



IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Unstoppable success means opening doors for others – Premier Soccer League referee Akhona Makalima

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The role of women in football continues to be a topic of discussion and yet refereeing is often a topic that isn't even considered. Enter Akhona Makalima. Akhona is not only the first certified woman referee in South Africa, but she is the phenomenal athlete who broke every single barrier placed in front of her through determination, sheer will and a force so that she could be a pioneer in her field. Her success is unstoppable.

Akhona spoke to us at Momentum's Womentum Tribe photoshoot, where she shared her experience about officiating for FIFA and the PSL. She spoke about how she is using her position as a trailblazer in women's sports to encourage and inspire other young South African women to dream big and kick their own doors wide open by participating in sports at all levels.

Having been raised in the poor community of Nqamakwe in the Eastern Cape meant that despite her athleticism and speed, Akhona had little or no access to any sports programmes. She didn't let that stop her, and says her journey to becoming a referee was an uphill battle, especially as a woman. "Most work in male-dominated fields require women to work twice as hard, because we start on the back foot. You know you are being denied opportunities because you are a woman," she says.

Those with archaic ideas of women in sports have not always appreciated Akhona's presence in the beautiful, skilful game of soccer. "Even if you are the best, [selectors] will pass you up because they believe women don't have what it takes or that there are other emotions at play when choosing a woman," Akhona says. "It is assumed that men know the game better and as a woman, you constantly have to prove yourself no matter how good you are. When you and a man score the same in assessments, you have to do everything to prove you are better because they will pick the man if you don't."

She says she deals with the gender based biases and discrimination by constantly working on improving herself. Akhona says, "You need to work on yourself to prove yourself – to yourself as well – that you are capable. You need to stop doubting and owning your ability." The sports industry is fraught with gender issues and many women have been told over time that they are not good enough. "I worked hard to be here, and I didn't want to get here by being just a quota or to fill up numbers – I want equality because I am equal in strength, ability, and desire. You have to invest in yourself to say that you are able to take up that kind of space," she says. And it's not just about being the best at what you do, Akhona quickly adds, "it's about banging on

doors, demanding a seat at the table, and raising your voice at the table because that will open that very same door for the next woman.”

She cautions though that women have to be realistic and not aim for being in the top spot right away and that you have to work your way up to where you want to be. “We are human before we are anything else,” Akhona says. “We have to show our humanity and fight for change by asserting our humanness so that we, as women, are not just seen as whatever role they assign us.”

Akhona has an unshakeable determination to succeed and got her first FIFA badge in 2014, which meant that she could be assigned to international matches. She has worked hard to get to where she is, and moved up the ranks. “I couldn’t go to CAF without doing the PSL first and I can’t go straight to the World Cup without doing CAF, you know?”

Akhona says you have to know the process, train with consistency and understand that there is a time for every milestone, and when you fail – go home and self-reflect.

“You need to look for the meaning behind what people say; are they criticising you because you’re doing something wrong or because you are a woman?”

And finally, once you have reached that success, she says, you need to own it. “I wouldn’t be flashy about it, shoving it in people’s faces but I want to walk with my head held high - knowing I have met and surpassed my own expectations. Respect others and acknowledge who helped you get to where you are.” For Akhona it was her parents that showed her she was limitless and her success is unstoppable. And she is eternally grateful for it.

Akhona is part of the Womentum Tribe, a class of powerful women from different disciplines who are spearheading the #SheOwnsHerSuccess campaign. They inspire other women towards unapologetically owning their success by sharing their own journeys to success. To hear more about Akhona, please visit www.momentum.co.za to listen to her podcast.

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