

Celebrating the women connecting IP and science

By [Amy Anderson](#) and [Dirk Hanekom](#)

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As we celebrate World Intellectual Property Day, our focus is on the remarkable contributions of innovative South African individuals, specifically females, who are leaders in their respective fields. This year's theme, *IP and the SDGs: Building our common future with innovation and creativity*, emphasises the critical role of intellectual property in achieving the United Nation's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including the important SDG of gender equality.



Image source: Anna Ivanova – [123RF.com](#)

In this transformative period across various industries, it is essential to recognise and celebrate these creative minds. Their innovations not only advance global agendas but also demonstrate the significance of intellectual property in building a sustainable and inclusive future for all, regardless of the time of year.

[Marie-Louise Grobler](#), an executive officer of the South African Institute of Intellectual Property Law, points out that out of the total qualified South African IP lawyers in 2023, an impressive 44% were women. This ratio shows the result of pioneering women who have helped establish a field where gender equality, [sustainability goal 5](#), is improving in the workplace.

However, when considering South African patent attorneys, the gender gap rears its head again where women only represented 29% in 2023. Despite the challenges women have faced and the continuation of the gender gap in some areas, we have inspirational women role models that have paved the way both for themselves and for future females in the areas of science and innovation, intellectual property law, and technology in general.

Breaking barriers – leading women in IP

[Shanaaz Mahomed](#), partner at Spoor & Fisher, is a trained chemist and biochemist, an admitted attorney, and a patent attorney. According to Mahomed, she reached a crossroads when confronted with the choice of following the traditional path of a scientist, or exploring other options.

Guided by her interests in both science and law, and her awareness of how traditionally distinct areas could co-exist, Mahomed ultimately decided to pursue a career in patent law. Her advice to any aspiring female patent attorney is this:

- make sure you are aware of what the career path has to offer you;
- be proactive in the search for opportunities;
- know that the field and the journey to get there is both challenging and rewarding;
- but know also that hard work and self-belief will be rewarded.

[Dina Biagio](#), also a partner at Spoor & Fisher, is trained in physics and electrical engineering, an admitted attorney, and a patent attorney. Her unique combination of skills makes her a prime example of inspirational women in IP.

Having determined her interests from a young age, Biagio discovered that a career in IP law matched her interests both in linguistics and analytical thinking. She acknowledges the increase of women within the field of IP law, and accredits the rise to pioneering patent and trade mark attorneys that came before her.

Although both Biagio and Mahomed give credit to those that have gone before them, it is clear that they are both playing their unique part in paving the way for women of the future, and reaching the sustainability goal of gender equality.

Leading women in the lab

[Dale Rae](#), an associate professor at the University of Cape Town (UCT), show us the unique value of female contributions to the scientific discipline through her research, interests and work. Rae is a director of [Sleep Science](#), a spin-out company from UCT, through which she furthers her personal interest and research in sleep and circadian rhythms, and how this is associated with health, obesity and disease, athletic performance, and work-place performance.

Through her work at Sleep Science, she has been able to explore and develop a deep understanding of the link between sleep and physical and mental health. She notes that UCT, in particular staff at their Research Contracts and Innovation Office, has encouraged and supported her to further pursue her research interests through the start-up business, thereby allowing her passion and knowledge to translate into societal benefit.

Rae is also proud to note that Sleep Science is one of only a few companies born out of UCT that are exclusively led by a team of women scientists.



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[Carminita Frost](#) is an associate professor in the Department of Biochemistry and Microbiology at the Nelson Mandela University. She is involved in groundbreaking research on cannabinoids and cannabinoid combinations that have the ability

to terminate cancer cells.

Frost has always been involved in research surrounding cannabis, but it was her genuine passion to answer questions of individuals who have been using cannabis in combination with chemotherapy that led to the body of research, some of which are now the subject of patent applications in a number of countries.

Frost is of the view that the best inventions usually come as a result of a deep passion and personal interest, which runs in parallel with her view that more creative spaces for innovation are required for scientific breakthroughs to occur. With the important aspects of her work now protected, Frost's research now has the time and space to move to clinical trials, with the hope that it will ultimately benefit those in need of improved treatment regimens.

Inclusivity in innovation

While World Intellectual Property Day highlights the importance of innovation and creativity, it is crucial to continuously recognise and celebrate the leading women who have broken boundaries to achieve gender equality in science and IP. These trailblazers are shaping a more inclusive future through their contributions to these fields.

As we reflect on their achievements, let us celebrate their successes and commit to fostering an environment where future generations of women can thrive and continue to push the boundaries in innovation and creativity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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