

AFRICA



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WOMEN POWERING THE GREEN INDUSTRIAL SHIFT

FROM CLEAN MANUFACTURING TO CLIMATE TECH

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PEOPLE & COMMUNITIES

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

As we mark this edition of Africa Sustainability Magazine alongside International Women's Day, one truth stands out with renewed clarity: Africa's green rebuild will not happen at scale without the leadership, capital, and ingenuity of women.

Issue VI is therefore both intentional and symbolic. Every contributor featured in these pages is a woman, not by design alone, but by the depth of expertise and insight they bring to the continent's most pressing sustainability conversations. From clean industry and circular economies to digital opportunity and the future of work, their perspectives reflect a reality that is increasingly undeniable: women are not peripheral to Africa's transition; they are central to it.

Yet progress remains uneven. According to the United Nations, at the current pace, full gender equality under SDG 5 will not be achieved until well into the next century. Women continue to face structural barriers in access to capital, land, digital tools, and leadership pipelines, even as evidence consistently shows that gender-inclusive economies deliver stronger, more resilient growth outcomes. In climate-vulnerable regions such as Africa, the stakes are even higher. When women have equal access to productive resources, farm yields can rise by up to 30%, and food insecurity declines measurably. When women lead enterprises and investment decisions, capital tends to flow more inclusively and with stronger community spillovers.

This is the essence of what we frame in this issue. If Africa is serious about building a resilient, competitive, and inclusive green economy, the continent must move beyond rhetorical commitments. We must deliberately give, in the form of capital, capability, policy support, and platforms to unlock the full economic and social returns that women's leadership can generate.

Across these pages, you will encounter women building climate-smart industries, sustaining informal circular systems, unlocking digital pathways for entrepreneurs, and challenging how we think about jobs, growth, and resilience. Together, their work points to a future that is not only greener, but more inclusive and economically grounded.

As always, we are grateful to our partners, particularly Sterling Bank, for supporting this edition and for recognising the importance of credible sustainability storytelling at a time when Africa's transition narrative is still being written. ■



Labake Ajiboye-Richard

Editor-in-Chief, Africa Sustainability Magazine





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ABU
SUSTAIN



Quarterly Brief

AfDB and Air Côte d'Ivoire Advance Africa's Aviation Transformation

أسبوع أبوظبي DHABI ABILITY WEEK 2026



▶ **FAITH OSAMAYE**
Research Associate,
AR Initiative

Africa's aviation sector remains structurally constrained

despite its strategic importance to mobility, trade, and regional integration. The continent accounts for just 2–3% of global air traffic, even as demand continues to rise. Fleet modernisation remains a persistent challenge: although Africa holds around 6% of the world's commercial aircraft, its fleets are among the oldest globally, averaging 17–19 years. While seat capacity among major carriers is expanding, with a 7–8% year-on-year

increase among major carriers, limited intra-African connectivity persists, reinforced by long-standing infrastructure bottlenecks.

Despite these challenges, Africa's commercial aircraft fleet is set to more than double by 2044, from 744 to 1,680 planes, driven by 6% annual passenger growth. Boeing's 2025 Commercial Market Outlook forecasts 1,205 new deliveries, with 70% single-aisle jets for regional, domestic, and high-frequency intra-African routes.

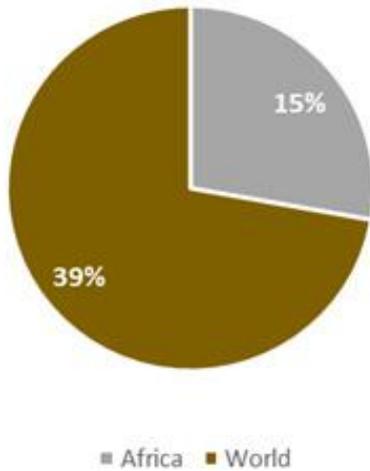
While this represents significant fleet growth, it is unevenly distributed across carriers and routes, with most

domestic capacity concentrated in markets like South Africa, Nigeria, and Ethiopia. For example, South Africa remains the largest domestic market in Africa, with 1.6 million seats this month (a 16.9% increase) compared with last year. Even with more aircraft in these countries, most of Africa still faces limited air connectivity.

These constraints are closely linked to chronic under-investment in airport infrastructure. Globally, airports reinvest an average of 39% of their revenue into infrastructure, yet in Africa this figure stands at just 15%, one of the lowest levels worldwide. This under-invest-

ment limits airport expansion, modernisation, and operational efficiency, ultimately constraining connectivity, airline competitiveness, and the sector's ability to support regional trade and integration. Without addressing this gap, fleet growth alone cannot unlock the full potential of African aviation.

Reinvestment of Airport Revenue in Africa and Globally (%)



Human capital challenges further compound these structural issues as women account for only about 4.1% of pilots in Africa, with even lower representation among aircraft maintenance engineers and technicians.

In addition, the sector faces widespread skills shortages across technical and operational roles, slowing growth and underscoring the need for targeted training, capacity building, and more inclusive pathways into aviation careers.

To overcome these structural challenges, the African Development Bank Group (AfDB) and Air Côte d'Ivoire (ACDI) have entered into a strategic cooperation framework at a pivotal time for the continent's aviation industry. The Letter of Intent, signed in Abidjan, aims to expand access to aircraft financing, strengthen technical capacity, and advance sustainability initiatives, responding directly to Africa's ageing fleets, infrastructure deficits, and skills gaps.

The partnership prioritises practical solutions, including innovative financing for affordable aircraft acquisition and collaboration on sustainability initiatives such as Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF). In parallel, it creates pathways for women to participate more



fully across the aviation value chain by supporting training, technical skills development, and leadership opportunities in areas where they remain underrepresented.

Building on a partnership that dates back to 2019, AfDB and Air Côte d'Ivoire are now moving from strategy to implementation, with a focus on fleet expansion, aviation training, and airport modernisation.

Through AfDB's Integrated Aviation Transformation Program (IATP), these efforts are being scaled through a coordinated focus on three pillars: strength-

ening regulation, safety, sustainability, and capacity-building; modernising airports, air navigation systems, and logistics infrastructure; and improving airline access to affordable aircraft financing and fleet renewal. Together, these interventions reinforce a more competitive, inclusive, and resilient aviation ecosystem.

Nigeria and UAE Sign Strategic Economic Partnership to Boost Trade, Investment, and Sustainable Growth

Nigeria and the United Arab Emirates



have reached a new Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), opening the door to closer trade ties, more investment, and deeper cooperation across sectors such as renewable energy, infrastructure, logistics, digital trade, and aviation. The deal was agreed during the 2026 Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week, with President Bola Tinubu and UAE President Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan present.

The agreement goes beyond trade. It makes it easier for Nigerian businesses to set up in the UAE and allows busi-

ness visitors, managers, specialists, and company staff to move between both countries for longer periods. The aim is to attract more foreign investment, improve logistics and connectivity, and create better jobs for Nigeria's young and growing workforce. Early signs of investor confidence are already visible, with institutions such as First Abu Dhabi Bank and Sky Capital backing projects like the Lagos–Calabar Coastal Road.

Trade between both countries is still relatively small, but the agreement

is designed to change that. Nigeria's exports to the UAE were valued at \$148.33 million in 2024, according to the United Nations COMTRADE database. Under CEPA, tariffs will be removed immediately on more than 7,000 Nigerian products, while duties on other goods will be phased out over the next three to five years. This lowers costs for exporters and makes Nigerian agricultural, industrial, and manufactured goods more competitive in the UAE market, especially for small and medium-sized businesses.

Women stand to gain directly from this shift. Women make up 39.17% of registered exporters in Nigeria (12,095 out of 30,876). Trade is also one of the biggest sources of paid work for women in urban areas, accounting for about 47% of female wage employment, compared with 20.3% for men. With lower tariffs and fewer barriers, women-led businesses can ship more goods, explore new product lines, and enter the UAE market with fewer hurdles.

The agreement also fits into Nigeria's push for greener growth. President Tinubu has outlined plans to raise up to \$30 billion a year for climate and green industrial projects. This includes a \$500 million distributed renewable energy fund backed by the Nigeria Sovereign Investment Authority and a \$750 million World Bank programme expected to improve electricity access for more than 17.5 million people. CEPA supports these efforts by making Nigeria more attractive to investors looking for long-term, sustainable opportunities.

Services are another big part of the deal. CEPA opens up trade across 10 service sectors, including transport, finance, construction, communications, tourism, and digital services. This creates new space for women and young professionals to move into higher-value work, from digital trade to sustainable infrastructure.

At a broader level, closer ties with the UAE also strengthen Nigeria's position as a gateway to the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and its 1.4 billion-person market. With ongoing reforms, CEPA gives Nigeria a practical route toward steady, inclusive growth that allows businesses, investors, women, and young people to play a real role in shaping the country's economic future.

WIOCC Secures \$65 Million to Expand Africa's Digital Infrastructure and Connectivity

WIOCC Group, one of Africa's leading open-access digital infrastructure providers, has raised an additional USD \$65 million in debt financing through a sustainability-linked facility. The funding was arranged by IFC, Proparco, Emerging Africa Infrastructure Fund (EAAIF), Asia Infrastructure Fund, and Ninety-One, and will support the expansion of connectivity capacity and digital infrastructure across the continent.

The investment comes at a time when Africa's digital backbone is still struggling to keep up with demand. Between 2022 and 2023, only 36–38% of Africans had access to broadband internet, far below the 68% global average, leaving most of the population offline.

Across sub-Saharan Africa, 76% of men have mobile internet access, compared with 63% of women, showing how weak digital infrastructure deepens existing inequalities.

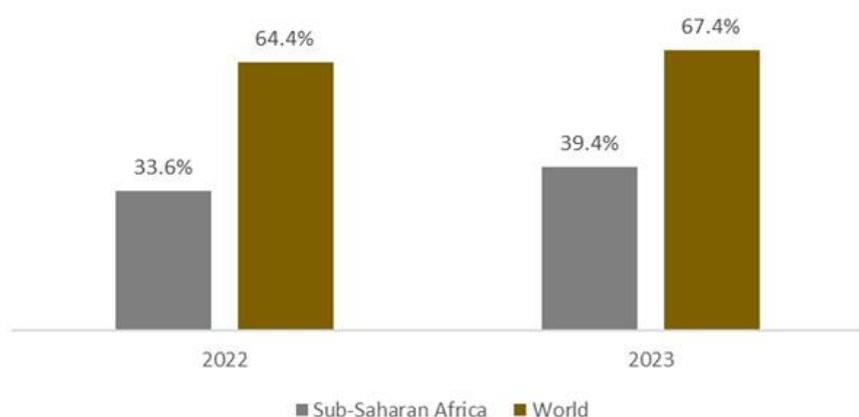
These figures underscore the urgent need for the rapid expansion of open, reliable, and affordable digital networks, a gap that WIOCC's new financing is designed to address. The company says the facility will allow it to scale more quickly and respond directly to Africa's connectivity and data-capacity gaps. According to Samuel Ndungu, CFO of WIOCC Group, the funding reflects continued confidence from development finance partners and supports WIOCC's long-term growth strategy, while reinforcing its commitment to digital inclusion and Africa's digital economy.

Chris Wood, CEO of WIOCC, added that the financing strengthens the company's ability to extend its data-centre footprint, improve network resilience, and expand open-access infrastructure across borders, making it easier for more people, especially women and underserved communities, to take part in the digital economy.

IFC's Sarvesh Suri noted that the blend of USD and ZAR financing helps WIOCC manage currency risk while speeding up investment in resilient, open-access networks that support job creation and economic growth. Proparco's Françoise Lombard highlighted WIOCC's role in strengthening fibre, submarine cable, and data-centre networks that carry a significant share of Africa's internet traffic, while Puleng Pitso of Ninety-One described digital connectivity as one of the strongest drivers of growth for entrepreneurs, small businesses, and industries across the continent.

Since launching in 2008, WIOCC Group has invested over USD \$750 million in digital infrastructure, connecting open-access data centres through high-capacity networks and improving the cost, reliability, and reach of communications across Africa. With this latest financing, the company is building a more resilient, inclusive, and future-ready digital ecosystem, giving both women and men the infrastructure they need to participate fully in Africa's digital economy ■

Internet Usage in Africa and the World



Data infrastructure remains especially thin. Africa has about 223 operational data centres across 38 countries, representing less than 0.02% of the world's more than 11,800 data centres. Capacity is also unevenly distributed, with South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria host-

ing about 41% of Africa's total; South Africa alone accounts for roughly 56%, followed by Kenya (19%) and Nigeria (17%). These gaps affect people differently, and women are hit hardest. In 2024, 43% of men in Africa used the internet, compared with only 31% of women.



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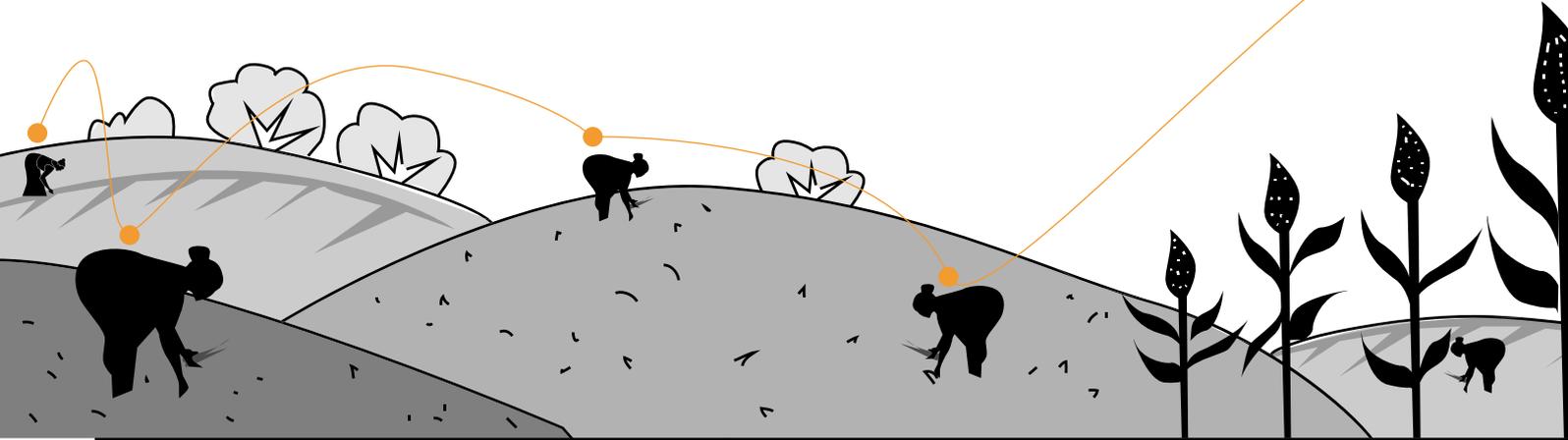
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DATA

THE INVISIBLE
FORCE OF
AFRICA'S FIELDS

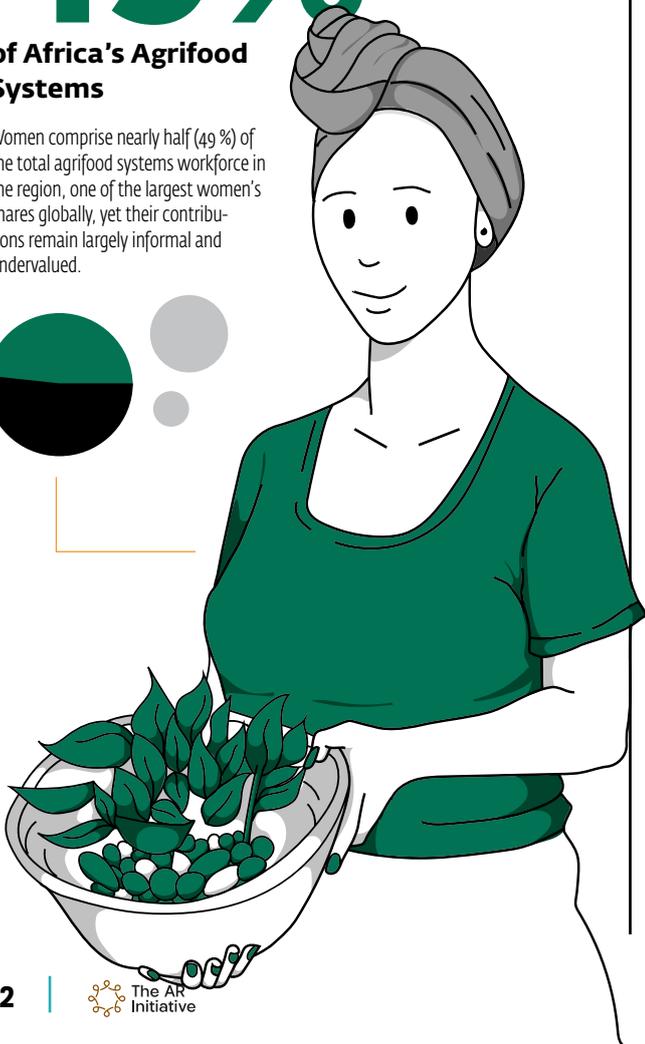
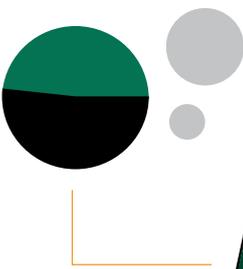


Women Power

49%

of Africa's Agrifood Systems

Women comprise nearly half (49%) of the total agrifood systems workforce in the region, one of the largest women's shares globally, yet their contributions remain largely informal and undervalued.



OVER 90%

of women's agrifood work is informal

More than 90% of women employed in agrifood systems work in the informal sector, where jobs are often precarious, low-paid, and lack social protection.



76% of working women in sub-Saharan Africa are employed in agrifood systems

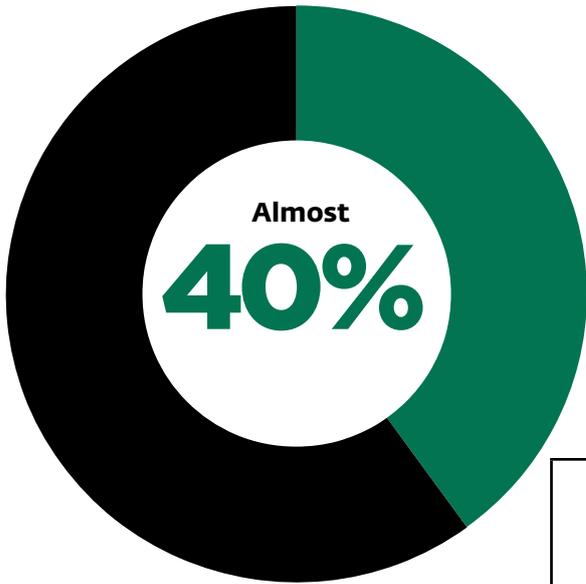
In 2022, about three in four (76 %) of all employed women in sub-Saharan Africa worked within agrifood systems, encompassing farming, processing, distribution, and related food activities, highlighting the sector's central role in women's economic lives.



64% of the population faces food insecurity

of the population faces food insecurity

In 2024, about 64 % of people in sub-Saharan Africa experienced moderate or severe food insecurity, with 11.2 million more women than men affected, underscoring how women's vulnerability intersects with broader food system challenges.



of women aged 15-49 are anaemic

In sub-Saharan Africa, women dominate participation in agrifood systems, with approximately 76% of working women employed in the sector and nearly half (49%) of the agrifood workforce made up of women. Despite their pivotal role, close to 40% of women of reproductive age in agrifood communities across Sub-Saharan Africa are anaemic, signalling persistent nutrition insecurity and associated health burdens.



29%

Growth in Women's Off-Farm Employment Across Africa

Women's involvement in agrifood off-farm segments, such as food processing, packaging, distribution, and retail, increased from 21 % in 2005 to 29 % in 2022, showing expanding roles beyond farm fields.



Redefining Sustainable Development:

Why Africa's Future Depends on **Financing Women**



Africa has one of the highest rates of female entrepreneurship globally, with about 24% of adult women engaged in entrepreneurial activity and women comprising 58% of the non-agricultural self-employed population in sub-Saharan Africa. Yet structural barriers persist: only 37% of women in the region have a bank account, compared with 48% of men.

Discussions on sustainable development often emphasise frameworks, policies, and long-term planning, particularly how programmes are designed to persist over time. However, another useful way to view sustainability is through the lens of economic participation, and who is positioned to carry development forward in practice. Across Africa, experience has shown that development outcomes are more likely to endure when women are treated as active economic participants rather than peripheral beneficiaries. In this sense, investing in women then becomes a development agenda as identified through SDG 5, which focuses on achieving gender equality.

The scale of the gender financing gap is substantial: African women entrepreneurs face an estimated ₦58.8 trillion (\$42 billion) financing gap compared to men, largely due to misperceptions about creditworthiness and collateral requirements. Addressing this gap is not just a matter of fairness; it is a strategic economic imperative. The World Bank estimates that closing the gender gap in Africa could add an estimated \$2.5 trillion to the continent's GDP by 2025. This underscores the untapped potential of women's economic participation, whose impact compounds across education, health, and community well-being.

Targeted initiatives designed around women's unique circumstances are making a difference. For instance, Sterling Bank's OneWoman proposition combines access to tailored financial products with capacity building and community networks, through their 'Triple C' Framework (Capital, Capacity, Community). This model was built with the understanding that finance alone rarely moves the needle unless coupled with skills and social support.

Today, OneWoman is one of Nigeria's leading gender-focused banking propositions, combining commercial performance with measurable social impact. The initiative has supported over 50,000 women across sectors, and has driven

over ₦16 billion in financing to women-led businesses in 2025 alone. Partnerships such as Sterling's collaboration with the International Finance Corporation, the Development Bank of Nigeria, as well as the Bank of Industry, to provide targeted access to finance for women-owned and women-led SMEs and to offer business education to thousands of women entrepreneurs, exemplify how financial institutions can design interventions that speak to women's broader entrepreneurial realities.

This logic is also mirrored internally in how Sterling Bank structures opportunities for women within its workforce. Through flexible work policies, inclusive parental leave, and the Momship programme, the bank recognises that sustainable economic participation depends on systems designed around women's lived realities.

The Momship programme specifically supports women re-entering the workforce after career breaks related to caregiving, providing flexible, structured pathways back into professional roles. By prioritising work arrangements that accommodate the demands of motherhood while maintaining opportunities for career progression and skill utilisation, the initiative reflects a broader understanding that retaining women in the economy also requires organisational systems that recognise life transitions without penalising long-term participation.

The experience of Sterling Bank's women-focused initiatives aligns with broader evidence that investing in women yields multiplier effects for households and communities. Women often reinvest a larger share of resources into strengthening social and economic systems in ways that are difficult to achieve through capital alone. As such, investing in women remains a practical route to achieving sustainable development.

As Africa works to build systems that endure beyond external interventions, empowering women with targeted finance, skills training, and supportive networks will be central to transforming development goals into long-term, lived realities. Taken together, these efforts address not just the symptom of limited access to resources, but the structural barriers that constrain women's economic potential ■

SUSTAINABILITY OUTLOOK 2026



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Why 2026 Marks a Turning Point for Global Sustainability

► **FAIZAT SALAWU**
Consultant (Regulatory, Sustainability & Projects) Avant-Garde Innovation and Technology Services Limited

In 2024, global temperatures breached 1.55°C above pre-industrial levels for the first time. At the same time,

investors channelled more than US\$100 billion through carbon pricing mechanisms, while regulators across major economies began tightening sustainability disclosure rules. These signals point to one conclusion: sustainability has entered its era of delivery.

For much of the past decade, sustainability was treated as a box-ticking exercise. Companies published glossy ESG reports, governments announced ambitious climate targets, and accountability remained limited. In 2026, that dynamic changes. Sustainability is moving decisively from promises to proof. What organisations do, and can demonstrate, will matter far more than what they say.

Across regulation, finance, energy, and supply chains, certain interlinked trends are reshaping how sustainability is governed and rewarded. Together, they mark a turning point for Africa and the global economy.

● Regulation Takes the Lead

The most consequential shift in 2026 is regulatory. Voluntary ESG reporting is giving way to mandatory disclosure regimes with defined metrics, third-party assurance, and penalties for non-compliance. In the United States, California's SB 253 requires large companies operating in the state to disclose Scope 1 and 2 emissions from 2026, with Scope 3 emissions to follow in 2027. Because global supply chains do not stop at borders, these rules ripple outward, affecting suppliers and subsidiaries worldwide.

Nigeria is not exempt. The Securities and Exchange Commission's Sustainable Financial Principles and the Financial Reporting Council's 2024 roadmap establish mandatory sustainability reporting for public interest entities by 2028. While these deadlines may seem distant, Nigerian firms are already under pres-

sure from multinational partners and international financiers to meet global reporting standards years ahead of local enforcement.

● The Energy Transition Accelerates

By 2026, renewable energy is projected to overtake coal as the world's leading source of electricity, driven by falling costs and strong investor demand. Wind and solar are expected to account for more than 90% of new power generation, pushing renewables to roughly 36% of global electricity supply.

For Africa, this shift has both environmental and economic effects. Falling renewable costs are reshaping industrial competitiveness, attracting energy-intensive manufacturing and reframing climate compliance as an advantage rather than a constraint.

● Adaptation Becomes a Business Imperative

Climate impacts are accelerating faster than mitigation efforts. Floods, heatwaves, and storms are intensifying, particularly in developing economies. By 2035, adaptation needs in these countries are projected to exceed US\$300 billion annually, more than twelve times current finance flows. As a result, adaptation finance is gaining prominence, targeting resilient infrastructure, water systems, and early-warning mechanisms. In Nigeria, initiatives such as Lagos State's Climate Investment Opportunities Diagnostic illustrate how resilience projects can attract capital while delivering social and economic returns.

● Circularity, Technology, and Nature Take Centre Stage

The circular economy is moving from the margins to the mainstream, driven by waste regulations, extended producer responsibility, and rapid technological innovation. Globally, the sector is projected to reach USD 220.4.39 billion by 2034, expanding at a 13.20% CAGR from 2025 to 2034. Nigerian industries, from FMCG to construction, are beginning to adopt reuse, recycling, and waste-to-value models at scale.

Technology underpins this shift. Digital tools now enable real-time tracking of emissions, energy use, and supply-chain risks, closing long-standing gaps in data and enforcement. At the same time, nature-based solutions are gaining strategic importance as biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation are increasingly recognised as financial risks. COP30 reinforced this trend, mobilising billions for forests, oceans, and community-led conservation.

● Supply Chains and Carbon Markets Redefine Risk

Supply chains have become the front line of sustainability risk. Scope 3 emissions, labour practices, and land-use impacts are attracting intensified regulatory and investor attention. For Nigerian exporters and SMEs, traceability and transparency are now essential for market access.

Carbon markets add another layer. Following the finalisation of Article 6 of the Paris Agreement, demand is shifting toward high-integrity, verifiable credits. Nigeria's National Carbon Market Framework aims to unlock up to US\$3 billion annually by 2030, offering new revenue streams, but only if governance and monitoring systems deliver credibility. ■

The Defining Question of 2026

The defining feature of sustainability in 2026 is execution. Organisations that invest early in credible systems, data, and governance will gain access to capital, markets, and trust. Those who do not will find sustainability a competitive fault line. The question for Africa's businesses and policymakers has moved from whether sustainability matters to whether they are prepared to prove it.

For the full 2026 Sustainability Outlook and deeper analysis of the trends discussed here, please visit Avant-Garde Innovation and Technology Services Limited's website to access and download the full report: <https://avante-garde.netlify.app/>

WOMEN POWERING THE GREEN INDUSTRIAL SHIFT

FROM CLEAN MANUFACTURING
TO CLIMATE TECH

▶ TORINMO SALAU
Profile

As the world races to decarbonise everything from

steel production to semiconductor manufacturing, the clean energy sector is also grappling with a leadership gap that could affect its own success. A report by the International Renewable Energy Agency shows that women represent just 32% of the clean energy workforce globally and hold fewer than 15% of executive positions in climate tech startups.

We cannot build the future using an old blueprint for who gets to lead it when it has been proven that companies with gender-diverse teams are 45% more likely to improve their environmental performance and 70% more likely to capture new markets.

While there is ample space for increased participation, women are already showing their mettle in clean energy management. Below is a list of women leading the green industrial shift. ■



Dr Jennifer Holmgren
(LanzaTech)

Dr Jennifer Holmgren is the CEO of LanzaTech, a carbon recycling company. LanzaTech is leading the transformation of waste carbon into sustainable materials and fuel, turning industrial emissions into usable products. LanzaTech develops a range of platform chemicals and fuels, including the world's first alternative jet fuel produced from industrial waste gases. As a result of her central role in developing this alternative jet fuel, she is also a Director and the Chair of the LanzaJet Board. Dr Jennifer is the co-author of 50 U.S. patents and more than 30 scientific publications.



Professor Veena Sahajwalla

Professor Veena Sahajwalla is an internationally recognised materials scientist, engineer, and inventor who is transforming the field of recycling science. She is best known for pioneering high-temperature processes that convert waste into a new generation of sustainable "green materials." In 2018, Veena launched the world's first e-waste microfactory, followed by the groundbreaking plastics microfactory in 2019. As Founding Director of the Centre for Sustainable Materials Research and Technology (SMaRT) at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, she leads the development of innovative materials and products made entirely or primarily from waste.



Rekik Bekele
(Green Scene Energy)

Rekik Bekele is the CEO of Green Scene Energy, a renewable energy company that provides affordable, high-quality solar energy products and services to off-grid rural areas of Ethiopia. The company supplies stand-alone solar technologies for households, productive businesses, and community centres, and also delivers mini-grid installation services for government and development partners. Since 2010, Rekik has worked extensively on renewable-energy and energy-efficiency programmes within the private sector. Green Scene Energy has provided solar home lighting solutions to over 9000 households.



Dr Lisa Dyson
(Air Protein)

Dr Jennifer Holmgren is the CEO of LanzaTech, a carbon recycling company. LanzaTech is leading the transformation of waste carbon into sustainable materials and fuel, turning industrial emissions into usable products. LanzaTech develops a range of platform chemicals and fuels, including the world's first alternative jet fuel produced from industrial waste gases. As a result of her central role in developing this alternative jet fuel, she is also a Director and the Chair of the LanzaJet Board. Dr Jennifer is the co-author of 50 U.S. patents and more than 30 scientific publications.



Maryanne Gichanga
(Agritech Analytics)

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From Informal to Indispensable: How Women Keep Nigeria's Recycling Economy Alive

Sunmibola
Fatimah Quadri
Writer

Under the thin shade of a tree in Surulere, Ngozi* wipes sweat from her face as she forces empty plastic bottles into a nylon sack already stretched to its limit. Cars speed past. The smell of refuse hangs in the air. Her hands do not stop moving.

"This is how I survive," she says softly. "It's not much, but it helps." Four full bags earn her ₦500(\$0.37).

What many dismiss as scavenging is, in reality, labour. And Ngozi is part of a largely invisible workforce of women quietly holding Nigeria's recycling economy together.

An Unseen Backbone

Rising food prices and transport costs pushed Ngozi into waste picking, turning a temporary fix into a daily routine. In the morning, she cleans offices, and in the afternoon, when the unforgiving Lagos sun is at its height, she combs bins and street corners for plastic bottles before waste trucks arrive. By evening, Ngozi collects her ₦500 and heads home.

Across Lagos, Abuja, Ibadan, and Port Harcourt, thousands of women who are cleaners, market workers, and informal traders collect plastic bottles, sachet water, nylon, and aluminium cans. They sell to intermediaries, who sell to recyclers. Without contracts or protection, these women reduce waste, unclog drainage systems, and keep recyclable materials in circulation. They are environmental workers, even if the system fails to recognise them as such.









A Country Struggling with Waste

Nigeria generates an estimated 32 million tonnes of solid waste annually, according to the World Bank, yet less than a third is properly collected.¹ Plastic waste, in particular, clogs waterways, worsens flooding, and breaks down into microplastics that contaminate food and water.²

Every bottle Ngozi retrieves is one less that blocks a gutter or floats into a lagoon.

In 2024, Nigeria launched a Circular Economy Roadmap, supported by the EU SWITCH to Green Facility, to move away from the “take–use–dump” model³. While the policy is forward-looking, women at the base of the recycling chain remain excluded from its benefits.

They absorb the risk, earn the least, and remain informal.

Shrinking Returns, Growing Competition

“When I started, three bags gave me ₦500,” Ngozi explains. “Now it’s four.” In Abuja, Letitia*, an industrial cleaner and mother of three, supplements her income by collecting aluminium cans from buildings she cleans. “If business is good, I make up to ₦30,000,” she says. “If not, maybe ₦2,000.”

But competition is increasing. Bins are locked. Waste now has value, and access is tightening.

The Cost of Essential Work

Without gloves, boots, or masks, women face cuts, infections, and other long-term health risks. Many endure stigma, harassment, and exhaustion, balancing this work with caregiving responsibilities.⁴

According to the Waste Pickers Association of Nigeria, at least 2,500 women are formally registered, though many more operate outside any structure.⁵ Experts argue that recognising waste pickers as part of the formal waste-management ecosystem is essential. That recognition must come with protection, fair pricing, health support, and inclusion in urban planning.⁶

To many, the bottles she gathers are trash, but to Nigeria’s recycling economy, they and the women who collect them are indispensable ■

8 WOMEN, 8 QUESTIONS: VOICES VOICES SHAPING AFRICA'S SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Across Africa, women are not waiting to be included in the sustainability transition, they are actively shaping it. From fashion and finance to policy and technology, a new generation of female leaders is redefining what climate action, economic resilience, and inclusive growth look like on the continent. In this special ASM quickfire, eight women working at the

intersection of sustainability, innovation, and development share candid reflections on the myths that persist, the opportunities ahead, and what must change for Africa's green future to be more equitable and effective. Their insights are a reminder that the continent's transition will not be driven by capital and technology alone, but by the people, and perspectives guiding them.

1. Where is climate finance falling short for African women, and what needs to change?

Climate finance falls short for African women because it underestimates proximity. Women bear a greater share of climate vulnerability, yet female founders receive barely 2-3% of venture funding in Africa. That disconnect is costly. Women entrepreneurs in climate-sensitive sectors build solutions rooted in lived experience, often more resilient, adaptive, and community-anchored than externally designed models. Backing them is not philanthropy; it is strategic capital allocation. What needs to change is mandate design: smaller tickets, flexible risk frameworks, and intentional deployment through local managers. Climate resilience in Africa will scale faster when women are funded as builders, not beneficiaries.

July Androus-Seemuth

Managing Partner, Jambaar Capital

2. Where do you see the biggest opportunity for women in Africa's green economy?

From a feminist analysis of climate change, its impacts affect men and women differently, reinforcing existing gender inequalities. The global transition to a green economy, including in sub-Saharan Africa, is generating new jobs, yet women face structural barriers to accessing these opportunities. Positioned at the centre of implementation, women's participation must be accelerated by levelling the playing field through green finance and economic instruments. Opportunities exist in underrepresented sectors such as transportation, construction, renewable energy, and green finance. The African Development Bank Group (2023) estimates Africa's gender finance gap at \$42 billion, with minimal gender-responsive green finance. Prioritising women's access and reforming biased green finance systems is essential.

Mudrakat Alabi Mcfoy

Sustainability Consultant, Green Sage Africa

3. What local or indigenous practice do you think the world should pay more attention to?

One indigenous practice the world should pay more attention to is handweaving traditions across West Africa. These systems prioritise slow production, natural fibres, plant-based dyes, and generational skill transfer. Production is community-based, waste is minimal, and garments are made to last, often worn, repaired, and passed down. Unlike mass manufacturing, value is placed on craftsmanship rather than volume. In a fashion industry driven by speed and excess, these traditions model circularity, cultural preservation, and economic empowerment at the local level. They remind us that sustainability is not new, it has always existed in indigenous knowledge systems.

Adaeze Oguzie

Project Director, Style House Files |
Lagos Fashion Week

4. What sustainability myth do you wish more people would stop believing?

There's a common belief that recycling is the best way to practise sustainability. In reality, the process is more complex. Only about 10% of plastic collected is recycled effectively, for fashion items, that percentage is even lower. Sustainability in fashion goes beyond recycling. It begins with intentional consumption: choosing fewer, high-quality pieces from companies that are transparent about their environmental and social impact. As Founder of TemAde Studios a sustainable fashion brand in Lagos, I continue to explore and implement responsible and creative ways to practice impact-driven designs while delivering thoughtful, enduring pieces

Temilade Ashafa

Founder, TemAde Studios

5. What problem in Africa keeps you up at night?

What concerns me most is how exposed many working people remain to predictable life events such as illness, income interruptions, and ageing. One of the most important conversations for the coming decade is how African economies can continue expanding social protection systems so that economic growth translates into long-term security and dignity. The issue is not individual resilience. People have consistently demonstrated extraordinary resilience. It is how institutions continue to evolve to provide reliable safeguards across the life cycle.

Nana Mariam Maiga

Sustainability Communications

6. What global conversation feels disconnected from African realities?

The global conversation around women's empowerment often underestimates African women's agency. Too often, African women are framed primarily as vulnerable or in need of saving, rather than as economic drivers, community leaders, and founders. Across markets, farms, tech hubs, and informal networks, women are building businesses, funding families, and shaping culture at scale. The overlooked story is not just resilience, but innovation and influence. A more accurate narrative would recognise African women not just as beneficiaries of change, but also as architects of it

Yewande Odumosu

Tech Entrepreneur & Fund Manager

7. Where is climate finance missing the mark?

Climate finance in Africa is missing the mark primarily because it remains insufficient, inequitable, and poorly aligned with urgent needs. Adaptation finance is especially underfunded, yet African countries face disproportionate climate risks. Flows are concentrated in a few countries, leaving the most vulnerable underserved, and much of the funding comes as loans, increasing debt burdens. Structural barriers like weak institutions, limited bankable projects, and policy risks further restrict effective deployment. To close the gap, we need finance that is scale-appropriate, equitable, adaptation-focused, and backed by strong domestic frameworks. Climate finance in Africa often misses the mark by ignoring local realities. In Nigeria, over 82 million people live on less than \$1 a day, yet the country faces floods, droughts, and food insecurity despite contributing little to global emissions. Top-down solutions like rapid renewable energy adoption overlook the need for grassroots education and awareness, especially with limited internet and media access. Climate finance should fund community sensitisation, school programs, and food-related climate initiatives. Wealthier nations, whose consumption drives the crisis, must support Africa's mitigation and adaptation efforts, making climate finance equitable, context-sensitive, and actionable.

Enitan Okediji

Lead Consultant | Elyra – Development, Policy & Strategic Communications Advisory

8. What do people often underestimate about women leaders?

The expectation that women would underperform on the same targets as their male counterparts is quite common. From problem solving, multi-tasking to strategic thinking, years of underestimating women's ability to perform has allowed for women to maximise every resource available to them.

Aisha Raheem

CEO Farnzuz

Bonus: A book or podcast that shaped how you think? leaders?



A: Book - The hard thing about hard things by Ben Horowitz, Podcast - How I built this by Guy Raz.

Yewande Odumosu

Tech Entrepreneur & Fund Manager

A young woman with voluminous, dark, curly hair is smiling warmly at the camera. She is wearing a light brown, short-sleeved blazer over a white top. She is holding a silver tablet computer in her right hand. The background is a blurred indoor setting, possibly a modern office or a public space, with warm lighting and architectural details like a ceiling light fixture.

YOUNG WOMEN, GREEN JOBS, AND THE FUTURE OF WORK IN AFRICA

Lidadi Oyakhilome
Oriarewo
Writer

The Future Isn't Coming. It's Already Here.

Yewande

Akinse was 28 when she looked at a plastic bottle discarded on a Lagos street and saw not rubbish, but raw material. Today, at 33, she has co-founded Salubata, a company that collects waste PET bottles, shreds them into pellets, melts them into polyester yarn, and weaves them into high-end fashion footwear with algae-based soles. One sole. Endless uppers. A full wardrobe built from what the city threw away. Salubata has since supported over 50 waste collectors and local artisans, turning environmental hazards into economic opportunity.¹

Yewande's story is striking, but it is not unusual. Across Africa, young women are quietly dismantling the myth that green jobs are a distant future. They are building that future now, with their hands, their minds, and their refusal to wait.

The Crisis That Demands a New Kind of Work

Africa's young women face a brutal economic reality. Across sub-Saharan Africa, nearly 62 million young people, representing more than a quarter of the region's youth population, are Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEET).² In East and Southern Africa specifically, women earn 21% less than men across sectors, with substantial variations by country.³ Climate change tightens the grip further. African nations risk losing up to 15% of GDP per capita growth due to climate-induced disruptions, with erratic rainfall and extreme heat devastating the agricultural sectors that historically provided the most employment.⁴

Young women bear this weight disproportionately. Two in every three NEETs in Africa are young women, often because they shoulder household tasks, childcare, cooking, and fetching water, which limit their participation in the labour market.⁵ Yet amid this crisis, a door is opening. Africa could create between 3 million and 30 million green jobs by 2030,

depending on investment levels and policy implementation.⁶ The opportunity is real. But so is the gap. Only one in eight workers currently possesses green skills, and access to training, capital, and formal recognition remains painfully uneven.⁷

The question is no longer whether green jobs exist in Africa. It is whether young African women can get them.

The Women Who Are Not Waiting for an Answer

Kemisola Bolarinwa graduated from Ekiti State University with a degree in electrical engineering in 2010 and immediately realised her curriculum had given her dated knowledge. Nothing about robotics, IoT, or modern programming was covered. So she taught herself. Late nights with C++ tutorials. Borrowed internet connections. A boss at Baun Robotics who believed enough to quietly fund her learning.

The discipline of self-teaching led her to found Nextwear Technologies, Nigeria's first wearable technology startup. Her flagship product, a smart bra using Doppler ultrasound technology, can detect breast lumps and abnormalities without a hospital visit. The idea was born from grief: the death of her aunt from late-stage breast cancer in 2017, a disease that could have been caught earlier.

Today, Kemisola has secured over \$120,000 in funding and earned recognition from the BBC and the Obama Foundation. But she is not selling her technology abroad. "I am not selling it. We are mass-producing from Nigeria," she said. "For the first time, they should buy from Africa."⁸ She now leads the Women in ICT Foundation, mentoring Nigerian girls into STEM. Her challenge remains real, however. African investors favour software over deep-tech hardware, and importing specialised components is expensive and slow. But Kemisola has already proven what happens when a young woman refuses to accept the limits of her circumstances.

The Women Of WEADA - Turning Vulnerability into Agency.

In Yaoundé, Cameroon, the Women



Empowerment Association for Development in Africa (WEADA) was founded in 2015 by women who saw a gap no one else was willing to fill. In a country where only 3% of women own land or property, and where conflicts have displaced entire communities, WEADA built something different: a network that turns vulnerability into agency.

Their work is unglamorous but essential. They provide legal support for survivors of gender-based violence. They train women in literacy and financial management. They advocate re-enrolling young mothers in school. And in conflict-affected regions, they

help internally displaced women build small-scale sustainable livelihoods not as charity, but as economic survival.

"My goal in life is to create an environment in which every woman or girl can exercise her human rights," said Baiye Frida Ebai, a human rights defender and WEADA associate. "Working for humanity is my driving force."⁹ The risks are significant. Staff operate in regions where separatist conflicts threaten their safety. But WEADA continues, because the women it serves have no other choice, and neither, it seems, does anyone who truly believes in building a just, green economy.

A Pattern, Not an Exception

Yewande turns plastic into fashion. Kemisola builds medical devices from determination and borrowed internet. The women of WEADA are rebuilding communities from the ground up. These are not only isolated stories, but a pattern, a blueprint for what the African economy could look like if it stopped overlooking the people already doing the work.

Green jobs offer something traditional employment rarely does for young African women: ownership, flexibility, and purpose. The circular economy thrives on local solutions, em-



powering women to lead supply chains rather than simply serve them. And for a continent where 70% of the population is under 30, purpose matters. Solving climate change is not just an environmental imperative; it is a career path that aligns economic survival with planetary health.

The numbers support this. Research from FSD Africa and the Boston Consulting Group forecasts that Africa's green economy could create up to 3.3 million new direct jobs by 2030, with the majority in renewable energy, particularly solar.¹⁰ If investment levels increase sufficiently, this could reach 30

million jobs across the continent.¹¹ And the multiplier effect is powerful: women reinvest 90% of their income back into their families and communities.¹²

The Cost of Looking Away

Back in Lagos, Yewande Akinse is scaling Salubata. She is planning to expand production, train more waste collectors, and prove that high-end fashion and environmental responsibility are inseparable. But she needs investment. She needs a policy that recognises what she has already built. She needs a system that stops treating young African women as passive victims of climate change and starts seeing them

for what they are: the most resourceful, adaptable, and determined builders this continent has ever produced.

For policymakers and investors, the choice is stark. Allocate capital and policy support to the systems and women already proving viability, or watch the talent, innovation, and climate solutions flow elsewhere. For readers, the choice is to understand that the future of African work is not a distant promise, it is being built now by young women. Whether we have the vision to invest in it remains the question ■

HOW DIGITAL SKILLS UNLOCK OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS

Faith Osamaye
Staff Writer

Africa cannot be overlooked in the global digital conversation. The

continent's digital economy has gained significant momentum over the past decade, reshaping trade, finance, and entrepreneurship across multiple sectors. Countries such as Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and Egypt have emerged as regional leaders in this transformation, driven largely by mobile money innovation, expanding e-commerce platforms, and a growing fintech ecosystem. A 2020 study by Google and the International Finance Corporation (IFC) similarly estimates that the digital economy could contribute \$180 billion (5.2%) to Africa's GDP by 2025, rising to \$712 billion (8.5%) by 2050.

Africa's e-commerce sector is among the fastest-growing globally. According to Statista, online retail revenue on the continent is expected to surpass \$75 billion by 2025, with Nigeria, Kenya, Egypt, and South Africa leading this growth. Mobile money platforms now account for an estimated 45% of Sub-Saharan Africa's GDP, underscoring how deeply digital financial services have become embedded in ev-

eryday economic activity. This expansion has been supported by rapid smartphone adoption, which is projected to reach 650 million users by 2025.

At the same time, the continent's large informal sector presents a major opportunity for digital inclusion. However, women entrepreneurs often face unique barriers to fully leveraging digital tools.

Within this rapidly expanding digital landscape, women's participation remains critical yet uneven. Digital empowerment is not only a question of gender equality but a powerful driver of broader economic growth and development. Greater inclusion of women in the digital economy can unlock opportunities ranging from e-commerce and digital entrepreneurship to improved access to financial services.

The Digital Gender Gap Facing Women Entrepreneurs

Despite Africa's growing digital economy, a significant gender gap persists. According to the World Bank, women are underrepresented in the digital economy, with a 37% gender gap in Sub-Saharan Africa. Women in the region are 19% less likely than men to use mobile internet, leaving approximately 200 million women offline. While mobile money has expanded





financial inclusion, gaps remain; for example, Nigeria alone experiences a 46% gender gap in usage.

Internet access also remains limited: only around 32% of women in Sub-Saharan Africa use the internet, compared with a global average of 53%. Furthermore, only 15% of African women can afford internet access, severely restricting their ability to engage digital platforms for marketing, payments, or distribution.

Sub-Saharan Africa has the world's highest rate of women entrepreneurs, at 27%, yet most female-led enterprises remain small businesses with limited growth potential. Even though women participate in starting businesses at similar rates to men (22% of the working-age population), digital barriers keep them from scaling effectively. As a result, women continue to earn less than their male counterparts and have reduced access to funding and digital visibility.

Women play a vital role in Africa's economy; they facilitate about 70% of informal cross-border trade and contribute at least 13% of the continent's GDP, with Nigeria and South Africa accounting for over 60% of that contribution. The International Finance Corporation (IFC) estimates that women could add over \$300 billion to Africa's e-commerce market alone. Yet only 33% of women have a formal bank account, compared with 43% of men, and only about 12% possess formal digital finance-related ICT skills. In Nigeria, just 6% of women have access to formal credit, highlighting how digital and institutional barriers compound.

Bridging the digital divide is not just a matter of fairness; it has tangible economic impact. UN Women and GDIP estimate that bridging the gap could lift 340 million women out of poverty and inject \$15 billion annually into Sub-Saharan Africa's GDP.

How Digital Skills Transform Women-Led Businesses

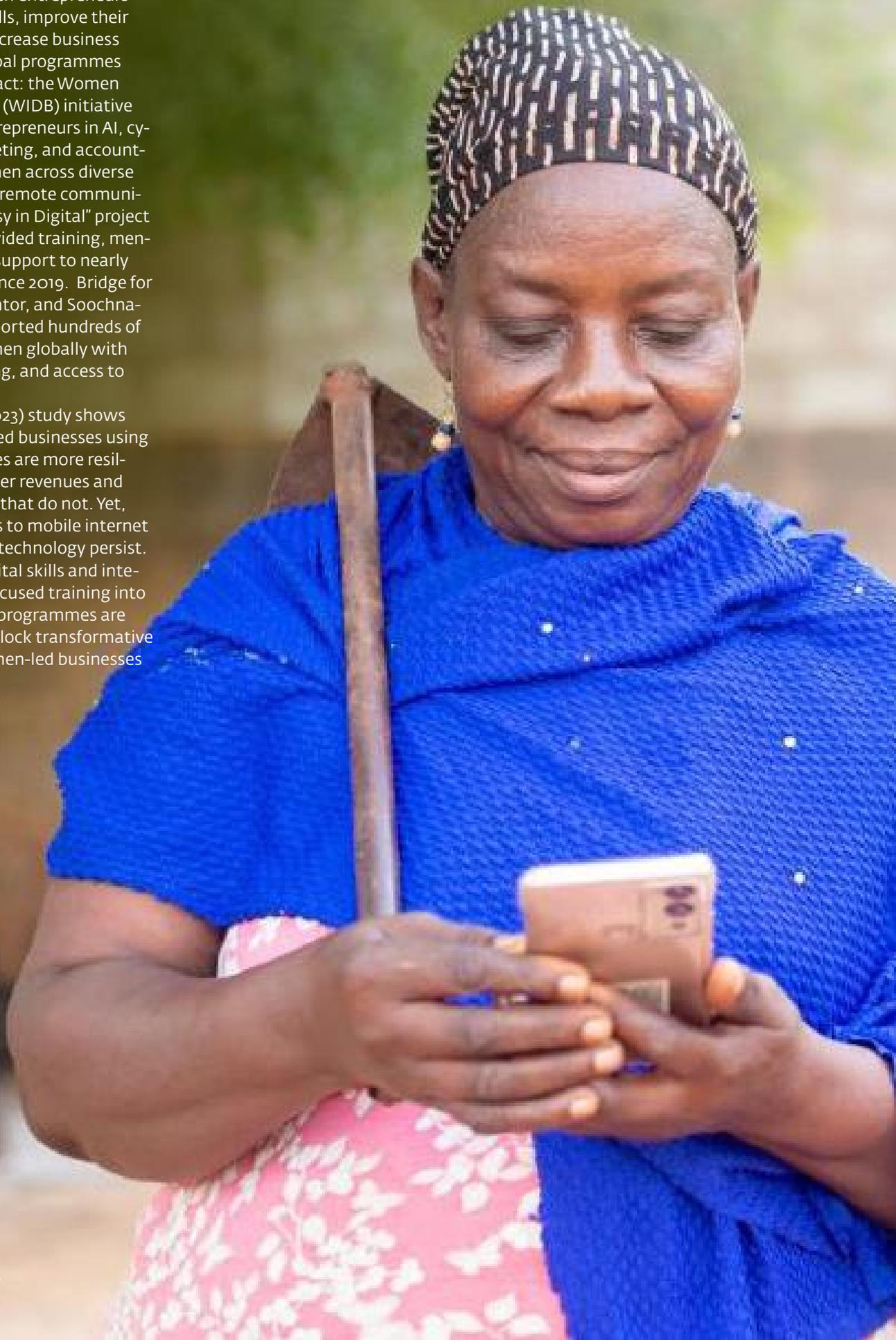
Access to finance has long been a major barrier for women entrepreneurs worldwide. However, digital technologies are helping to bridge this gap, enabling women to access credit, financial services, and business support more easily. Small businesses





Digital technologies also provide critical access to information and training. Online courses, webinars, and mentorship programmes have empowered women entrepreneurs to acquire new skills, improve their operations, and increase business performance. Global programmes illustrate this impact: the Women in Digital Business (WIDB) initiative trains women entrepreneurs in AI, cybersecurity, marketing, and accounting, reaching women across diverse regions, including remote communities. The “Life is Easy in Digital” project in Türkiye has provided training, mentoring, and grant support to nearly 40,000 women since 2019. Bridge for Billions, MicroMentor, and Soochnapreneur have supported hundreds of thousands of women globally with mentoring, training, and access to information.

A recent IFC (2023) study shows that women-owned businesses using digital technologies are more resilient and have higher revenues and profits than those that do not. Yet, significant barriers to mobile internet access and digital technology persist. Strengthening digital skills and integrating women-focused training into entrepreneurship programmes are critical steps to unlock transformative outcomes for women-led businesses across Africa.



Existing Digital Upskilling Solutions for African Women

Africa is witnessing a surge in initiatives aimed at equipping women entrepreneurs with the digital skills needed to thrive in today's economy. Across the continent, programmes are emerging to address gaps in digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and access to technology, helping women leverage innovation for business growth.

National programmes (Nigeria):

The Digital Transformation Centre Nigeria (DTC Nigeria), co-funded by the European Union (EU) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and implemented by GIZ GmbH, focuses on digitalisation and entrepreneurship. It takes a holistic approach, working with stakeholders, including women and youth, to promote both the supply and demand for digital innovations. Innovation centres, public and private service providers, and consultants are empowered to support MSMEs in their digitalisation efforts, while the government is assisted in implementing strategies to modernise Nigeria's digital economy.

Nigeria's Scale HerBiz Initiative, led by Tech Herfrica in collaboration with SMEDAN, illustrates the transformative potential of digital upskilling. The programme initially targeted 50 women entrepreneurs, though only 24 participated, allowing for personalised guidance and intensive engagement. Over four days of virtual training, followed by ongoing mentoring, participants gained practical experience with tools like Google My Business, Canva, AI-powered platforms, and the Business Model Canvas, enabling them to reach more customers and strengthen their enterprises.

Continental programmes:

In response to this growing demand, UNESCO and the Women in Africa Initiative (WIA) are developing a vast open online course to enhance African women's digital entrepreneurship and literacy in AI. Similarly, the Women Techsters Initiative, a partnership between Microsoft and Tech4Dev, trains girls and women aged 16 to 40 in coding and deep tech skills across 54 African countries, aiming to bridge the technology divide and ensure equal access to opportunities.

Global / multi-country initiatives impacting Africa:

The E-Trade for Women initiative by UNCTAD encourages women entrepreneurs in developing countries to participate in policy creation and pursue digital entrepreneurship. The project has reached over 200 women-owned digital firms across more than 40 developing countries, helping them navigate digital challenges and expand their businesses.

A collaborative project titled "Tech as a Driver of Women's Economic Opportunity", involving ITU, EIF, and the EQUALS Global Partnership, focuses on developing digital skills for women in LDCs. The initiative's Talking Tech series fosters dialogue and mentorship for girls and young women in technology, supporting global programmes such as Girls in ICT (2020–2022) [UNESCO News, 2021]. Encouragingly, AI innovation and training are growing across the continent, from community-run AI classes to private and government innovation hubs.

Other notable programmes include:

- » Hermplify, which empowers African women by providing access to financial and educational resources. Through AI-driven tools, Hermplify enables women entrepreneurs to leverage digital solutions for business growth.
- » Digital Opportunity Trust (DOT), which offers digital literacy programmes focusing on entrepreneurship, job readiness, and leadership, connecting young women with industry mentors to enhance skills and career opportunities.

These initiatives show that digital upskilling can empower African women entrepreneurs and drive inclusive economic growth.

Digital Success Stories of Women Entrepreneurs

Across Africa, women entrepreneurs are using digital tools to grow their businesses, reach new customers, and increase income.

In Nigeria, Ms Allwell-Brown Ibitoru of Angie's Ice Cream and Pastries attracted new customers using Instagram videos after attending an EU-funded business optimisation workshop. Aisha of Aeshak Tasty Bites in Kano applied social media market-

ing skills from the same programme, increasing orders by 30% within one month. In Lagos, leather-craft entrepreneur Eruanga Gloria Olokhirere (Slides by Ego) used sponsored ads, consistent posting, and Canva-designed flyers to significantly boost online sales.

Helen from Port Harcourt faced challenges marketing her ice-making business until she joined SDN's digital skills training. The programme taught her how to leverage social media and digital marketing, helping her attract new customers and expand her enterprise. Damilola Asaley, co-founder of Ashdam Solar Company, is using digital tools to provide sustainable energy solutions in Nigeria, reaching millions without power.

In Nairobi, traditional hair braiders such as Jemima Atieno have seen increased bookings and visibility through a mobile app connecting stylists with clients, even though limited digital skills remain a barrier.

These examples demonstrate how digital skills can transform women's businesses, expand market reach, and increase economic opportunity across Africa.

Way Forward

Across Africa, governments and organisations have launched programmes to equip women entrepreneurs with digital skills and access to financial tools, laying the groundwork for greater economic participation.

Initiatives such as Rwanda's National Gender Policy and Ghana's Digital Skills Training Programme address gender disparities and provide targeted support for women in business. Kenya's technology-focused initiatives, including the Kenya Women Microfinance Bank and the Kenya Women Entrepreneurship Programme, provide financial support and capacity-building for women leveraging digital platforms.

At the same time, the expansion of digital infrastructure and e-commerce platforms is creating new opportunities for women to reach broader markets and grow businesses beyond traditional boundaries. However, persistent gaps in internet access, digital literacy, and technology adoption between men and women continue to limit the full potential of digital entrepreneurship. Gender biases within the technology

sector further constrain women's participation and advancement. Digital financial services have also transformed the landscape. Platforms such as MTN Mobile Money in West Africa and Eco-Cash in Zimbabwe now reach millions of users, while Nigerian fintech companies like Palm-Pay and OPay process over \$10 billion in transactions annually. These platforms address Africa's unique financial context, where mobile phone ownership is widespread but traditional banking penetration remains low. With the right digital skills, women can use these tools to manage finances more effectively, expand customer reach, and scale their enterprises.

Global experiences reinforce the value of digital empowerment. In the United States, women entrepreneurs use mobile devices extensively for business functions such as accepting payments, managing social media, and hiring, demonstrating how digital proficiency improves efficiency, market reach, and revenue generation. Similar patterns are evident in developing contexts, where 63 per cent of women entrepreneurs report improved business functions from using digital tools. Additionally, 88 per cent use

WhatsApp and 74 per cent use Facebook for business, reporting increased sales and stronger customer engagement, showing that even basic digital skills can significantly enhance visibility and market access. In Europe, programmes like Girls Go Circular have trained over 60,000 girls in digital and entrepreneurial skills, and projections show that increasing women's ICT participation to 45% could add €260–€600 billion to EU GDP. These programmes succeed because they combine accessible training, mentorship, financial support, and user-friendly platforms, and often address systemic barriers such as gender norms and child-care responsibilities.

Africa can build on these global lessons by replicating proven success factors: integrating practical digital skills into women's entrepreneurship programmes, pairing mentorship with access to affordable technology, and embedding digital literacy within broader economic empowerment initiatives.

Beyond economic gains, closing the digital skills gap has profound social implications: it strengthens women's participation in decision-making, amplifies their voices, and challenges restrictive gender norms ■





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