivity and resilience, more women are choosing a different path. A path where softness becomes strength, where saying no is an act of self-preservation, and where living fearlessly means protecting what matters most.

At 1st for Women, safeguarding what's important has always been our foundation. But true protection extends beyond policies and products.

**Being "first for women" means listening to and understanding the reality, feelings, emotions, challenges, and triumphs of South African women.**

It means acknowledging that women face complex, intersecting pressures that shape every aspect of their lives.



This report represents our commitment to deepening that understanding. Through extensive qualitative and quantitative research, we've captured the voices of women navigating a changing landscape.

*What emerges is a clear picture: women's wellbeing cannot be reduced to single dimensions. Their mental, emotional, and physical health are interconnected, influenced by everything from financial stress and safety concerns to relationship dynamics and societal expectations. To truly champion women means addressing this holistic reality.*

This research is an act of deepening our purpose beyond traditional protection. It ensures we remain champions for women's complete wellbeing, understanding that true empowerment includes the right to rest, to choose, and to be seen in their full complexity.

The data that follows provides the foundation for this understanding, offering insights that move beyond assumptions to reveal what South African women actually experience, need, and aspire to achieve.

**Seugnette van Wyngaard & Jill Snijman**

Head of 1st for Women and 1st for Women Head of Marketing

# Introduction



# Introduction

03

South African women continue to live at the intersection of progress and deep-rooted inequality. While legal and educational advancements have opened new doors, the realities of race, class, and gender still shape access to opportunity, safety, and economic freedom.

Many women are the first in their families to pursue higher education or formal employment, carrying both the pride and pressure of generational expectation. Others shoulder the weight of unpaid care work, shrinking household budgets, and the persistent wage gap.

Patriarchal norms remain pervasive, and for many, womanhood is defined not only by ambition but also by resilience and the need to survive in a country where gender-based violence, limited healthcare access, and social inequality remain urgent issues. Against this backdrop, visibility and voice have become powerful tools of resistance.

2025 finds South African women in a paradox: they are more expressive, more ambitious, and more connected than ever. Yet, they're also more fatigued, more vulnerable, and more burdened by structural inequality. Amid this tension, a powerful shift is taking place, one that doesn't look like a revolution but feels like one. It is quiet. Intentional. Grounded in softness, not struggle.

This report, compiled through in-depth qualitative and quantitative research in partnership with the Culture Foundry Co, reveals how women are reimagining power, redefining success, and reshaping gendered norms. Not through disruption alone, but through deliberate self-preservation and subtle solidarity.



# Methodology

# Methodology

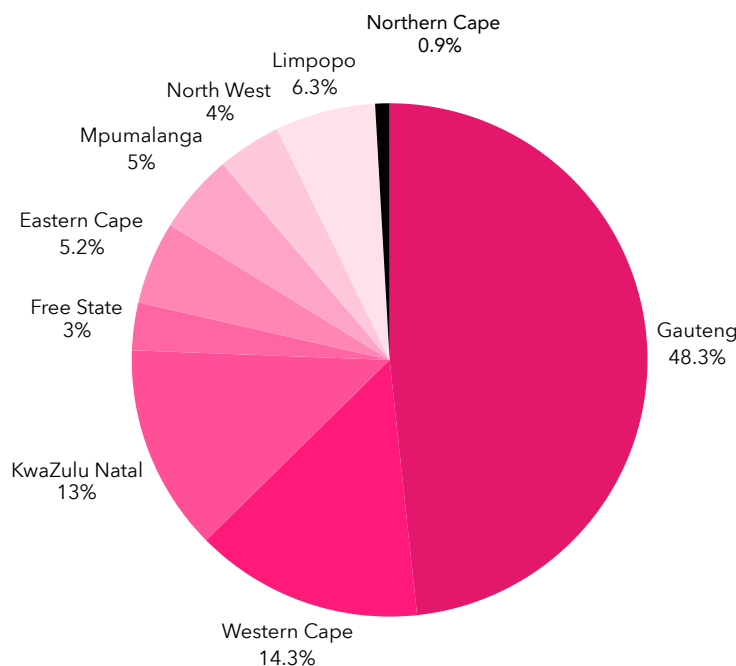
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This report gathered and analysed data on the experiences of South African women across multiple dimensions of their lives, including safety, economic wellbeing, relationships, and personal empowerment. This was done through comprehensive quantitative survey research and qualitative insights from the Culture Foundry Co's engagement with 1st for Women's community initiatives. Our approach was designed to elicit comprehensive insights while ensuring the voices of those directly affected were prominently featured.

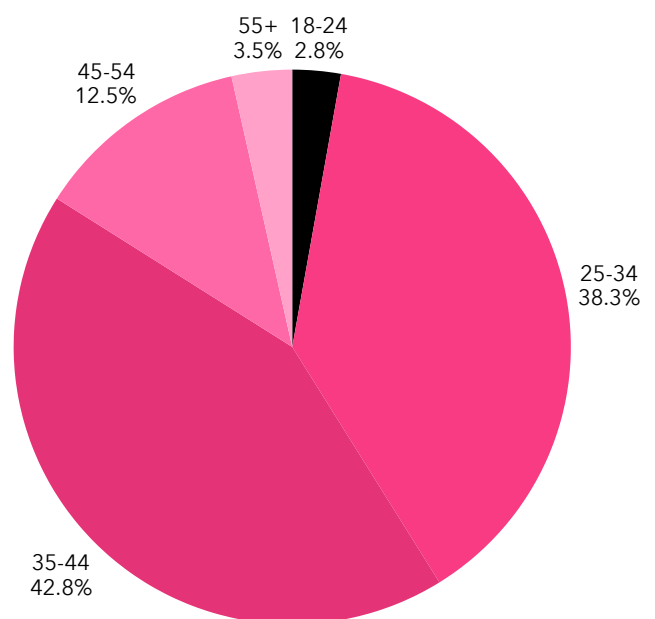
## Survey

We distributed a structured questionnaire to women across South Africa through multiple online channels. The questionnaire was hosted digitally and aimed to gather quantitative data on various aspects of their lived experiences, challenges, and aspirations.

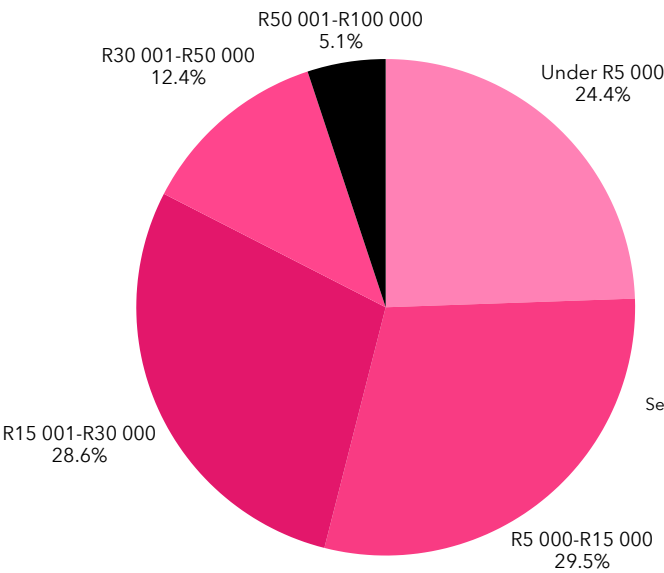
Over the course of our data collection period, we received a total of **4,049** completed responses. This provided a substantial dataset for our analysis, reflecting a diverse range of perspectives and experiences across different demographics, geographic regions, and socioeconomic backgrounds.



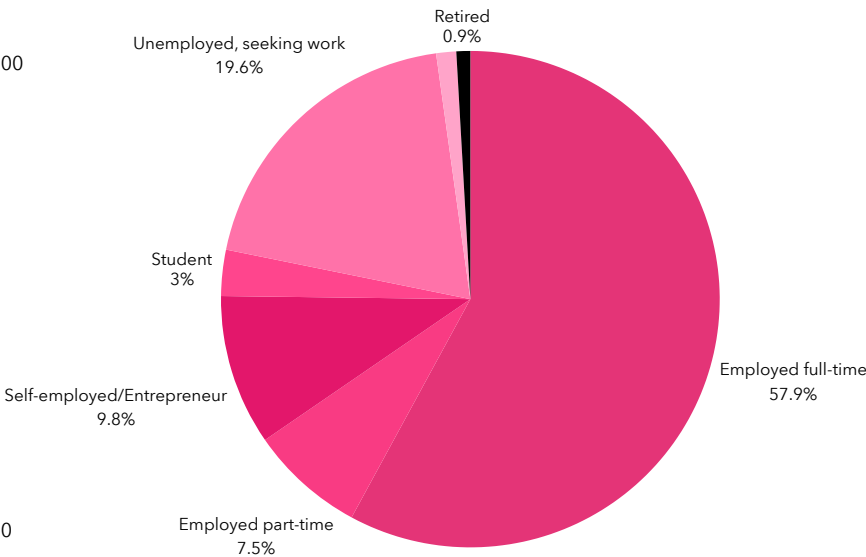
Regional spread



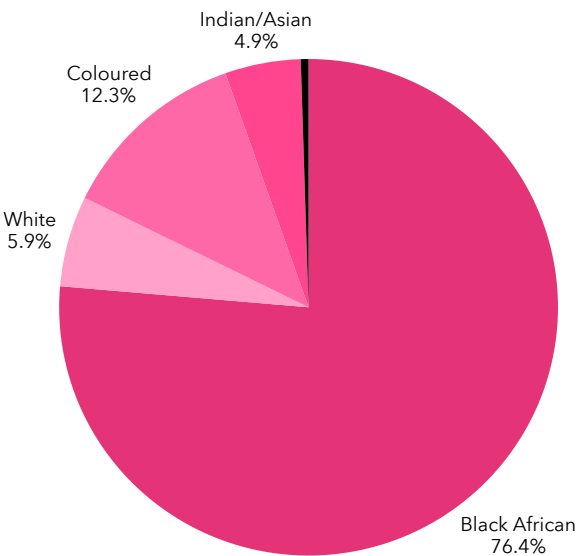
Age range



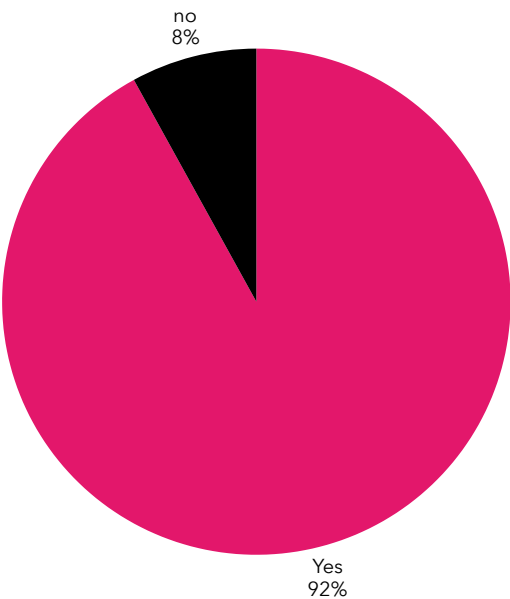
Household  
income level



Employment  
status



Race/Ethnicity



Parents/Non-  
parents

## Questionnaire design

The questionnaire explored nine key themes through a combination of demographic questions, Likert scale ratings, multiple choice selections, and ranking exercises. Questions were designed to capture both the challenges women face and their evolving definitions of empowerment, success, and wellbeing.

## Qualitative insights

To complement our survey findings, this report incorporates qualitative insights gathered by the Culture Foundry Co through expert interviews, roundtable discussions, focus groups, and community engagement via our established WhatsApp networks. These methods provided contextual depth and nuanced perspectives on the themes emerging from the quantitative data.

## Data analysis

Survey responses were analysed using quantitative methods, including statistical summaries, demographic cross-tabulations, and trend analysis. The qualitative insights from the Culture Foundry Co's research was integrated to provide deeper context and understanding of the patterns emerging from the survey data.

This dual approach allowed us to derive meaningful insights into the experiences of South African women, as well as identify evolving attitudes and potential areas for systemic change.

## Limitations

While efforts were made to maximise participation and diversity of responses, our study acknowledges inherent limitations, including potential self-selection bias among respondents and the digital nature of the survey, which may have limited participation from women without reliable internet access. The research reflects the experiences of women who had access to participate in online surveys, which may not fully represent the experiences of all South African women, particularly those in more remote or underserved areas.

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**The power paradox**



# The power paradox

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## *Understanding the psychological and emotional reality of South African women*

South African women today live a profound emotional duality. A pendulum swinging between empowerment and vulnerability. Younger generations are boldly self-expressing, fueled by digital platforms and community networks, pushing back against silence and inequality.

Older women, in contrast, carry years of enforced silence and resilience grounded in survival. This generational shift creates a culture of contrast: women are more visible yet still vulnerable, confident yet often in crisis.

This emotional polarisation manifests as a tension between public empowerment and private limitation. While women feel liberated in urban and professional spheres, they often face restrictions and traditional role expectations within their families and communities. They move between two worlds: one that supports independence, and one that quietly enforces tradition.

A striking theme is the “Panopticon effect”: An internalised self-surveillance and judgement, where women feel intensely observed and critiqued, not just externally but from within themselves.

68%

admit to judging themselves more harshly than others do.

90%

saying people assume they can handle everything because they're resilient.

*And yet, a quiet shift is happening. Many are redefining power, with peace, not just performance, as the goal. These women are not simply enduring; they are editing the very definition of strength and power – shifting it from self-sacrifice to self-preservation.*







# Unsafe haven

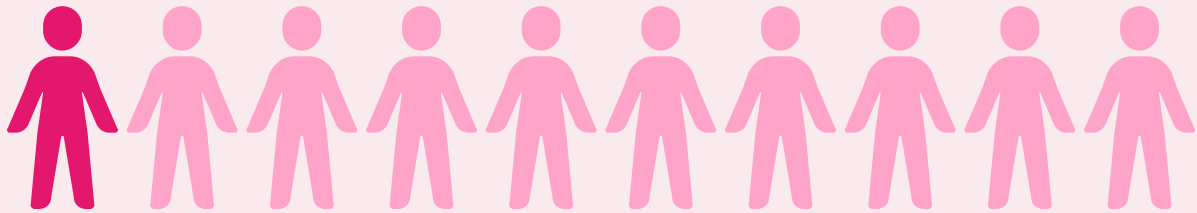
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## *Examining the baseline needs that must be met before women can thrive*

For many South African women, the foundation for thriving is still survival. Safety and freedom are the starting points, not luxury goals. Yet daily life tells another story:

**6%** only 6% feel safe being out after dark.

**18%** just 18% feel safe walking alone during the day.



Even in their own homes, 1 in 10 women don't feel consistently safe.

This sense of fear limits freedom. More than half (54%) say concerns for personal safety restrict their daily activities. And while public spaces are essential to participation, just 8% feel safe in them, a sharp reflection of how safety remains deeply gendered and unequal. Women describe a complex and paradoxical relationship with their country, simultaneously home and hostile.

**36%**

Only 36% agree that South Africa feels built for them, and nearly a quarter say they feel invisible or unheard in their communities.

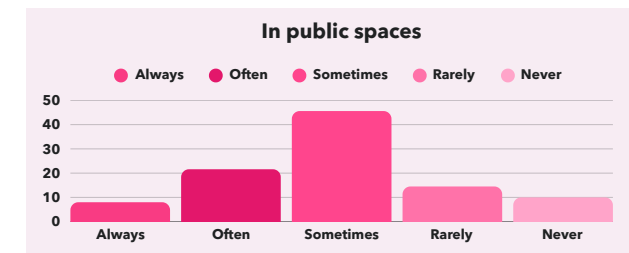
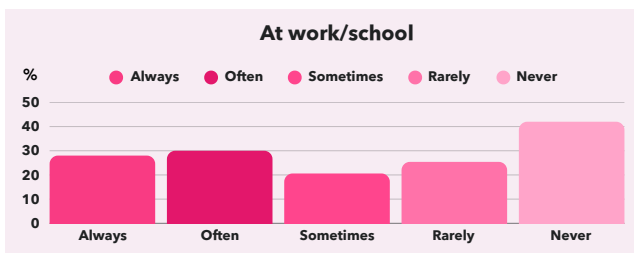
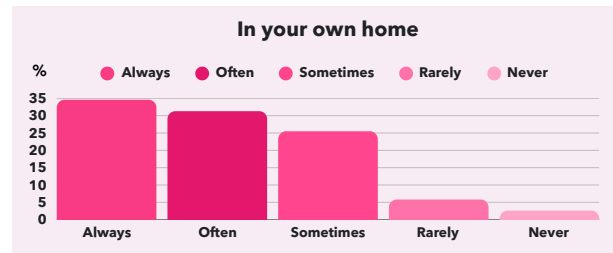
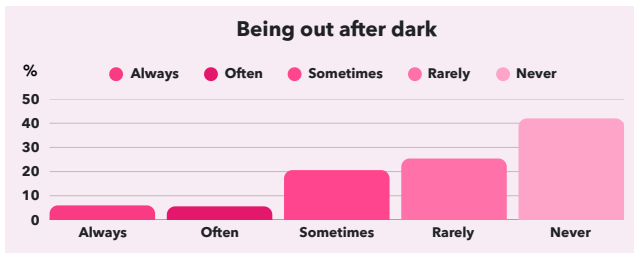
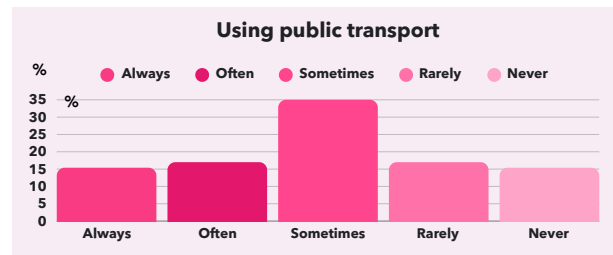
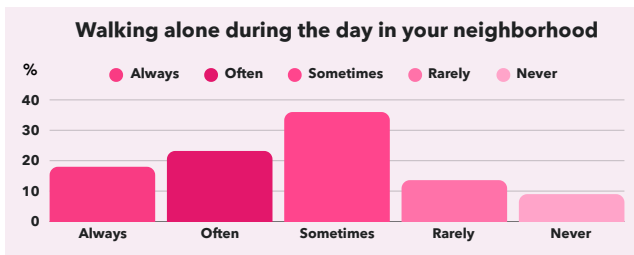
This sense of "uncomfortable belonging" fuels constant vigilance and negotiation, especially in public spaces. Emotional displacement and exclusion colour their mobility, social behaviours, and choices. This reality reframes how we understand female consumer behaviour: until security needs are met, aspirations and higher-order needs remain out of reach.

# Unsafe haven

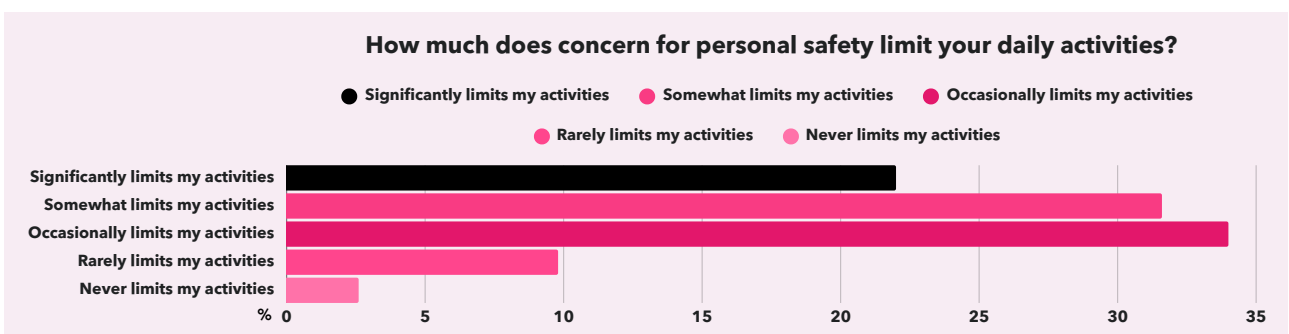
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*Examining the baseline needs that must be met before women can thrive*

How often do you feel safe in the following situations?



## Impact of safety concerns on daily life



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The price of joy

# The price of joy

14

*Examining the baseline needs that must be met before women can thrive*

Money is no longer just income or wealth, it represents freedom, choice, and emotional liberation. Women view financial stability as the key to choosing joy, spending guilt-free, and living without constant mental calculation.

**88%**

say financial independence is essential for happiness.

Despite strong ambition, many face systemic barriers, including lack of education and mentorship, particularly in underserved communities. These constraints limit economic empowerment and amplify stress.

**6 in 10**

and yet more than 6 in 10 lack the financial support to pursue their goals.

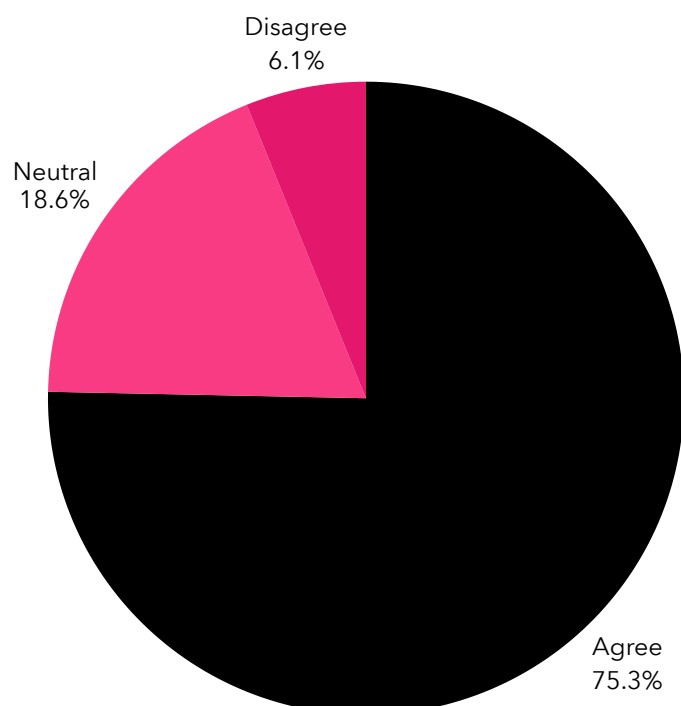
**64%**

say they often feel guilty spending money on themselves.

**only 4%**

say joy comes easily, taking considerable planning, effort, and permission.

## Money is my biggest source of stress



15

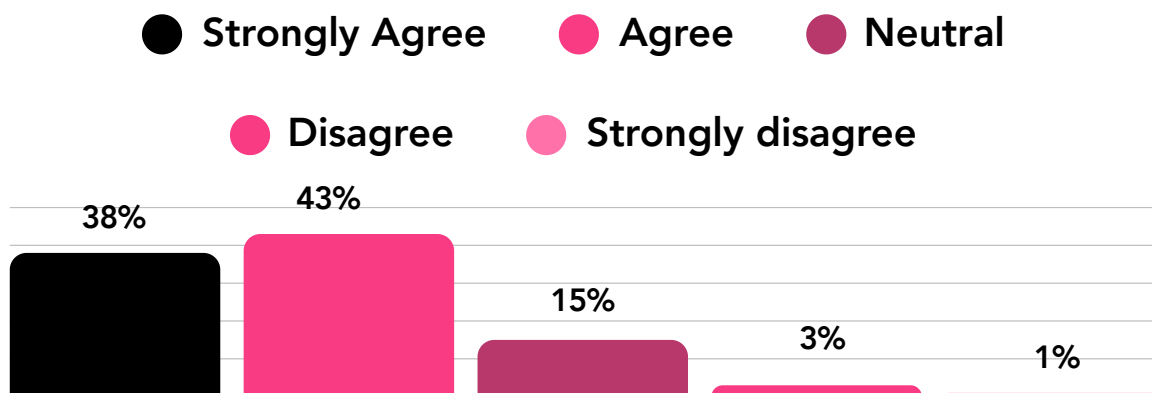
**Reclaiming masculinity**

# Reclaiming masculinity

16

*Navigating relationships with the men in their lives  
- from protectors to partners*

**"I wish the men around me were more emotionally available"**



Women describe a complex relationship with the men in their lives. A masculinity paradox where love and fear, dependence and distrust often coexist.

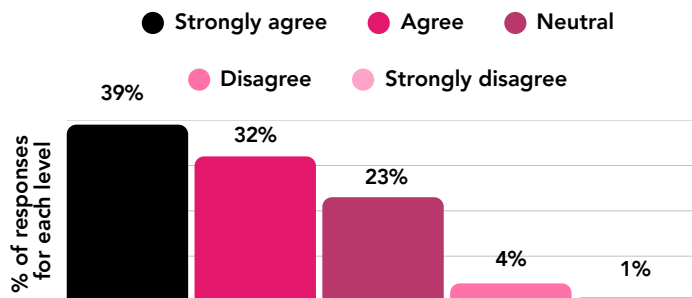
Men are protectors, partners, and fathers, yet many women still carry the emotional weight of masculinity's failures: absence, unpredictability, and emotional distance.

# Reclaiming masculinity

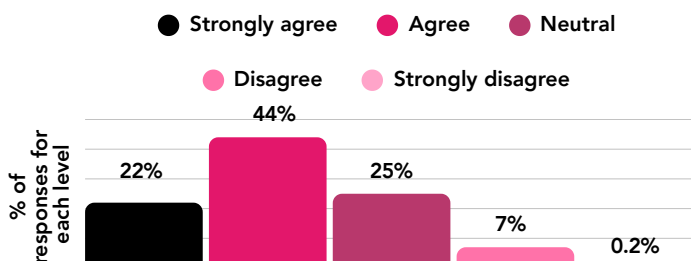
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*Navigating relationships with the men in their lives  
- from protectors to partners*

## "Men should be protectors and providers"



## "Traditional masculine roles still dominate my community"



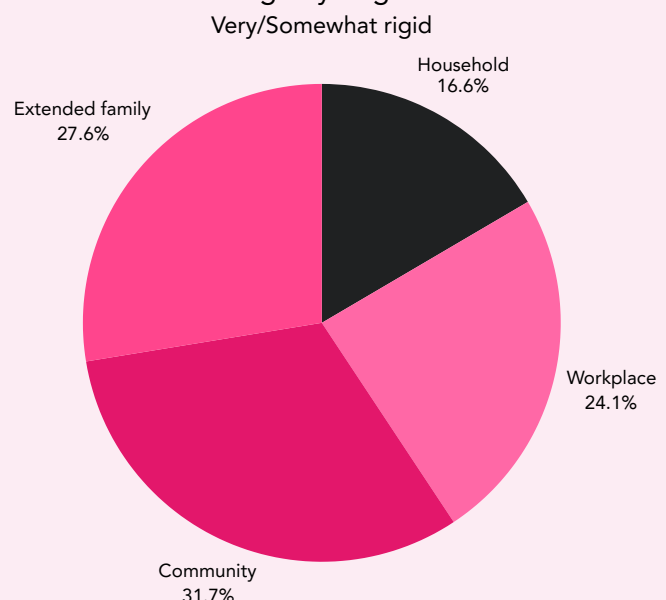
There is a clear longing for masculinity to evolve beyond the swinging pendulum of protector or predator. What many seek is a "king with a softer crown" – leadership and strength paired with emotional intelligence and a nurturing presence. And they're calling for it: **61.6%** of women say men need to **redefine what it means to be a man in today's world.**

**Even among those who value traditional masculine traits, there's a growing desire to see these redefined through care, not control.**

Yet in homes and communities, rigid gender roles still dominate. Masculinity is often performed in fixed, restrictive ways that limit not only men, but the women around them. **Only 15.4%** of women say the men in their lives are emotionally available, underscoring just how far there is to go.

**Gender equality may exist in theory, but for many, it hasn't yet reshaped the lived dynamics of daily life.**

## Perceived rigidity of gender roles



18

**The burden of strength**



# The burden of strength

19

## *Understanding the cost of resilience and the "strong woman" archetype*

Strength is celebrated. But, it's also silently crushing. Women are praised for their resilience, for holding families and communities together, for pushing through. Yet behind this admiration is exhaustion.

67%

feel expected to "keep it all together" daily.

68%

say others depend on them emotionally, financially, or socially every single day.



The "strong woman" archetype is a double-edged sword: empowering on the surface, but isolating in its expectations, leaving many women under constant pressure, especially mothers.

# The burden of strength

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*Understanding the cost of resilience and the "strong woman" archetype*

***"I sacrifice my own needs to maintain family stability"***

**60.7%**

*strongly agree*

***"The expectation to keep it together is more intense as a mother"***

**65%**

*strongly agree*

65% of mothers strongly agree that this expectation intensifies with motherhood, while 61% say they sacrifice their own needs to maintain family stability. And for these women, support often feels scarce, and softness even scarcer.

This relentless strength doesn't come without cost. Physical concerns like weight gain, fatigue, and chronic pain often reveal something deeper: the emotional toll of being everything to everyone. The body becomes a quiet battleground, absorbing what can't be said or shared.

Daily life feels like a multitasking marathon. Days start early, end late, and are packed with emotional and logistical labour. There is capability, but not capacity.

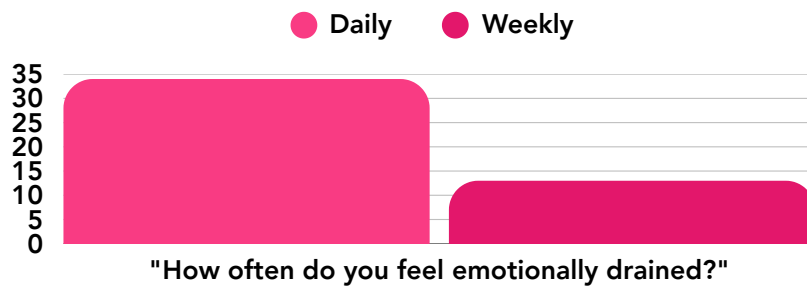
Empowerment is real, but so is the burnout. **34%** feel emotionally drained daily, and **33%** say they're praised for resilience even while feeling overwhelmed. Strength, it seems, is often mistaken for wellness.

***Women don't want to give up their freedom or power. But they are asking: at what cost?***

# The burden of strength

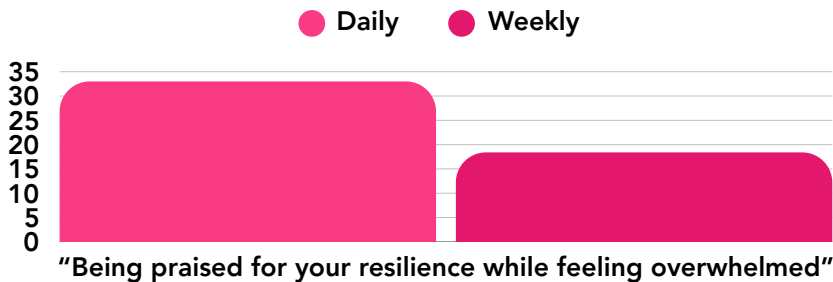
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*Understanding the cost of resilience and the "strong woman" archetype*



**1 in 2**

women regularly feel drained



**50%+**

more than half routinely feel this disconnect

**65%**

strongly agree pressure is greater as a mother



**60.7%**

strongly agree they sacrifice personal needs

**63%**

feel like the backbone of work/family daily



**44%**

feel unsupported despite being strong for others daily

22

**A gentle rebellion**

# A gentle rebellion

23

*How South African women are reshaping what it means to be powerful and successful*

***"I rarely get uninterrupted time for myself"***

**43%**

**strongly agree**

**Power isn't about pushing harder; it's about impact with intention.**

And rest? Not quite. Many women preferred movement – but movement on their own terms. It's not about doing nothing, but about doing what energises. Structure, surprisingly, is a source of freedom. Routines and rituals are emotional anchors, ways to find calm in the chaos. In this new vision, power isn't about more. It's about enough.

In a world that demands so much, softness has become a quiet form of rebellion. For many South African women, power is being redefined. Not as striving, but as stillness. Not as noise, but as peace. The fantasy isn't wealth or escape, but something far more radical: a quiet morning. A walk on the beach. A bath without interruption.

These aren't indulgences but resistance. A reclamation of the right to exhale.

Joy isn't accidental. It's scheduled, ritualised, and protected. Saying "no" becomes sacred: not defiance, but preservation. Fulfilment, too, is shifting. It's less about personal ambition and more about communal purpose.

Enough time, enough space, enough softness to come back to yourself. **44%** strongly agree that softness is a form of strength. And nearly **90%** agree they're redefining success to include peace, not just achievement. Success is:

**11%**

of women define success as career advancement.

**45%**

of women prioritise financial security.

**29%**

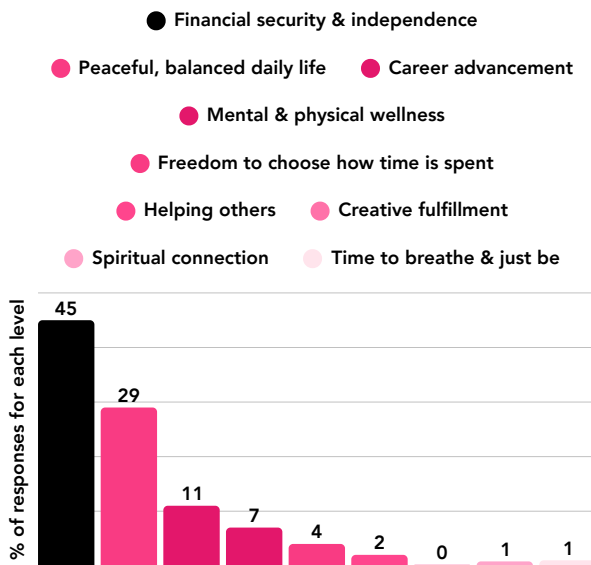
of women want a peaceful, balanced daily life.

# A gentle rebellion

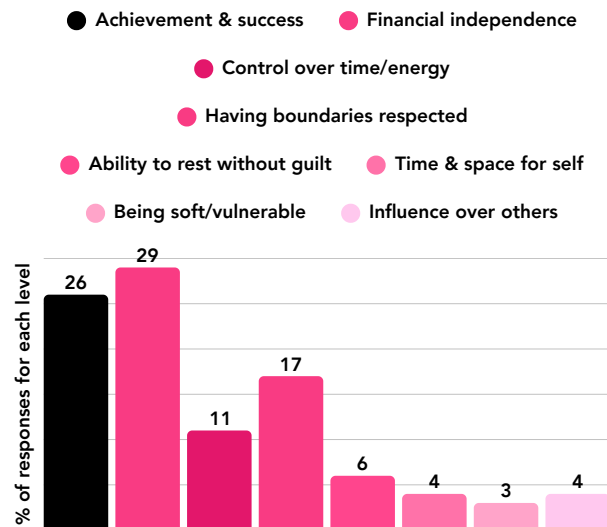
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*How South African women are reshaping what it means to be powerful and successful*

## What success looks like



## How women define power



*"The right to exhale is as important as the drive to achieve"*

**58%**

strongly agree

**38%**

agree

*"Balance is more valuable to me than ambition"*

**94%**

agree overall

*"Softness and gentleness are forms of strength"*

**90%**

agree overall

*"I long for quiet moments to belong to myself"*

**50%**

strongly agree

**40%**

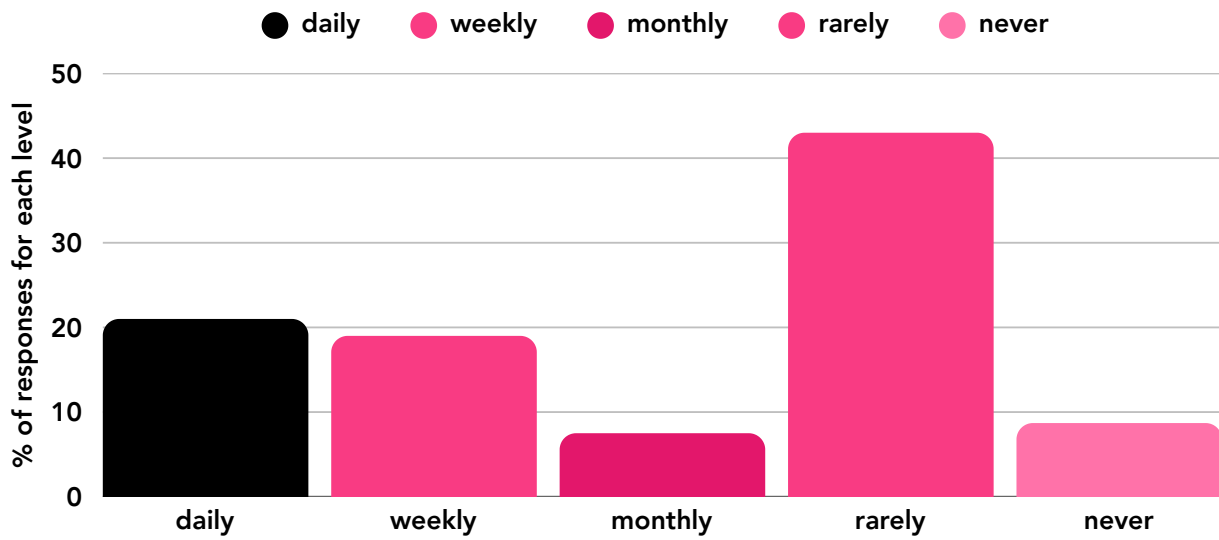
agree

# A gentle rebellion

25

*How South African women are reshaping what it means to be powerful and successful*

"How often do you get uninterrupted time?"



27%

Emotional safety  
and comfort

15%

Gentle self-care  
rituals

8%

Slowing down  
without judgment

14%

Quiet,  
uninterrupted time

23%

Permission to  
be vulnerable

6%

Physical comfort

**Sisterhood & solidarity**



# Sisterhood & solidarity

27

## *The "girl's girl" phenomenon and how women support each other*

Sisterhood is being reshaped through everyday solidarity. A new kind of "girl's girl", defined not by closeness or friendship alone, but by the willingness to show up for one another. Across South Africa, women describe this identity as rooted in empathy, loyalty, and non-judgement. Small, intentional acts, such as encouragement in moments of doubt, kindness amid struggle, presence in times of need, create vital emotional safety and support in a world that often fails to protect women.

65%

of women say they always encourage other women.

29%

say they do so often.



This sisterhood exists amid a broader scepticism about institutional change. Women express little optimism about systemic progress and instead place their faith in personal agency and collective self-determination.

*"Change will come from women ourselves, not institutions"*

88%

agree

# Sisterhood & solidarity

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## *Understanding the cost of resilience and the "strong woman" archetype*

They envision real change emerging from within their communities – through increasing financial independence, stepping into leadership roles, and building structures that prioritise and uplift each other.

These alternative frameworks include entrepreneurship, employment opportunities, and networks of mutual support designed by women, for women.

The revolution is not only public, but profoundly personal. Many see transformative change happening inside homes and daily habits. In how sons are raised with different values, how relationships are negotiated more equitably, and how cycles of generational trauma are actively resisted. Feminism is localised and practical, moving beyond protest slogans and abstract theory to become a lived, practiced reality in households and communities.

86%

of women observing that they are "building the future they want to see"

This new sisterhood is creating both a refuge and a foundation. A source of strength and resilience built on solidarity, shared purpose, and emotional safety as **93% agree that "women should support each other unconditionally"**. It's a quiet but powerful movement that holds space for women to support one another amid challenges that remain unaddressed by larger societal systems.

94%

regularly encourage other women

97%

show up for other women, even when it's difficult

86%

say change will come from ourselves

88%

are actively building their future

## Half the picture

# Half the picture

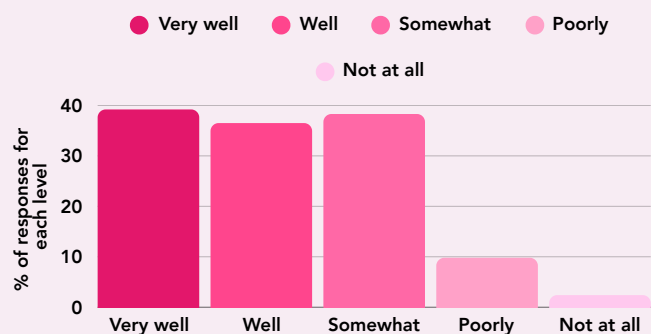
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*What women want to see reflected back to them in media, brands, and society*

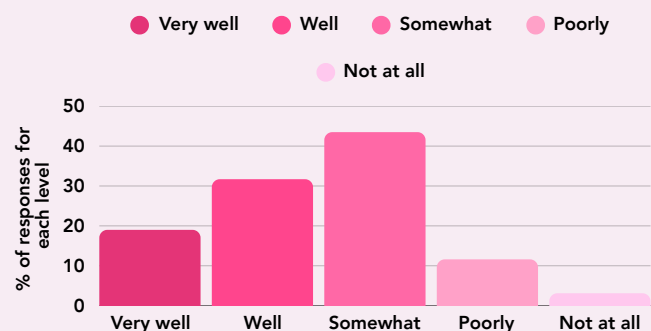
South African women want to see their full, complex realities reflected back at them, not narrow ideals or surface-level inclusion. There is a strong desire for diverse representation that spans race, culture, age, and background. Women want brands and media to move beyond tokenism and portray authentic stories that honor the rich variety of lived experiences, from different generations to cultural traditions.

The prevailing fatigue with aspirational stereotypes is clear. Women are tired of having to perform to fit ideals that don't capture the nuanced challenges they face daily. Instead, they seek inspiration rooted in realness. A mirror to their true selves rather than prescribed solutions or unattainable perfection.

"How well do you feel represented in..."  
Entertainment



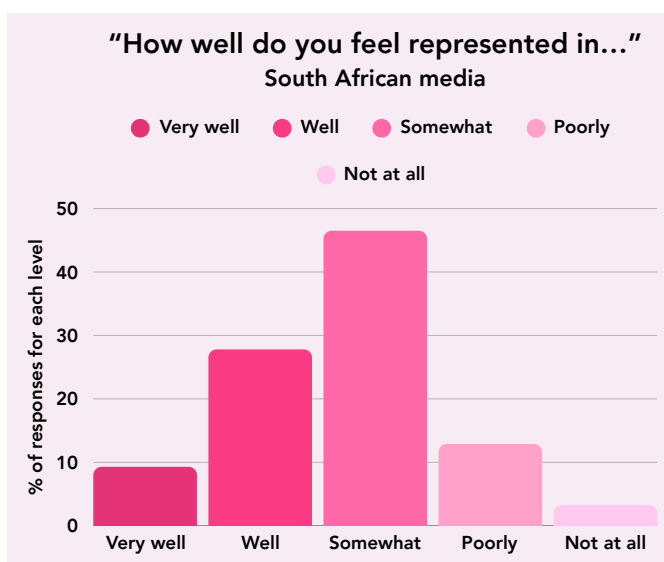
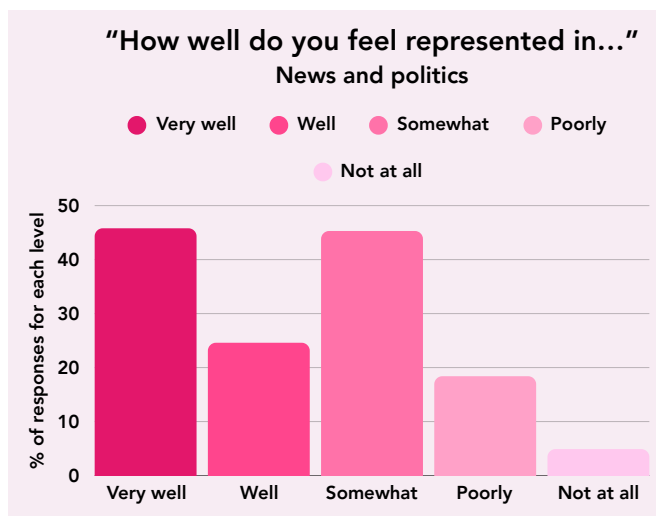
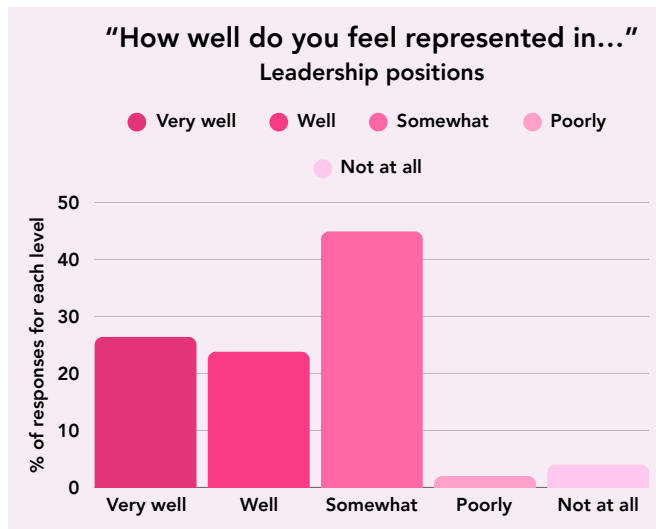
"How well do you feel represented in..."  
Advertising



# Half the picture

31

*What women want to see reflected back to them in media, brands, and society*



Feeling invisible and disrespected is a common experience, especially among Black women who face added layers of marginalisation. Many long for recognition and respect, not only socially but politically and economically, where their voices are truly heard and valued.

This yearning for authentic mirrors reflects a deeper need for societal acknowledgment that encompasses all facets of womanhood: resilience alongside vulnerability, empowerment alongside burden. Women want to be seen as whole, complex human beings – not just symbols or simplified narratives.

## Conclusion

## *Seeing women as they are*

This research shows – above all – that South African women are not one dimensional: simultaneously more empowered, and more exhausted, than ever before. Through the voices of over 4 000 women, we see generations quietly redefining what it means to be powerful, choosing peace over performance, and reshaping the meaning of success

**Women are not waiting for systems to change. They're adapting by setting boundaries, seeking their own peace, supporting one another, and finding meaning in daily intentional choices. Their stories show how progress often happens away from the spotlight. Sometimes, it looks like saying no. Sometimes, it's a quiet walk alone. Sometimes, it's just being able to have a moment to yourself.**

So what can we do to support this quiet revolution? The most important step is recognising that women's wellbeing cannot be addressed through single interventions. Safety, financial security, emotional support, and personal agency are interconnected needs requiring comprehensive approaches.

As 1st for Women, our job is not to speak for women, it's to listen. And to respond with care, with context, and with the kind of support that sees the full picture, not just the highlights. Protection means more than covering what might go wrong. It means recognising what women are already carrying, and helping to lighten the load.

The data is clear: South African women are ready to lead this transformation. The question is whether the rest of society is ready to follow their lead toward a future where strength and softness, achievement and rest, individual success and collective care can coexist.

This is the first edition of Her and Now, but the work continues. Because understanding women, as they are, is our commitment.





1st for women

**August 2025**

*1st for Women is a licensed non-life insurer and FSP. Ts and Cs online*

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