

## Women Who Inspire

As managing director of M-Net Africa, the continent's biggest content provider of locally produced TV programmes, **Abiola Alabi** is one of the most powerful women in African media. She tells *New African Woman's* Belinda Otas about the value of hard work, her passion to shape a new and diverse narrative about Africa and Africans on the global stage, and her dream to see more women in leadership positions.

# M-Net Africa's Abiola Alabi:

*Going  
beyond  
breaking the*

*“glass ceiling”*



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**The media industry, especially the broadcast media, is largely seen as “a man’s world”. But here you are, one of the most powerful people in African media. How do you feel about your role and responsibilities?**

**Abiola Alabi:** (Laughs) I think it’s important you never lose focus of who you are and what you are doing. A lot of the time when people say you are this or that, I really try not to get caught up. For me, it’s about this is what we have to do. We have a huge responsibility to our viewers and I’m extremely conscious of that at any given time. Our viewers trust us and have a huge expectation that we deliver. I really try to separate myself from a lot of the noise that happens around me. I have never said you are a woman in a man’s world. I just say you are a human being, you are working and you have a responsibility to humanity, but you also have a responsibility to others because you have this opportunity. Along the way, you do a lot of jobs in life, and the idea is to do the best you can – be it flipping burgers, which I have done. In whatever I’m doing, that has always been my mantra, to be the best.

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**We are a magazine with a strong focus on women, gender and equality. Since you started working in your current environment, have you been able to create an atmosphere where other women are able to come through the doors without having to pay a price they were not willing to pay?**

Women lead differently. My boss (M-Net CEO Patricia van Rooyen) is a woman and has been able to give me an amazing opportunity and has had blind faith in me, which also translates into the blind faith I have in other people. I think we have been able to provide different opportunities and engage women in different ways that someone else might not have paid attention to as an African woman. I think men tend to share more information and are much more intuitive and tuned in to opportunities out there. So it has been really important to let women and women producers understand that there are ways you can work with people, do creative deals and partnerships. Not in a special way of giving people preference but really just giving people information that they normally might not have had or information that men have much more readily available because men do interact in a different way than when

**“I would like to see more women breakthrough to leadership roles... then we can make even greater contributions.”**



woman socialise. Men socialise from talking about what you are doing and on a much more professional level. Women socialise on a personal level, asking about your family and where did you get those shoes, and I think sometimes, we never get to the meat of the matter about how to get to the next level. It’s important to engage women in a different way because I think women require a different kind of engagement because the opportunities have traditionally not favoured us.

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**When you were offered this senior role at M-Net, was it daunting or were you ready to embrace it?**

I was not thinking of the level. I was thinking of the challenge and the opportunity to make amazing content that reflects the different images of Africa and I didn’t just show Africa in one light.

Everything about Africa was always issue laden, so it was really important to do something different and show the diversity of Africa beyond famine and war, but as people who also have aspirations as the rest of the world.

It was about being able to share universal stories that allow people to escape. Escapism is something we all share globally but no one ever shows that about Africa. I always embrace new challenges and this was embracing new challenges for me.

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**As a woman in a senior position, would you say African women are equally represented on screen and in the boardroom?**

This is definitely a work in progress, but I believe that in comparison to other markets, West African women are well represented in African media. There’s more work that needs to be done in media and women when it comes to leadership behind the camera and heading media organisations, but I would say Africans are leading this trend in media and not the other way around.

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**Does M-Net have a policy that encourages women across the various platforms of writing/production and presenting, among others, when it comes to locally generated content?**

M-Net’s policy is to create opportunities for all qualified candidates and to nurture these talents through opportunities, training and mentorship. M-Net’s approach has been very effective and actually has resulted in producing women leaders at every level in the organisation.

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**Which specific areas in the media industry in Africa would you like to see more women break the glass ceiling?**

I would like to see more women

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breakthrough to leadership roles in the boardrooms, at our public broadcasters, major newsrooms, behind the camera and in digital media. It's when we are in leadership roles that we can make even greater contributions.

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### **You are seen as a role model to many aspiring young African women, Do you see yourself as such, while Africa still grapples with cultures and traditions that still box women and hinder their advancement?**

When you have certain opportunities and you have learnt certain lessons, you can't help but be a role model and I take that responsibility very seriously. I really understand the challenges of finding important role models to look up to, to encourage you and assist you on how to navigate this world. Sometimes, the navigation is not just about you being a man or woman, but some of that is in situations where you are exposed and you are able to embrace opportunities. So, I'm extremely aware and conscious of the fortunes and blessings I have had and I don't take my role lightly.

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### **You have said your life's philosophy is to live with no regrets and that you always make sure that you learn from experiences. What keeps you focused?**

I'm constantly looking for ways to learn from people. I always ask questions when I don't understand and I grew up in a place where humility has always been one of the cornerstones. Never be too proud to ask a question and ask for help. And that's one of the things that's really important as a woman – when you need help, ask for help, especially from other women because we are here to support each other, guide each other and to learn from each other. It has always been important for me to have a strong network of women that I can tap into. One of the quotes that always stay with me is from Madeleine Albright, when she said, "There is a special place created in hell for women that don't help other women." As sisters, we owe it to each other to help each other, so I always try to give a little bit of myself every time I meet someone who needs help.

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### **What change would you like to see or make in Africa at the moment? And what impact do you want the content on M-Net to have on its viewers and subscribers?**

There are a couple of narratives out there about Africa and, funny enough, even today with all the different images out

there, the one that is most prevalent from a Western perspective is still the negative one. I still think there is a lot of work to do in terms of the narrative that's told about Africa in the West. Even at home, if you are not being told that there is wealth, richness and beauty in your culture and around you and you are not given opportunities to see those things and images, you actually start to have a different view and reflections of yourself. For us at M-Net, it's really about presenting diversity on screen. People do come at me – I'm sure, this will be your next question (laughing), how we justify Big Brother and reality TV? Yes, there are some negatives to it and there are some positives to reality TV. I think it's important for us to show the diversity that's Africa. And I think when we do reality shows in Africa, we do them with a different twist and in a different way that they are not just always frivolous but that they do have some purpose and agenda.

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### **When it comes to the representation of women in the programmes and content that goes across your channels, is this something you are conscious of as a woman in a senior position within the entertainment industry and at M-Net especially when it comes to representing African women in the different content that your company acquires or produces?**

I'm in the creative industry. I don't believe in censorship and I think it's important for people and writers to write about their environment the way they see it. There are some things that I will say we will definitely not air and that's because we are a family entertainment company and believe in the representation of great content and it does not have to be negative with race, creed or religion. We are quite sensitive in the sense that we do quite censor ourselves with what we put on air. I think it's important for me to encourage people and provide platforms where there could be more positive images of Africans in general, especially women and children when we are able to do it, and I do encourage and provide that. It's also important to present images of women that are realistic. When you look at a show like *Tinsel*, we have been able to tackle some very challenging issues that are realistic in our society. For example, we have tackled the issue of working women and working pregnant women on maternity leave and returning to work. That happens in real life and we do promote the idea of working women. One of the other issues we have also tackled on *Tinsel* is the issue of rape and sexual boundaries. How do you define that as a woman and how do you find your voice as a woman. That is a very important topic to embrace and we did bring in professionals to address the issue, but also provide the right support for women if this was happening to them. These are things we are able to do that are topical and we address sensitive issues in the African context. ■

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