



QUEEN

HOME COMING

Not only is co-founder of SweepSouth Aisha Pandor (yes, that Pandor!) providing a vital service with her home-cleaning company, she's also empowering her employees and bringing the industry into the 21st century

By HEATHER INGARFIELD Photography GARETH VAN NELSON

WT WHEN YOU THINK OF any industry, think about how much it has grown and progressed in the past 30, 20 or even 10 years. Bloggers are now considered editors; we get our news online rather than from newspapers; tablets and smartphones are getting smaller and smarter by the day; genetically modified crops are breaking ground across South Africa; passenger flights are planned to the moon. One industry, however, has been slow to catch up to the 21st century – well, that is, until Aisha Pandor stepped in.

Domestic goddess

'The domestic cleaning industry is still traditional and old-fashioned. It hasn't really been thought about much. Apart from changing minimum wage and labour laws, it's not something that

people have thought about progressively,' she tells me as we sip on beetroot and carrot juice.

We have had to cut our lunch meeting short, as she needs to rush off to an urgent meeting with an investor. It feels quite surreal, talking about investors, attending conferences in San Francisco, and how she was named one of *Mail & Guardian's* Top 200 Young South Africans in 2012.

'IT'S KEY TO HAVE ENTREPRENEURS FROM A RANGE OF BACKGROUNDS TO IDENTIFY HOW WE CAN SOLVE ISSUES'

As an old friend, I remember all the braais and parties at her parliamentary house in Newlands, Cape Town (her mother is current Minister of Science and Technology Naledi Pandor), getting up to mischief at school, lurking around at Cavendish Square for hours on end. Now, the 31-year-old is the co-founder and CEO of SweepSouth, one of the most progressive start-ups in South Africa, which, through technology, is bringing fresh thinking and a new approach to the domestic service industry.

'So,' I say, 'let's go back to the start...'

'We need help'

After studying for 10 years to obtain her PhD in human genetics, Aisha went into a corporate job. Her husband Alen Ribic, who is a software

engineer, also worked in the corporate world. The only problem was, they both hated it. 'We were very unhappy,' she tells me. Having moved to Joburg for these jobs, they decided they needed a break, so they came home to Cape Town one December for some much-needed family time. While staying in the Mother City, they tried to find a domestic cleaner. 'Our daughter Ajla was three then and was very messy. It'd been a rough year, we had family coming to visit and we just needed the help,' says Aisha.

A few days, a thousand Gumtree pages and a couple of desperate pleas to friends later, their search efforts yielded no results.

'At the same time, Uber had recently launched and we loved the concept. So we thought, why don't we build

AISHA'S TOP 5 TIPS for start-ups

1

Go team

'Having a great co-founder or partner is essential. This person should complement your personality and skills well.'

2

Timing is everything

'Launch as soon as you have a viable product. Your market will tell you more about the direction your product should take than you and your partners will probably anticipate.'

3

Money matters

'Be smart about raising money and clear about what you expect from your investors, as well as what they expect from you.'

4

Target practice

'Set big targets. Celebrate when you hit them, and pick yourself up quickly when you fail.'

5

Why?

'Remember the "why". This is your purpose and the reason you are doing what you are doing.'



'It was just the two of us, at home, sitting at a tiny desk, building the app bit by bit.'

something similar, but that connects domestic cleaners with homeowners looking for their services? We'd obviously been through the experience ourselves, but it also seemed like something that was very relevant – SA has 1.2 million registered domestic cleaners, and many more who are not registered. That's around two percent of the total population,' says Aisha.

'We thought developing the technology that could help people find work, connect homeowners with domestic cleaners and modernise the industry would be extremely impactful. So we decided to build the platform ourselves.'

Aisha and Alen quit their jobs, cashed in their pensions and bonuses, and got to work. 'We spent about four months constructing the platform. It was just the two of us, from home, sitting together every day at a tiny desk, building it bit by bit, from the first line of code. Literally from the ground up.'

In June 2014, the couple launched SweepSouth, at first targeting their surrounding areas in Joburg, spreading the word among friends and going from door to door. 'It had to work. We had put it all on the line – both of us, at the same time, with a three-year-old in tow. It was a big risk and was incredibly scary, but at the same time, the excitement and prospects outweighed the scariness,' Aisha says.

A ratings game

'We built two different apps: a client-facing app and cleaner-facing one. As a client, you would visit the website, put in all your details and specify what you need. The app makes use of complicated algorithms to find a domestic cleaner for

you, based on your needs, schedule and personalities. So if you want ironing done, for example, we're not going to choose someone who has been rated poorly on ironing.'

For the domestic cleaners, they need to download the app on to their phone, which will become their constant connection to SweepSouth. 'It helps them find the house where they'll be cleaning for the day, log the completion of the job (which is also GPS-stamped), as well as let them rate the client. The cleaner rating the client is critical, as we don't want to send a cleaner to a client they don't like,' says Aisha.

'DOMESTIC CLEANERS PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE AND WE NEED TO REALISE THAT AND VALUE THEM'

'How did you go about finding the cleaners?' I ask.

'Honestly, that's never been a problem,' says Aisha. 'With unemployment rates in SA and the number of domestic workers who don't have jobs, finding domestic cleaners has never been an issue for us.'

One of the first people Aisha shared her idea with was Ajla's nanny and, from there, it didn't take long before queues of people who wanted to sign up on the platform were snaking around her house.

'That was just from word of mouth. It's still working that way now. We do a small amount of advertising when we are looking for people within a certain area, but otherwise, it's simply word of mouth.'

Modern family

Offering regular employment to one of the largest sectors of the population is one thing, but Aisha has grander plans. 'Companies like ours have a responsibility to change. One of the key things has been the language around domestic cleaners. We don't use terms such as "chars" or "maids" – we stay away from any of the old-fashioned language. There's no "Madam" and no "Baas" either; the cleaners are given the client's name and that's what they use.'

SweepSouth also runs workshops to help the cleaners feel more empowered, focusing on topics such as financial literacy, legal advice, domestic violence, homecare and education. 'The way these cleaners have been treated in the past has made them feel very disempowered. They don't feel like they can say, "I don't want to go to that client" or "I don't like the way this person is speaking to me". They don't feel like they can speak up about things. If you think about the industry as a whole, the power imbalance still leans very much towards the homeowner. We want to change the narrative around the place of a domestic cleaner in society.'

'For me, there's no way that, after a 16-hour day, I'd be able to go home and do the laundry and clean the house. They play

on the cover



Favourite pastime

'Reading (novels, tech and biotech articles), yoga, spending time with my husband and daughter.'



Guilty pleasures

'Chocolate, fashion magazines and online clothes shopping!'



People who influence you

'Without a doubt, my mom and dad, as well as my husband/co-founder, who is my biggest supporter and biggest critic too.'



SweepSouth has cleaned...

'At last count, about 50 000 homes, but this number grows each month.'



SweepSouth employs...

'We have 16 people in the office, and almost 700 cleaners and counting.'

GET IN TOUCH



on the cover

a very important role, and we need to realise that and value them.'

Trials and tribulations

Even though SweepSouth is now a pioneer ('When we got our very first booking, it was the first time in Africa that a person had bought a home service end-to-end online,' she says), it hasn't been easy for Aisha and Alen.

'The start-up life gets quite romanticised – working out of your parents' garage and having no money. But actually, when you are almost 30, you have a child and you can't pay school fees, it's not that much fun. It's been hectic.'

Not one to deny that she has come from a privileged family, having Naledi Pandor as her mom has not opened any doors for Aisha and Alen, she affirms. 'My mom is a minister, she's a civil servant. She works a job herself and earns a salary, and, yes, it may be better than what some people earn here in South Africa, but she is definitely not a millionaire. We've had people who assume that this whole venture must've been easy for me simply because of who my mother is, but my mom can't build a business from scratch, she can't write code, she can't hire cleaners, and she can't maintain the quality of the platform. We don't work with government – we work with customers who just want their houses cleaned.

'My mom is just my mom. Growing up, my parents would call me and my sister "she lions", which we absolutely loved! But having such a principled, strong and highly respected woman as a mother has been a great inspiration to me – and it has helped me through the tough times. And we've had

TRUE COLOURS

'More **women of colour becoming entrepreneurs is vital.** It stands to reason that it is easier for a black female South African than it is for a white male South African to understand the dynamics behind a township-based domestic worker. Entrepreneurs tend to try to **solve the problems they've faced themselves,** so it's really key to have entrepreneurs with a wide range of backgrounds to help identify how we can solve issues. This is particularly crucial when the majority of the population is so under-represented in business.'

tough times. We've run out of money too many times to count, we've had to sell our house and our car. We still drive around in one car today!'

So Aisha and Alen share a car, work together and raise a daughter together. How do they do it, I ask. 'We're still not fantastic at separating business and pleasure,' she laughs. 'We are best friends and absolutely love working together now – it did take

me a while to get used to his working style, which is very different to mine. But we're still not good at separating our relationship from work, which is 95% of our lives. Every day, we take work home with us, and it's fine; it's the stage we're at with our business. We don't know how to switch off from it – we must be the most boring dinner guests ever!'

I laugh. I know this is not true at all. Aisha has to be one

of the most vivacious and vibrant people I know. We finish our drinks and walk to her car, a VW Polo with a black stripe down the middle. 'I lent my car to my younger brother and he gave it back with a stripe on it. I mean, what even?' she laughs.

We make plans to see each other again soon, but for now, she has to race to a meeting – she has the world to change, after all. **EL**

