



Closing the Gender Digital Divide in Africa

Connected Africa Summit (CAS)

Nairobi, 25 April 2025

Plenary Session

Keynote speeches by **Ann Okello**, Presidential DigitTalent Programme (Nairobi, Kenya), **Zeinab Mohamed**, M-PESA Foundation Academy (Thika, Kenya), **H.E. Henriette Geiger**, Ambassador of the EU to Kenya, and **H.E. Peter Maddens**, Ambassador of Belgium to Kenya.

Ann Okello

Presidential DigitTalent Programme (Nairobi)

“My name is Ann Okello and I'm an electrical and electronic engineer graduate. I find myself in the space as a global change maker leaning towards the SDG4 and I have functioned as an advocate for women in STEM.

I am currently an intern at the ICT Authority under the Presidential DigitTalent Programme together with 399 others. We receive comprehensive training and coaching through mentorship. We also make use of a platform where we can showcase our ICT innovations. I am 5 months into this program, and I have already experienced benefits derived from the government's effort to improve ICT skills, and therefore I want to thank the government of Kenya for having ICT skills development as one of its key pillars in the development of Kenya's digital transformation agenda.



Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education

Today we are celebrating International Girls in ICT Day. Statistically, women make up a significantly smaller proportion of the ICT workforce, and this both in technical roles as in leadership roles. Women represent approximately 20 to 30% of ICT professionals on a global scale, and in Kenya this is about 10 to 30%. Clearly there is a gender divide in the ICT profession, and I thank the government for bringing this session at the Connected Africa Summit.

I want to tell a story about why I think this issue is so pertinent. I am part of a group of like-minded people who share opportunities and information and opportunities. We are both men and women. A gentleman came up to me to discuss opportunities targeting girls and women in the tech industry. He then asked a question that was very valid at that time and even right now: “Why are there opportunities only targeting women?”. This created a stir in our group and one gentleman responded: “Most STEM courses are made for men. They forced a horse to the river and now they are forcing it to drink the water”. I responded to the gentlemen: “You cannot force a horse to drink the water, but you can put a little salt in the hay, so the horse will get thirsty and starts longing for the water”.

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We have not yet gotten there but there are opportunities. Stakeholders are coming on board through policy-making, through various trainings and mentorships targeting women, and I want to encourage female professionals to take advantage of these opportunities to help us become leaders in the tech in industry.”



Zeinab Mohamed

M-PESA Foundation Academy, Thika, Kenya

“We gather here today to celebrate the International Girls in ICT Day. My name is Zeinab Mohamed from the M-PESA Foundation Academy. I am filled with both pride and determination. This day is commemorated not only to stress the importance of girls in ICT but also to celebrate the milestones we have achieved as girls in ICT.

As a student from a school where STEM is valued, I really appreciate that this school not only focuses on boys in STEM but also enables girls to unleash their potential in what they can do in STEM.

Did you know that as the world of technology continues to expand rapidly, the role of women in ICT cannot be underestimated? The first programmer in the world was a woman named Ada Lovelace. However, in today's digital age men are dominating the ICT field with only one out of five being a girl.

I believe that we are tomorrow's ICT gurus. With my curiosity and quest in coding and programming I have faith that more girls will be empowered and that together we will break the stereotypes. I'm sure that – with the rise of artificial intelligence and other technological advancements – I'll be the next Ada Lovelace, I'll be the next Mary Curie, I'll be the next Elon Musk.



Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender Equality

I believe that if every girl in Kenya is granted equal opportunities that they can make equal innovations on this year's International Girls in ICT Day. I encourage every one of you to create an environment where girls can unleash their potential and today's girls become tomorrow's ICT gurus.

Let's promote SDG 5 and let's promote girls in tech!"

H.E. Henriette Geiger
EU Ambassador to Kenya

“This is the last day of this exciting summit and I'm honoured and happy that we're closing this journey with a full day dedicated to girls and women in ICT, and to reduce the gender digital divide.

First, let me acknowledge the presence of H. E. Peter Maddens, the Belgian ambassador, and acknowledge and thank the tremendous effort the Belgian presidency is making in the EU towards gender equality. I would also like to thank the D4D Hub and Enabel, the Belgian Development Cooperation Agency, for organizing this session.

Also in the EU – even though we have made incredible progress in the last years and decades – there is a huge gender digital divide. We are not so different from other regions. And the gap

is not narrowing, its widening.



H.E. Henriette Geiger and fellow panelists attending the plenary meeting at CAS 2024

Today we are celebrating the International Girls in ICT Day, so let's take this opportunity to discuss together and share best practices on how to accelerate the inclusion of women and girls in the digital transformation and unlock this invaluable potential that remains largely unexplored.

The message is simple: much more investment in women and girls is needed to close the digital divide. Latest figures tell us that in sub-Saharan Africa, in 2022, only 40% of women use the internet, compared to 45% of men. Women are still less likely to follow STEM courses and so they are under-represented in the group of people with advanced digital skills.

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Digitization is transforming and shaping our societies, and the trend will accelerate. If women and girls cannot participate in this transformation because they do not have access to the internet or they do not have the right skills set, we risk undoing the gains we have made on gender equality in the last years. This is very serious. It is a worldwide risk for the gender movement and the equal rights movement. We have to take this seriously.

Investment in digital literacy is therefore much required as early as primary education, so girls are encouraged and equipped to build flourishing careers in the digital age. Investing in women and girls is not only fair but it is the smart thing to do. If we were to include all women in the digital sphere, low- and middle-income countries would see an increase of about 13

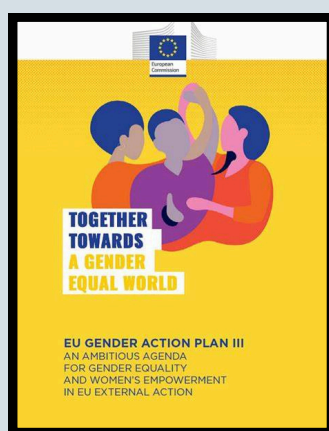
trillion Kenyan shillings or 1 trillion dollars in their GDP. I believe that this is a very convincing argument. And if connected, women would add over 40 trillion Kenyan shillings, that is \$300 billion, to e-commerce markets in Africa and Southeast Asia by 2030. This is an incredible number; we need to let that sink in.

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For many years gender equality has been at the core of EU's collaboration with Africa because we are convinced that women are key agents for development and change. The EU has therefore adopted a Gender Action Plan, now in its 3rd edition. The GAP is a very ambitious framework to promote gender equality and women's empowerment through all the external action the EU is taking worldwide. What is special about this Gender Action Plan is that it's mandatory. It's committing the EU and its member states to make a compulsory contribution to gender equality and women empowerment. Concretely 85% of the EU and its member states development budget has to work towards gender equality. And 5% of our entire portfolio has to be dedicated exclusively to gender equality. Since it is mandatory, every EU institution, every delegation, every member state has to report on the compliance with these numbers. If that is not an instrument that is delivering results, I don't know what it is.



EU Gender Action Plan III

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“Every EU institution, every delegation, every member state has to report on the compliance with these numbers. It is a mandatory instrument.” H.E. Geiger, EU Ambassador to Kenya.

We are also working with other instruments here in Kenya and worldwide, one of which is the EU Global Gateway. Digitization and gender equality are at the centre of the EU's Global

Gateway Strategy. With this strategy the EU wants to accelerate sustainable investment in the green and digital transitions. The EU Global Gateway is promoting a human-centric and inclusive approach to digitization, prioritizing equal access and participation of women and girls in shaping the digital landscape, from developing policy frameworks to infrastructure, from the development of skills to financial access.

As part of our approach in Kenya, we are working together with UNICEF to connect primary schools in under-served areas to the internet and invest in digital literacy for boys and girls.



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The ambitious targets we set for the EU Global Gateway can only be met by working in a collaborative spirit. The EU new [Digital for development hub \(D4D Hub\)](#) facilitates these types of partnerships. It is a strategic multi-stakeholder platform that fosters digital cooperation between Team Europe and partners from Africa, Asia and other regions through its gender working group. The D4D Hub prioritizes women and girls by focusing on skills development and digital media literacy, so women and girls can take up leadership positions and stay safe online in a space increasingly marked by online gender-based violence.

This is a much under reported and unseen phenomenon but online gender-based violence has been on the increase in an incredible way and nobody sees it, and nobody talks about it. I think we should also discuss that today.

Finally, I cannot stress enough the importance of our collective discussions today. I'm glad to see also that men are present, demonstrating that they also understand the significance of this issue for the digital transition. I would like to encourage all of you to move beyond discussions. Discussions are great for awareness raising but if they're not followed by actions we have not gained much. Please, let us join to transform what we learned today and take the solutions back to our workspaces. Together we can close the digital divide in Africa and around the world.



(right) Mrs. Onica N. Makwakwa and Micky Elanga, (left) Mrs. Cristina de Lorenzo and H.E. Henriette Geiger

H. E. Peter Maddens Ambassador of Belgium to Kenya

“Good morning. Looking at the panel discussions earlier I felt a little a bit of a divide, but I can assure you in my heart and in my head, there is none. I want to thank the conference for inviting me and for organizing today's event and for inviting me to speak.

I don't think there's anything more important than attacking divides, whether they're gender or digital or poverty or environmental. In this room, probably more than in any other room, it's obvious to state that people without access to the internet and other forms of ICT are at a socioeconomic disadvantage. It makes them less able to find and apply for jobs, to shop or to learn.



(right) H.E. Peter Maddens and H.E. Henriette Geiger during the plenary meeting at CAS 2024.

The digital divide is even greater rural areas, but it exists also across income, gender and age groups and vulnerable communities. Expensive access to ICT services, financial limitations, preventing device ownership, lack of technical or digital skills, or even feelings of insecurity and safety online impedes women's capacity to flourish and sometimes even to participate in our swiftly digitizing world.

Every young girl and woman deserve an equitable chance. The gender gap doesn't need to be an unavoidable truth and digital empowerment – meaning access, affordability and skills – can significantly contribute to closing the gender divide on a global scale.

An enabling policy environment needs to be created. Education must be reformed to accommodate the surge in digital skills and include women and girls and other vulnerable groups in their thinking and design of policies. The private sector needs to invest in the development of infrastructure, solutions and skills development. ICT tools need to be developed and created by diverse gender balanced teams to ensure a truly connected world.

“ We need to create an enabling policy environment, both in educational institutions and in the private sector

– H.E. Peter Maddens

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Women and girls know what tools they need to excel in their private and professional lives. They need to thrive in the world of ICT to create their own future. Many amazing ICT tools were invented by women. Everybody knows about the American woman who calculated the trajectories for the first space flights. But there is also Prof. Ingrid Daubechies, a Belgian professor who taught us how to save photo images as JPEG. Hilda Moraa is a Kenyan CEO who founded Pezesha, a digital financial enabler that empowers under-served communities in Africa by connecting them with affordable access to financial services. And there's Gina Abas, who founded Lami, insurance technology to democratize and digitize insurance products, first in Kenya and then across Africa.

As Ambassador Geiger said before, as part of our presidency of the Council of the European Union, Belgium is launching a pioneering democratic initiative closely linked to the digital divide: a gender balance citizens panel on artificial intelligence. This initiative underlines our country's commitment to an inclusive and participatory approach towards the formulation of European policies. We look forward to their conclusions which will be presented at the end of May and to share their vision with you all.

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Belgium puts women's rights at the forefront of our policies and objectives and projects. The realization of gender equality and the rights of women and girls are a priority, including the equal participation of women in all sectors of society, especially ICT.

Digital transformation is a journey which started with technological innovation, digitalization, market liberalization. Since the dawn of the mobile and the internet, the role ICT plays in our modern societies and economies has only increased over time. New and emerging technologies continually reshape the landscape of digital skills emphasizing the importance of lifelong learning and adaptability. Digital technologies are creating millions of jobs requiring people to learn new skills. The window is open for individuals to add skills and certifications to their resume to pick the best ICT jobs. But for that to happen, each person needs to have access to the material, to the equipment, to the software and to the skills to use these new technologies.

“ Collaborations with African partner countries in the digitization for development agenda is of utmost importance, especially if we want to find solutions that address specific socioeconomic challenges faced by communities.

— H.E. Peter Maddens

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Girls must have access to the education and to STEM and for that we all must play our part. The public sector, the private sector, academia, civil society and individuals. And isn't that precisely the purpose of a conference like this?”

Enabel 



Belgium

partner in development