

'Women of Africa are our most valuable, untapped resource'

The women of Africa are our most valuable, untapped resource, said the founder and CEO of the Africa Women Innovation & Entrepreneurship Forum (AWIEF), Irene Ochem, in her opening speech at the start of the 2018 event yesterday.

 By Louise Marsland 9 Nov 2018



Irene Ochem, founder and CEO of AWIEF.

The theme this year of the AWIEF conference and expo, held at the CTICC in Cape Town 8-9 November 2018, is *Unleashing ideas: Innovation, sustainability and enterprise growth*.

The event culminates in the AWIEF Awards on the Friday night, where women entrepreneurs excelling in their fields will be awarded.

Guests in the audience included Dr Ameenah Gurib-Fakim, former and 6th President of the Republic of Mauritius; Cecilia Julin, Ambassador of Sweden to South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho and Namibia; Helen Budliger Artieda, Ambassador of Switzerland to South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho, Mauritius, Namibia and Zimbabwe; Davorka Shepherd, head of Swiss Economic Cooperation and Development; Elizabeth Thabethe, South Africa Deputy Minister of Tourism; Zanele Mbeki, former First Lady of South Africa; Michail Hailu, director of the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA); Themba Kalua, UN Women Deputy Representative to Southern Africa; and representatives from the sponsors and partners, including Invest Cape Town, City of Cape Town, Embassy of Sweden, Shell, Nedbank, ARC, Tsogo Sun, Venture Capital for Africa (VC4A), Cardova and Channel Africa. Bizcommunity.Africa is also a media partner.

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Ochem said collectively, women had the power to transform the lives of individuals, communities, nations, long as they worked together and helped to raise up other women entrepreneurs.

“Together, we can harness enough expertise and wisdom, and apply ever-expanding influence, to impact Africa dynamically.

“We know we face challenges on our continent. We know the cultural, legal, social and traditional barriers Africa’s women must overcome. We know the inadequacy of education and skills training. The scarcity of entrepreneurial support, advice and mentoring. The lack of access to funding, marketing, distribution.”

Ochem highlighted that women give back some 90% of their earnings to the health and education of their families and communities; that women handle credit better; have a 5% greater likelihood of innovativeness than men; and naturally gravitate towards community-driven initiatives.

“The women of Africa are our most valuable, untapped resource. In 2013, global accounting and advisory firm, EY, predicted that by 2028 ‘women will control close to 75% of discretionary spending worldwide’. Yet women are less likely to expand products or services because they think they can’t do it, or because they don’t have access to training, networks and support.”

This is where Ochem said that her Pan-African organisation, AWIEF, which she launched in 2015, makes difference.

“Our conference is not so much a conference but a convocation – a gathering for a special purpose.

Addressing challenges

AWIEF gathers leaders, innovative thinkers, go-getters from across the continent to release creativity and craft solutions for our challenges.

“This year, again, the event culminates with our Nedbank-sponsored *Pitch ‘n Grow* competition. Eight bold innovative women who have passed through our Growth Accelerator Programme will present their business cases to an eminent panel of judges.

AWIEF has partnered with the Southern African Network for Biosciences as Country Coordinator for the FemBioBiz II Accelerator Programme for women-owned businesses in health and agriculture biotechnology.

As a result of this programme, Nomahlubi Nazo presented her business case at the recent SA Innovation Summit. She was awarded R70 000 from the SAB Foundation and R600 000 from the South Africa Enterprise Development Agency (SEDA).

AWIEF is also collaborating with the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation as Southern African implementing partner in the #VALUE4HER programme funded by the European Union.

Explained Ochem: “We are setting up the first intelligence network, targeting women-led agribusinesses in Africa. This is a significant step in linking them with regional and global markets and improving technical and managerial skills. It will help all women in the value chain.

“At AWIEF, we constantly improve our knowledge about women entrepreneurs in Africa, so that we can develop versatile training and advocacy models – adaptable for all business and industry sectors.

“Through our conference, programmes and awards, AWIEF has caught the eye of national and international players and is fast becoming a force to be reckoned with in terms of female entrepreneurship.”

She emphasised that women entrepreneurs must pool their resources: “We must embrace digitalisation. We must harness technology to find African solutions to Africa’s problems. We must explore and implement fintech and agritech, stay abreast with the growth of big data, of blockchain technology, cryptocurrency and artificial intelligence.

“We are all here today because we are continent shakers. We are innovators who can dialogue with policy makers to urge them to facilitate women empowerment and entrepreneurship.

“Among this influential, experienced body, we have unprecedented opportunities to collaborate in order to bring life-changing solutions to our problems. Let’s dig into our own potential. Our continent is unique. Our solutions must be home grown.

“Let’s not just ‘push the envelope’... Let’s ‘tear the envelope’ wide open. So wide that innovation, ingenuity and initiative come pouring out. It is my burning desire that you will be so inspired and motivated by the conversations here that you will return to your own communities with renewed determination and fire to ignite fundamental transformation!”

ABOUT LOUISE MARSLAND

Louise Burgers (previously Marsland) is Founder/Content Director: SOURCE Content Marketing Agency. Louise is a Writer, Publisher, Editor, Content Strategist, Content/Media Trainer. She has written about consumer trends, brands, branding, media, marketing and the advertising communications industry in SA and across Africa, for over 20 years, notably, as previous Africa Editor: Bizcommunity.com; Editor: Bizcommunity Media/Marketing SA; Editor-in-Chief: AdVantage magazine; Editor: Marketing Mx magazine; Editor: Progressive Retailing magazine; Editor: BusinessBrief magazine; Editor: FMCG Files newsletter. Web: www.sourceagency.co.za.
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