

Inspirational groundbreakers 15 women in rail are motivational examples for others

IRJ's editorial team profiles the winners of our third Women in Rail Award

WELCOME to IRJ's Women in Rail Award 2024. Our now annual search for the brightest and best female leaders and managers goes from strength to strength. What follows over the next 12 pages are career profiles of 15 remarkable women working across the railway industry in all parts of the world.

Earlier this year, a European Rail Supply Industry Association (Unife) workshop held in Brussels on developing next-generation skills for our industry highlighted the increasingly challenging issue of recruiting new talent. More than ever before, rail is competing not just internally, but with other sectors, on attracting the finest minds, male and female, which will be required if rail is to achieve the transformational role that net zero and other societal changes are demanding of it.

But as the International Association of Public Transport's (UITP) secretary general, Mr Mohamed Mezghani, points

out (p38), although women account for the majority of public transport users, they account for just one-fifth of its workforce. Or, to put it another way, 80% of posts are held by men. And Mezghani candidly says part of the problem is that men often don't realise the many barriers facing women. Simple actions, such as including female faces on recruitment material, can massively help stimulate interest and applications.

And, as speakers at the Unife workshop explained, despite the many potential hurdles, there is much to be positive about. An increasing focus on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (Stem) subjects at high school level is increasing the number of girls considering entering what was for generations a male-only preserve. Attracting talent at an early age will be crucial for filling a new generation of mould-breaking roles.

The onus is now on our industry to respond by demonstrating that there are

satisfying and substantial career paths that can match and even surpass those in other sectors, from accountancy to zoology.

What is clear from the many entries to this year's IRJ Women in Rail Award is the sheer determination and ability to accomplish outstanding achievements, often in the face of adversity. While they have undoubtedly had support from male and female colleagues, what sets our winners apart is their self-belief that in turn empowers colleagues and industry partners alike.

Judging by the calibre of the Women in Rail entries, we expect to see more outstanding individuals when we present the third IRJ Young Rail Leaders Award in our December issue. Nominations will open in October.

In the meantime, we invite you to join us in celebrating a truly exceptional group of employees who we are proud to present as the winners of our Women in Rail Award 2024.

Nthabiseng Kubheka
CEO, Bombela Operating
Company, South Africa
Years in the industry: 3



BOMBELA is the joint venture led by RATP Dev that operates and maintains the 80km Gautrain commuter network in South Africa, running from Johannesburg to OR Tambo International Airport and Pretoria. Nthabiseng Kubheka joined the company as CEO in January 2021, the latest stage in her 27-year career in energy and rail. She is responsible for a business with over 500 staff and 1800 contractors that is estimated to contribute Rand 1.7bn (\$US 93.3m) a year to the national economy.

Nthabiseng's nominator says she is a passionate champion for inclusion and diversity, and has introduced these values throughout Bombela. Her speciality is leading multidisciplinary teams, achieving success through her focus on high performance as well as staff development. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Nthabiseng's commitment to the safety of her employees and customers ensured that all protocols to prevent infection were observed, and that Gautrain services continued to operate. She ensured that jobs were protected and that the mental wellbeing of employees was prioritised.

A strong advocate for increasing the number of women in rail, Kubheka is working to build the next generation of leaders within Bombela. She was born in the township of Soweto and is a shining example of what can be achieved by women who are given the opportunity to thrive. To demonstrate the opportunities that are available, Bombela invites female high school and university students to meet the women in leadership positions at the company.

That Nthabiseng has risen to CEO level in the South African rail industry, which has tended to be as male-dominated as its counterparts elsewhere, is a very big achievement, her nominator says. "Everyone in South Africa speaks fondly and proudly of Gautrain yet many are not aware that the captain of this ship is a woman," adds Nthabiseng's nominator. "I am super proud of her work; South Africa should be too and so should the world. She is a winner."