Shabera with her two minibus taxis

Shabera Arend's story

Former chairperson and member of the SANTACO Women's Desk, Northern Region

Shabera Arend was the first coloured woman to be elected chairperson of the South African National Taxi Council (SANTACO) Women's Desk in the Northern Region. Shabera supported her late husband with his own minibus taxi business until he sadly passed away. To support her family, Shabera took on running the business, and now owns her own fleet of minibus taxis in Cape Town, South Africa. Shabera started with one vehicle in her fleet, and over time this has increased to seven.

"At first, I was very fragile. You know, losing your husband, you're in an emotional state. Luckily for me, both of my sons are in the industry, they know the ins and outs, and they could direct me and help run the business as a family company."

Shabera recounts, "It was a challenge for me, but as a strong woman, I love challenges, and I applied myself fully. As I progressed, I came to know other members of SANTACO, and I came to learn the rules and regulations of the industry and that empowered me further. It took years to get to where I am. But today, I can proudly say that I was the first coloured woman to be elected as Chairperson of the SANTACO Women's Desk."

Shabera points out that the minibus taxi industry in South Africa is extremely male-dominated and marred by violence. Between 2017 and 2022, 1,653 deaths were linked to turf wars. Shabera says, "The violence puts fear into the public, and women read about it and think, 'I don't want to be in this industry'." Nevertheless, Shabera emphasises that women can help change this:

As women in this industry, we make change happen by showing that we are thriving. Through the media, we can show young women that yes, it is a male-dominated field, but we can show how strong we are and change it."

Working as a woman in the South African minibus industry has its challenges. Shabera explains that many women who are single, or widowed like herself, often struggle to juggle caring for their family and running a business. "I see them struggle in my association. There are a lot of women who have lost their husbands, and they struggle with the prices of vehicles, paying car insurance, taxes, and giving money to their families. And that leads to women leaving the industry instead of staying."

To support women in the industry, Shabera would like to see the government stepping in with subsidies. In addition to government support, Shabera highlights the important role minibus taxi associations play in creating a support structure for women who are struggling: "Having women come together, or just offering a shoulder to cry on, would be a great help."
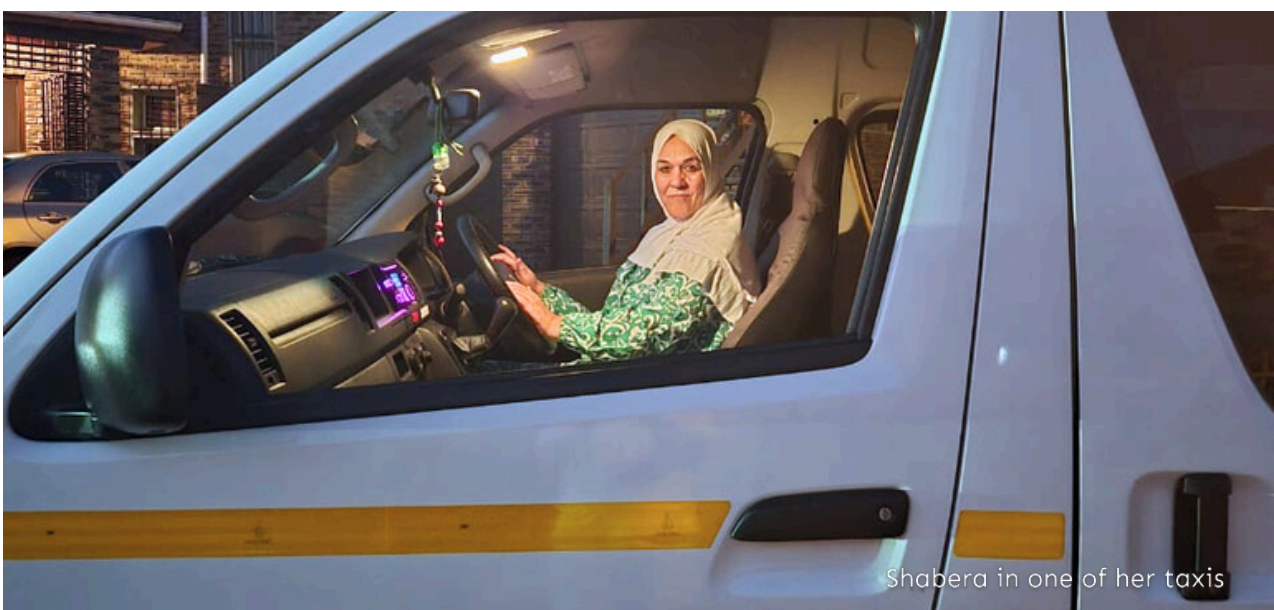
Shabera offers advice and emotional support to women who reach out to her: "I'm the type of person who's always been a helping hand. If people reach out to me, I do my best to assist. I was contacted by one woman last year, and I check on her every month just to hear how she's coping with supporting her children."

For women who are struggling in a male-dominated industry marred by violence, Shabera says that Transaid's work to improve safe access to public transport for women in the Western Cape is greatly needed. The project, funded by The Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI), follows on from a three-country study carried out in 2022 with Durham University to investigate the challenges faced by young women and girls as users of public transport, and aims to sensitise drivers and passengers on gender-based violence and harassment.

"To tell you the honest truth, this initiative should have been implemented years ago. It's an initiative that will help other women who feel like they can't speak to anyone. There's a lot of women that need support, that need a shoulder to cry on, that need to be heard. I appreciate this initiative and I applaud it, so much so that I want to see it going further.

"We can make a change, and show that women are in this industry, and that we are women who prosper, who inspire, and who progress in life."

Visit www.transaid.org to learn more.

Shabera in one of her taxis