



Unlocking She-Tech Potential

Connected Africa Summit 2024

Uhuru Gardens, Nairobi, Kenya

25 April 2024

Plenary session

[Digital for Girls and Women project](#)

Panel discussion: Unlocking she-tech potential for sustainable and inclusive tech driven economy in Africa, driving social change navigating challenges for a sustainable and cultivating digital leadership.

Moderator: Fiona Asonga, Chief Executive Officer, TESPOC (Technology Service Providers of Kenya).

Panelists:

- **Sen. Abdillahi, Miraj**, Kenyan Nominated Senator for UDA and Vice-chair of the Senate ICT Committee (Kenya)
- **H.E. Geiger, Henriette**, EU Ambassador to Kenya.
- **Mutuku, Annette**, Board member of the ICT Authority, Kenya
- **Nganga, Idah**, senior advisor UNESCO, president of the Women in STEM Leaders Org.
- **Sombah, Romnanah**, Education Officer at UNICEF Kenya

Fiona Asonga: *How can women be included in the decision-making processes in the tech industry in Africa?*

Idah Nganga:

“Inclusion into the decision making processes is usually the beginning of the bigger problem, because you cannot say that women should foster into tech or STEM when leadership itself is not representative. I look at the ladies around me and I can see we are from various demographic backgrounds, ethnicity and age and it reminds me that we should have been doing this a long time ago. We should have been coming together and having the conversation as one.

When we have conversations like these, cooperating and collaborating, we stop looking at individuality and we start looking at the impact and the purpose.”



The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action 30

The most widely endorsed global agenda for women’s rights was adopted by leaders from 189 countries at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. It includes critical areas for action, such as violence against women and achieving gender equality.

Fiona Adonga: *Do you think that women in leadership positions can drive social change, especially in tech?*

Sen. Miraj Abdillahi

“It is true that women in leadership can amplify economic impact into society because we reinvest in our families and amplify a positive societal impact by design. Since the Beijing discussions women have a seat at the round tables where the decisions are made.

The fact that we women have a chance to take part in important discussions shows a goodwill in the political sector in our country [Kenya]. Our government has given us many chances, for example I am sitting in the ICT Committee where I push for research and data from women in society, so that we can identify the challenges they face.

Kenya wants to connect the interior parts of our country with fibre cables. This means e.g. that the Mama Mboga markets can easily sell products without sending them to the urban areas. When we have a good e-commerce infrastructure, we have faith that the products that we post in our social medias from the markets are going to be delivered in the urban areas through a well-structured infrastructure and e-commerce platforms.”



Mama Mboga markets are local African markets where women sell fresh fruit, vegetables and other products. Mama Mboga is Swahili for “mother of vegetables”.

Kenya is supporting infrastructure to promote e-commerce platforms so women can sell their products easier.

Fiona Asonga: *Do governments have to put in place policies to foster gender equality and diversity in the Africa tech space?*

Romnanah Sombah:

“I work with UNICEF Kenya focusing on education and supporting education for girls and young women.

As different speakers before me have mentioned, the gender digital divide is a global problem - the EU Ambassador has mentioned that the gender digital divide not only happens in sub-Saharan Africa, but also in European countries. Why is this happening? One key factor is usually the gender stereotypes in the ICT industry. We need to support girls at an early age starting from primary school so that we can promote STEM-related careers. So, I’m looking at policies and initiatives that support the uptake of interests, building capacity and showing young girls exciting opportunities at an early age.

For example, looking at the Kenyan context: in secondary schools few girls enrol into science subjects. So when you are talking about women in the tech industry, they did not have role models, they don’t see the opportunities. In the 21st century most of the future careers are in technology, they are STEM-related so if they miss out on this, this has economic impact.

We should support policies and skills initiatives at a very early age, offering mentorships and coaching. So many girls here have mentioned that having a female role model has been crucial!”

“ Women leaders in technology are not visible in the media. UNICEF has stated that we don’t see enough female role models. But I meet them all the time.

— Fiona Asonga

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Fiona Asonga: *How does the media portray women in leadership positions? Are there sufficient platforms for women to be seen and heard? How many of inspiring high-rising women are visible on*

African media platforms? In Africa, a woman is often not supposed to be vocal. When a woman is vocal and expresses herself people might say that she is rude and that they don't want their daughters to be like that.

Women in politics must be very aggressive; they need to put themselves out there. They are perceived as role models but once back at home we say that we don't want our daughters to be like that. In the media, how many women leaders are being interviewed about their career in STEM? UNICEF has identified that we do not have enough role models, while I meet them all the time.

Annette Mutuku:

“This is a very interesting question and before I answer, I want to say that God took time to create a woman, women are created very uniquely and I tend to feel that God put all his brilliance and genius in women. The reason why I say that is because we were given an ability that was not given to anyone else: the ability to create life and to incubate life and women have the capability to give the same life to everything they touch.



(l. to r.) Fiona Asonga, H.E. Henriette Geiger, Sen. Miraj Abdillahi, Annette Mutuku, Idah Nganga and Romnanah Sombah

Statistics show that, if you put women in a leadership position in organizations, those organizations will thrive. The sad thing is in Africa there often is a wrong societal orientation. Especially in Africa, we grow up not being aware of that genius that God put in us, and we grow up not knowing how wonderful and amazing we are as women.

The majority of women suffer from impostor syndrome. You see educated women doubting themselves. For example, if you invite a man to a panel, he will accept even if he doesn't know what will be discussed. But a woman will think “I didn't prepare, you didn't send me the questions”. We need to start appreciating ourselves and be confident in what we do.

Having said that I think that media are searching for more political oriented stories. I want to challenge women that we do have content to share on those media. If you have something substantial to say, if you have quality as a leader there is always be a platform. Even if I don't appear on CNBC or CNN I can put my content out there and promote it and people will get to hear about it. I've seen very amazing

women who are waiting for the BBC to come and interview them, but I don't need BBC: if you have a LinkedIn profile or social media you can share whatever you want to share.”

“ If you have something substantial to say, there is always a platform to share it with the world. There are many social media platforms to promote your message

— Annette Mutuku

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Fiona Asonga: *Idah, you are mentoring women in STEM and pushing for women to study STEM. What has been your experience comparing Africa with other parts of the world?*

Idah Nganga:

“I'm going to be very candid answering this question, but I think the room is ready for it.

Unfortunately, I didn't get the greatest support in my country. I have been invited to speak on many global stages, for example the World AI Summit in Amsterdam, I've moderated sessions in forums of the World Bank, I have been invited by the government of South Korea, but in my own country I did not get a lot of support. What I like about Kenya is the innovation, the startups, it's vibrant, I must admit it. Kenya is making waves globally and people are talking about these startups, there are many girls and boys who can try out their ideas. The more support that comes with this, the better.

The problem is that professional leaders seem to find that we should talk about policies. I am not a politician; I don't know much about politics. Support in terms of policies would make a big difference to us.

Also, once you get into a leadership position, it doesn't matter whether you are a man or a woman, men need to create a space for women leaders to come in. It's not going to make you a lesser person, it's not going to take anything away from you. On the contrary, it will make you a statesman, someone who has built and paved the road for change. So, this is what I encourage: politicians, we can work together. Make sure that policies are in place.



I see a lot of women leaders on this panel, but they are not talking about the kind of hardships they encounter, teammates who do not support them. We have to fight for it. Why do I have to go to Europe to be respected as a woman leader? I can be a leader in my own country. We need to approach this very seriously, let's sit together and discuss this, see what change we can bring with the support of our senior brothers and sisters."

Fiona: What do you think the governments should do to bridge the gender digital divide? For example, by funding entrepreneurship. What often happens is that boys and girls start equally but at a certain point girls just disappear and boys keep growing.

H.E. Henriette Geiger:

"I think governments can create an enabling framework, but the real work has to be done by society, and this is taught in the family. Is the mother a role model, an empowered woman? Is she giving the right message to the girl, is she treating the boy child and the girl child equally? That's where it all starts. The government can come in when it comes to education and the educational system. It needs to be digitized and modernized and there lies a huge potential to equalize education: children - no matter where they grow up - should have equal access to education.

“Governments have a role to play, but the real work is done by society. It all starts in the family”

– H.E. Henriette Geiger

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Many girls are not sent to school because they are too far away from the school and the parents think it's too dangerous to let them walk. We also know of marriages on a young age, teenage pregnancies etc. that keep girls from attending school. It's a complex issue and the government needs to grasp that. It's very much linked with societal issues.

Kenya has the advantage of having a very young population, so if you can make these changes in the school system then within a few years you can have empowered girls. Education is the most important tool in development. Once you girls are educated they can take up the space themselves and you don't need to push them. And it's true that girls around the world are still underrepresented, but I think it has a lot to do with societal values that are being transmitted in overt and non-overt messaging. That needs to change. But the government must create an enabling environment, and that also means gender aware budgeting. Writing policies without looking at the gender dimension is disadvantaging women. So, every policy - specifically in education, but also entrepreneurship and job creation - needs to be gender sensitive.

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“Every policy - in education, entrepreneurship, job creation - needs a gender sensitive approach”

— H.E. Henriette Geiger

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In Kenya, as well as in other countries, there is gender discrimination in access to land or to credit. We need to avoid that this type of discrimination is being translated in the new digital space. So we have a chance to make a real break and start equally.

But as I said before, giving computers and internet access and modernizing schools is not sufficient: governments cannot be blamed for everything in society. Some of you have mentioned the Beijing Declaration. My colleagues have been participating in this process from the start, but sadly enough we are going backwards instead of forwards. We need to collectively make sure that with this great digital empowerment tool we are not widening the gap because there is a risk of losing everything when they don't act upon it.



In Kenya, all digital services will be digitized so women and girls need to be fully digitized. This is also something we are discussing with the government: How do you make sure that every citizen has equal access to the services, even if they don't have access to digital tools.”

Fiona Asonga: *Let's take a closer look at our African ecosystem. We have communities on this continent where – as a woman – you're not allowed to own a phone. If you want to have a phone the husband has to give permission to use it, if you want to make a call, you have to use the husband's phone. There is a cultural constraint in the family. How do policy makers address this issue? Are communities ready to adapt to cultural change?*

Sen. Miraj Abdillahi:

“I was reflecting on the book “Becoming” by the former first lady of the US, Mrs. Michelle Obama, where she wrote about her journey as a woman. She went to the former president, and she was saying: “What am I doing?”. Most of the women feel that way at some point. I think the only problem we have

right now is that we have so many empowered women that senior leaders have become old Gods who don't want to give up their place for the next generation. That is the only problem that we have.

“**“Empowering women is empowering society”**

— Sen. Miraj Abdillahi

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Africa sends a lot of its human labour to other continents because of their credibility, their mastery of the English language, so I would say it is rather bizarre to say that women in Africa still have to get permission from their husband. I don't know on which research this is based.

We have tried our best to include a gender responsive budgeting in our financial policies at the National Assembly [in Kenya]. We also think that if we elevate our people or our women from poverty, this will be the biggest success in the Senate. I have passed a legislation on care and protection of young parents so that young girls get a second chance to go back to school. In Africa we see that people are living in a cycle of poverty, not because we cannot take care of our families but because we are judged for bad things that happened to us. With that legislation we are giving a second chance to women, because I believe that empowering a woman is empowering the society.

“**“In 2028, 70% of economic decisions will be made by women”**

— Fiona Asonga (data from McKenzie)

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Fiona: We have come to the end of a very interesting and vibrant conversation. I would like to end with some food for thought: In 2022 McKenzie undertook a study in which they state that - by the year 2025 moving on to 2028 - 70% of the economic decisions in the world will be made by women. This means that there is a lot happening, women are heavily involved in economic activity. We are making positive strides that may not be very visible, and there's still a lot of work ahead. But we have been able to identify areas for policy intervention, and we continue to support women in STEM.



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