

WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP ACCELERATOR

Women's Entrepreneurship Accelerator Event at 67th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women Calls for Gender-Inclusive Digital Innovation Eco-Systems

High-level multi-stakeholder event on unlocking the potential of women entrepreneurs to innovate in the digital economy as prelude to the announcement of the top three winners of the WEA Digital Innovation Challenge

NEW YORK/GENEVA – (May 17, 2023) – Leveraging the theme of this year's [Commission on the Status of Women](#) (CSW67) on innovation and technology from a gender perspective, the [Women's Entrepreneurship Accelerator](#) (WEA) CSW side-event, hosted at MetLife's headquarters in New York City, brought together a high-level panel of experts. Senior representatives of WEA partner agencies, representatives from the private sector, and civil society discussed ways to build a more gender-responsive eco-system for women entrepreneurs so they can participate and compete in the digital economy. Speakers identified WEA as a critical multi-stakeholder solution to address the bottlenecks to women entrepreneurship.

Addressing the role of innovation and technology from a gender lens for the first time since its inception, the set of agreed conclusions adopted by Member States at CSW67 provide **best practice guidance** for stakeholders, including governments, the private sector and civil society. This guidance aims to promote the full and equal participation and leadership of women and girls in the design and rollout of digital technologies and innovation processes.

Panelists focused on:

- the critical importance of **women's entrepreneurship as a key driver of innovation** in addressing societal challenges, and;
- the **contribution women entrepreneurs make to economic growth and poverty reduction**.

The **barriers faced by women entrepreneurs** in growing their business and getting their products and services to market were also highlighted which include:

- a **lack of access to capital, unequal social norms, lack of connectivity, and time and skills constraints**, all of which hamper their ability to compete in the digital marketplace.

Digitalization as a critical enabler for women entrepreneurs and the role of digital technologies in supporting women businesses during the pandemic were underscored, as well as the fallout from the pandemic on women's labor market participation and women's rights at large.



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The importance of creating a strong eco-system for women entrepreneurs to compete and scale their business was central to the discussion. Panelists representing different sectors of the eco-system pointed to WEA as an exceptional turn-key platform that is working to address the obstacles to women's entrepreneurship through the partnership of the private sector and six unique UN agencies.

The WEA event was also an opportunity **to announce the winners of WEA's Digital Innovation Challenge.**

An initiative of WEA and conducted by ITU in collaboration with Mary Kay, the objective of the Challenge is to build an enabling context for women entrepreneurs by addressing the barriers to women's entrepreneurship, including the digital gender divide, complementing the theme of this year's CSW67 on innovation and technology from a gender perspective.

Launched in December 2022 at the global headquarters of WEA partner International Telecommunication Union in Geneva, the **WEA Digital Innovation Challenge** received **250 submissions from companies in 54 countries** either owned by women or with a minimum of one-woman founder each with their unique digital solution aimed at driving socio-economic benefits in their communities. In alignment with the ITU's [Innovation and Entrepreneurship Alliance for Digital](#), the objective of the Challenge is to showcase what an emerging eco-system of digital innovators looks like and build an enabling context for women entrepreneurs to participate in the digital economy.

The 10 winners of the Challenge were invited to present their two-minute live pitch before an expert Grand Jury at the CSW event comprised of investors and cross-sectoral representatives who each provided their unique insights.

Grand Jury Members included:

- **Dan Seymour**, Strategic Partnerships Director, UN Women;
- **Deborah Gibbins**, Chief Operating Officer, Mary Kay Inc.;
- **Harry O'Mealia**, CEO and President, 1919 Investment Counsel;
- **Julia Pimsleur**, Founder, Million Dollar Women Network;
- **Selin Oz**, SME Banking Entrepreneurship Banking, Senior Manager, Garanti BBVA;
- **Tess Mateo**, Sustainability ESG Impact Investor, US W20 Delegate to G20;
- **Ursula Wynhoven**, Representative to the United Nations in New York, International Telecommunication Union.

The 10 winners will gain access to the **"Digital Innovation Challenge Acceleration Program"** over the coming months where they will receive capacity-building training and a virtual bootcamp to help further refine their business plans as well as specialized mentorship and access to a network of change-makers. Following this, selected winners will participate in ITU's



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prestigious [Global Innovation Forum](#) later this year and join a community of practice to explore ways to leapfrog the digital innovation divide and address global challenges.

Special Mention awards were given to three companies receiving consultancy hours from [1919 Investment Counsel](#). In first place and the recipient of 10 hours of consulting services was [Tiny Totos](#), a Kenyan social enterprise working to ensure quality childcare. By providing training, access to capital, a network and a technology platform, Tiny Totos helps set up childcare centers to increase the availability of childcare and improve the quality of childcare services in the country.

Receiving 5 hours each of consulting services, the two runners-up, [Health Innovation Exchange](#) (HIEx) and [Gwiji for Women Gig Workers](#), are also addressing key societal challenges. HIEx identifies challenges faced by health systems and connects innovators with key health ecosystem actors primarily in Africa and Asia to deliver solutions that can improve access to quality healthcare. Gwiji for Women Gig Workers is a tech start-up addressing barriers to labor market participation by low-income women in Kenya. It identifies, vets, trains, and empowers women from lower socio-economic backgrounds as casual cleaners by connecting them with prospective clients through a mobile application.

The WEA Digital Innovation Challenge was held against the backdrop of a rapidly changing economic context which has seen the rise of digital technologies and the growth of a digital economy. Recognizing the potential of the digital acceleration to perpetuate inequalities, the Challenge presented an opportunity to discuss digitalization as a barrier to women's economic status.

The high-level panel discussion included the following cross-sectoral representatives:

- **Welcome:**
 - **Dr. Cindy Pace**, VP, Global Chief Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Officer, MetLife
- **Opening Remarks:**
 - **Anita Bhatia**, UN Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director UN Coordination, Partnerships, Resources and Sustainability, UN Women
 - **Ulrika Modéer**, UN Assistant Secretary-General and Director of the Bureau of External Relations and Advocacy, UNDP
- **Introductory Remarks:**
 - **Deborah Gibbins**, Chief Operating Officer, Mary Kay Inc.
- **Keynote Speaker:**
 - **Virginia Littlejohn**, Co-Head of the Women20 (W20) US Delegation to the G20 countries; Global Coordinator, W20's Women Entrepreneurs Act Initiative (WE Act); Advisor, Women7 (W7) for the G7 Countries, and Co-Coordinating Team for Women's Empowerment, Meaningful Participation, and Leadership; Forbes Women 50 over 50 (Investment)



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- **Discussant:**
 - **Sonia Jorge**, Founder and Executive Director, Global Digital Inclusion Partnership (GDIP)
- **Closing Remarks:**
 - **Dr. Cosmas Luckyson Zavazava**, Director Telecommunication Development Bureau, ITU

The above panelists spoke about the importance of women's entrepreneurship as a critical enabler of the Sustainable Development Goals, and the need to create a more gender-responsive eco-system for women entrepreneurs so they can compete and scale their businesses in the digital economy.

“Women entrepreneurs face obstacles that stunt the growth of their business from lack of capital to social norms, as well as time and skills constraints. Entrepreneurship can be a powerful force to address societal challenges. However, entrepreneurship and the benefits it can drive remain male dominated. By developing a more gender-inclusive eco-system for start-ups and challenging the current business models, we can remove the obstacles women entrepreneurs face so they can drive success and reach their full potential.”

Dr. Cindy Pace, VP, Global Chief Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Officer, MetLife

“200 million women in India received money during the pandemic because digitalization had made it possible through their mobile phones as well as through a national identification system. However, two years into post pandemic life, women continue to face huge barriers in accessing venture capital and therefore in innovating. We know that less than 5% of venture capital goes to women-owned businesses and until that eco-system of financing for women changes nothing much is going to change in the lives of women entrepreneurs.”

Anita Bhatia, UN Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director UN Coordination, Partnerships, Resources and Sustainability, UN Women

“We have seen more than 600 million people use the internet for the first time throughout the last couple of years, but 2.7 billion people are still offline the majority of whom are women. Women are also 25% less likely than men to know how to use technologies depriving them of basic opportunities to leverage technologies to thrive. On top of that, women-owned businesses make up 30% of registered businesses worldwide yet only 10% of them have access to the capital required to grow. We must also recall that basic legislation has to be in place for digital to benefit women and this means women's rights need to be worked on at the same time.”

Ulrika Mod er, UN Assistant Secretary-General and Director of the Bureau of External Relations and Advocacy, UNDP

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“We need to reverse the current trend of gender-blind innovations and redress the digital gender gap that exists in access to technologies and in digital education and skills. The time is now to ensure women are not left behind. This is too big a feat for just one company or one industry to shoulder. Given the scale of the challenge, we need more cross-sectoral partners to join efforts to build the conditions for women entrepreneurs to innovate, compete and thrive. With the Women’s Entrepreneurship Accelerator, we have a turn-key platform to shape a more equal and inclusive digital marketplace and society.”

Deborah Gibbins, Chief Operating Officer, Mary Kay Inc.

“Research has shown that there’s an inherent gender bias which obstructs female entrepreneurs from equal access to eco-system resources such as finance and markets, while weak governmental and private sector collaboration within eco-systems deters women’s entrepreneurship from accessing key pillars of the eco-system. As a result, many women entrepreneurs tend to “go it alone.” Policies and partnership frameworks that take a more holistic and synergistic approach, such as the Women’s Entrepreneurship Accelerator, are pivotal to unlocking the full potential of female entrepreneurship. Expanding the WEA partnership further can help drive even more progress.”

Virginia Littlejohn, Co-Head of the Women20 (W20) US Delegation to the G20 countries; Global Coordinator, W20's Women Entrepreneurs Act Initiative (WE Act); Advisor, Women7 (W7) for the G7 Countries, and Co-Coordinating Team for Women's Empowerment, Meaningful Participation, and Leadership; Forbes Women 50 over 50 (Investment)

“In the last decade the world lost about a trillion US dollars because we did not include women in digital economic activity. If we reversed that, we could gain over \$525 billion from closing that gap, meaning governments could earn an additional \$525 billion in the next 5 years if they included women as active economic agents. Furthermore, to close the gap in universal meaningful connectivity by 2030, we would only need \$430 billion. To put it in perspective, this is how much the world spends every year on soda! This is foundational to bringing women online, to creating opportunities for entrepreneurship and to creating opportunities for participation, creation, innovation and engagement with digital services and products.”

Sonia Jorge, Founder and Executive Director, Strategy and Partnerships, Global Digital Inclusion Partnership

“The solutions presented throughout the Challenge are indisputably changing the world for the better. Inclusive and equitable innovations will help us navigate a new digital world that is increasingly Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous. Digital innovation eco-systems still suffer from a substantial gender divide that affects everyone. More gender-inclusive digital innovation eco-systems are needed to elevate economies and societies worldwide and help protect against the socio-economic crises we have seen.”

Dr. Cosmas Luckyson Zavazava, Director of the Telecommunication Development Bureau at ITU



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A recording of the panel event is available [here](#) and a recording of WEA's Digital Innovation Challenge is available [here](#).

About the Women's Entrepreneurship Accelerator

The Women's Entrepreneurship Accelerator (WEA) is a multi-stakeholder partnership on women's entrepreneurship established during UNGA 74. It convenes six UN agencies, International Labour Organization (ILO), International Trade Centre (ITC), International Telecommunication Union (ITU), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UN Global Compact (UNGC), UN Women and Mary Kay Inc. to empower 5 million women entrepreneurs by 2030.

The goal of the initiative is to maximize the development impact of women entrepreneurship in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by creating an enabling ecosystem for women entrepreneurs around the world. The Accelerator exemplifies the transformational power of a multi-partnership of unique magnitude to harness the potential of women entrepreneurs. Learn more at [we-accelerate](#). Follow us: Twitter (We_Accelerator), Instagram (@we_accelerator), Facebook (@womensentrepreneurshipaccelerator), LinkedIn (@womensentrepreneurshipaccelerator)

