Empowerment in the digital era

By Dineo Molefe

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The expanding scope of tech-enabled learning, employment and business opportunities has the potential of changing the role of women in the workplace and in their communities.

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Today, we're seeing a number of important tech trends converging: from high-speed mobile networks, to low-cost smartphones, publicly-available e-learning tools and powerful cloud-enabled software. Suddenly, one's location becomes less important, as women in rural areas gain more opportunities to empower themselves.

With technology, we can solve the location issue: where women are excluded from business due to where they live.

Many local technology companies have developed digital learning centres and as more and more corporates see the potential of technology-led community development initiatives, we can hope for even greater impact in the future. By opening our minds to the possibilities that ICT enables – dissolving barriers, compressing geographies, and connecting people from anywhere – we begin to discover ways to address many of the challenges facing many ordinary women.

New definition of success

As a business community, it's time to reflect honestly and authentically on these challenges, which extend like taproots into the very core of our nation.

It's time to recognise that shareholder value and financial gain are narrow definitions of success. While shareholders must undoubtedly benefit from the businesses they own, so must the people building those businesses – through bursaries, empowerment schemes, proper maternity benefits, flexible working hours, and the like.

In short, we must remember that there are families and communities behind every successful business.

Inspiring the next generation of girls

Within the IT sector, being a historically a male-dominated field, we're still not seeing enough young girls choosing technology as their path into a brighter future. As an industry, we simply haven't done enough (when compared, for example, with the engineering industry) to attract girls into the field.

Women in leadership positions within the ICT industry have a responsibility to attract the next generation of female innovators, to become role models that aspiring girls can look towards and want to emulate. By interacting with women that have progressed in this industry, new horizons open-up, as our girls' creativity and vision meets with technology opportunity.

But while attracting young girls to the technology industry may not be easy, it's certainly possible. In our T-Systems ICT Academy, close to half of the over 2,000 learners that have graduated through the programme are female. An expansive majority of these are now working within the sector, rising through the ranks, and slowly changing the gender imbalance.

All across the continent, the innovations that our people are creating are designed to solve uniquely-African problems – from agriculture to healthcare, from energy to telecoms – and every other industry in between.

In many cases, our innovations reach across the entire globe, such as East Africa' mobile money networks changing the face of mobile banking. Another example emerged from the need to speedily transport life-saving blood across Rwanda's mountainous regions. This spurred the adoption of long distance drone technology, which will culminate in the world's first fully-fledged drone airport.

With women at the centre of every South African community, it is essential that they be involved – front-and-centre – in designing the technology solutions that address our society's most critical problems.

Michelle Obama asked the tech leaders at Silicon Valley: "Are you ready to have women at the table?" We should not be found asking the same question in Africa in five, 10 or 15 years. Now is the time for us to act and make sure that technology empowers women in the world of work as well as the communities we live in.

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