

Promoting women ICT start-ups to accelerate women's economic empowerment: a case of @ibizafrika, Strathmore University

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Abstract

The technology sector has always been considered as a 'man's field' for the longest time. Only recently, women have gained recognition as formidable players in this field. Tech companies are beginning to make changes to achieve parity to the ever-widening human resource gender gap, by bringing more women on board. Despite these efforts, women remain a minority and there are many reasons as to why this is the case. One of the reasons is due to lack of support from people in the field. Today's female entrepreneurs are still up against a few major obstacles which include lack of funding, lack of networks, lack of mentors, difficulties in establishing a balance between work and family. With the above as the backdrop, a timely and unique opportunity has dawned on industry and academia to work together to complement each other in building. This paper focuses on the Standard Chartered Women's Tech incubator launched by Strathmore University-@iBizAfrica and Standard Chartered Bank.

Keywords: technology, women.

Introduction

The untapped potential of women and girls is gaining greater attention in Kenya enhance the motivation of including the need for gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls as a Sustainable Development Goal in Kenya (Develotion Planning, 2018). Women are marginalized in all spheres of life including, but not limited to, politics, business, education, culture and most recently, ICTs. In Kenya most Women are hesitant to pursue entrepreneurship fields that are related to technology due to a number of reasons.

Key contributors to this include lack of funding and lack of adequate support. Since the 1950s, women have attained more visibility within formal waged work such that they now constitute just under half of employees within developed economies overall (OECD, 2003). Over the past decade, the nascent tech industry in Kenya was propelled by entrepreneurs, such as those behind Mobile money (M-PESA), which leapfrogged traditional banking infrastructure and cultural payment habits and granted access to financial services for millions of unbanked people.

This handful of successful scale-ups made entrepreneurship to be perceived as a viable route to success for young people as well as women. Women are underrepresented in the entrepreneurial field of the Science Engineering and Technology (SET) sector which

although connected with volatile and high-risk ventures, offers considerable prospective for high returns (Smallbone, D. and Wyer, P,2006). In this Millennial age where technology is at its peak and giving opportunities for entrepreneurs to start business it is assumed that women will soon start being represented in the entrepreneurial sector of SET given there are now increasing numbers of female SET graduates (Mayer,2006) these in turn, will swell the numbers of female entrepreneurs.

There has never been a better time to be a Kenyan woman in business than now and there are many plans in place to see more women thrive in business especially since there quite a number of brilliant women entrepreneurs exploiting the opportunities that the country has to offer. To explore these arguments further, this paper considers the experience of a female SET entrepreneur project that was launched by Strathmore University-@iBizAfrica in partnership with a very prestigious organisation in Kenya. The paper aims to illustrate the degree to which the female entrepreneurs 'fit' within the project and the extent to which they benefited from it.

Objectives

1. To accelerate the growth of innovative women in the 47 counties of Kenya entering into the high-tech industry and building start-ups
2. To support the success of women led technology business in Kenya
3. To provide financial advisory and banking services to women in Kenya

Project Overview

Strathmore University -@iBizAfrica and the partner launched the project in the year 2017. The project was envisioned to setup one of Africa's leading women tech accelerator, aligning with calls for more diversity in tech and for more opportunities for women to develop entrepreneurial and leadership expertise. The project borrowed from some of the best practices of top accelerators in the world and local experience to provide Africa's most competitive and attractive start-ups acceleration program. Right from a selection criterion that only allowed the best talent and promising ideas, to an incubation program that enabled one to discover, validate, build and grow tech start-ups with women founders. Successful teams from the incubation phase proceeded to the last stage acceleration-where they got seed funding as well as the combined support to graduate from the program and linkages with networks to grow and scale the business. The project was able to support women entrepreneurs in the technology sector and provide them with guidance, expertise, and resources that they needed to grow into successful ventures.

Methodology

To investigate this issue further, evidence is presented from an in-depth case study analysis of the project execution plan. Strathmore University-@iBizAfrica and Standard Chartered Bank partnered to create the Standard Chartered Women in Tech Incubator.

An entrepreneurship program which aims to address some of Kenya’s Sustainability Development Goals and one that aims to support female-led entrepreneurial teams by providing them with training, mentorship and seed funding. The program had an open call for participation which had a final selection of the top 10 contestants with the most compelling ideas.

The 10 selected contestants went through a 12-week incubation period at the end of which five final winners were to be chosen. The winners were to be awarded \$10,000 seed funding to invest in their business. The program targeted Kenyan start-up companies which were women –led and had 2-3 people leveraging on technology as a key driver of innovation in business.

The project execution plan is summarized below.

Table 1: Project Execution Plan

Project Phase	Description	Key Activities
Launch (1 Day)	A high level breakfast event targeting at least 100 participants was held at the University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breakfast/cocktail • Program Launch (presentations and Keynote) • Media and PR for outreach and publicity
Call for Applications (2 months)	An annual call for applications. A two-month period where applications to the program were received.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing (sensitization meetups, online and mainstream advertising) to receive minimum of 150 applications • Online shortlisting of up to 60 applications for face-to-face interviews • Selection-15 to 20 teams for incubation • Scouting and recruitment of shortlisting and selection personnel • Meals and refreshments for panellists on selection day
Incubation (3 months)	Selected teams received training, coaching and mentoring support as well as access to office space, internet and technology support services to develop prototype to MVP, undertake customer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training • Mentoring • Coaching • Product Development Support

	discovery and validation, learn how to pitch, develop and test a business model for the product/Service.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accounting, legal and IP Support • Participants meals and maintenance allowance • Technical support
Incubation Demo Day (1 day)	Incubated teams pitched and show cased their solutions for selection to join the accelerator stage.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentations and demos • Judging and selection of teams to join the acceleration phase. • Meals and refreshments. • Appreciation for judges.
Graduation (1 day)	Successful teams from the program graduated in style in a graduation ceremony attended by a select invite only investors, corporate leaders and top Standard Chartered leadership. Graduated teams were to be inducted into the Alumni Network.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dinner • Award Ceremony • Induction into alumni network
Alumni Network	The alumni network comprised of a prestigious club of successful graduates of the acceleration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structure and launch Alumni Network • Alumni events and activities • Alumni Awards
Administration (Annual)	Day to-day administration and management of the program by @iBizAfrica, Strathmore University.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project Management and administration.

Project Management Methodology

Project planning and management are core functions throughout a projects life cycle that ensure proper management of resources and risks. Strathmore University-@iBizAfrica, was responsible for the overall project management in consultation with the partner. Strathmore University-@iBizAfrica. The project adhered to the following timeline.

Table 2: Project Execution Plan

Project Phase/Month	1	2	3	4	5	6
Launch						
Call for Applications						
Selection and Shortlisting						
Incubation						
Graduation						
Alumni Network						

Developments

Building knowledge on women business is very important in Strathmore University - @iBizAfrica especially through business incubation. It has proven to be a tool to promote economic development even though there is little knowledge about women business incubation despite the dynamism women entrepreneurs. Strathmore University has been able to champion some of the leading women entrepreneurs in the sector of SET in Kenya and they include the following:

- *Hilda Moraa* – The co-founder of MyOrder Africa and the CEO of Weza Tele, a mobile solution firm in the supply chain, distribution and financial services in the emerging markets. In May, AFB bought the start-up Weza Tele Ltd, in a deal whose value in stock and cash is estimated to be about Sh100 million (Gisesa, 2015).
- *Wangechi-Mwangi* – A lady who won the Social Impact Award, for leveraging her business to improve her community and the world at-large. The idea for Valuraha was created to open up access to financing, financial education and trading competence in Kenya and Africa using its virtual trading platform. Mwangi is a student at Strathmore University in Nairobi and qualified for the awards by winning the East African chapter organised by iBizAfrica, an incubation centre home to Valuraha (Student Spotlight,2015).
- *Diana Martha* – a Co-founder of Purpink on-line gift-shop that targets high-end clients and corporate bodies with customised gifts. The two classmates started a small on-line gift-shop selling simple and low-cost jewellery to fellow students with a capital of Sh500. Today, the business has grown and diversified into a profitable venture making up to Sh1 million per month in profit (Business Daily,2013).

Results

The results of the project included the following:

- a mentorship network of over 100 women was formed
- The project led to Women entrepreneurship themed events that would encourage other female entrepreneurs
- The Shortlisted start-ups were able to get financing solutions i.e. trained on financial management, risk management and get access to seed funding
- The participants of the project were able to access advisory networks to accelerate their growth of women-led businesses

Business Benefits

The project managed to address sustainable development goals of Kenya in the following ways:

Table 3: How project addressed SDG's Goals of Kenya

Goal	Description of the Goal	How project addressed it
1	End poverty in all its forms everywhere	The project provided all the applicants even those who did not make it to the finalists with networks and mentors who they could follow up with so that they may build their start-ups and have enough funds to provide employment to other people
2	End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture	Even though the project focused on Women Led start-ups that were using Technology. Companies which had a focus on agritech were encouraged to apply and they were provided with mentorship and coaching.
4	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all	The shortlisted companies were provided with taught by industry experts from blue chip Organisations and they were provided with resources which they could pass on to their teams. The shortlisted companies formed an alumni network that was to provide mentorship to other start-ups
5	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls	The project focused on empowering women to pursue entrepreneurship and ensured that applicants had a Women who led the start-up

8	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all	The project aimed to accelerate the start-ups so that they could be able to grow and have enough resources to employ other Kenyans in their companies.
10	Reduce inequality within and among counties	The project was advertised and marketed to all 47 counties of Kenya to ensure that several Women applied to the program and also ensure that they applied the skills they learnt in their counties.

The selected applicants for the program were able to benefit from the project in the following ways:

- Office space-The selected applicants were provided office space at the Ultra-Modern facilities of Strathmore University
- Funding and Investment Opportunities-The selected applicants were able to access funding from selected investors and were trained and coached on investment opportunities
- Access to Training, Mentorship and Coaching-the selected participants were trained with qualified industry specialist and they were each provided with Female mentors who have made it in the field of technology
- Networking Opportunities-The selected applicants were able to interact with other start-ups in the University and other applicants who had been shortlisted in the project

Conclusions

Universities in Kenya especially Strathmore University have introduced a range of initiatives designed to encourage more women to start Business'. It is recognised that innovative entrepreneurial ventures within the Technology sector have considerable potential to create both wealth and new employment. Accordingly, the business incubator at Strathmore University-@iBizAfrica offers such ventures ready access to business infrastructure, professional support and advice whilst enabling them to develop and share networks and gain credibility with potential stakeholders. Current programmes and initiatives to encourage women to engage with business ownership may eventually increase female entrepreneurial activity yet, this of itself will not necessarily spill over into high growth technology enterprises given the limited understanding of the tensions between sector culture and the reality of women's lives.

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