Breaking down barriers for women digital entrepreneurs: Insights from Africa

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Note

Within the Division on Technology and Logistics of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the E-Commerce and Digital Economy Branch seeks to enable developing countries to improve their capacity to engage in and benefit from e-commerce and the digital economy for sustainable development. The present publication has been developed as part of the work of its eTrade Initiatives Section, which leads efforts to support developing countries to engage in and benefit from the digital economy by leveraging global partnerships and policy dialogue and by fostering digital entrepreneurship.

The Section manages key initiatives, including the eTrade for all initiative, which serves as a global platform to coordinate and scale support for e-commerce development, and the eTrade for Women initiative, which supports women digital entrepreneurs through three strategic action lines:

(a)   Advocacy and policy dialogue, to promote enabling policy and regulatory environments;

(b)   Tailored capacity-building, to help women-led digital businesses grow;

(c)   Community-building, to build strong digital ecosystems across the global South.

Since its launch, the eTrade for Women initiative has supported more than 450 women entrepreneurs from 65 countries, helping them grow their businesses and drive digital transformation in their ecosystems. By empowering women-led digital micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises, it creates a domino effect with broader, systemic impact.

Acknowledgements

Foreword

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The digital economy continues to reshape global trade and the way in which we do business, offering new opportunities for inclusive growth and sustainable development. Those opportunities are not equitably distributed. In most parts of the world, women entrepreneurs continue to face a range of barriers to their full participation in the fast evolving digital economy.

The present report is aimed at narrowing the significant knowledge gap. Research on women digital entrepreneurs in the global South remains scarce. It helps address the gap by drawing on a mixed-method approach – combining survey data and qualitative interviews with members of the eTrade for Women network. The analysis highlights the diversity of voices and lived experiences, which are too often overlooked.

The challenges confronting women digital entrepreneurs in sub-Saharan Africa are multifaceted, rooted in deeply embedded societal norms and compounded by structural and institutional gaps. Such challenges include limited digital connectivity, which restricts both businesses and consumers from fully harnessing the benefits of the digital transformation; unequal access to the finance and capital needed for business growth and cross-border expansion; significant skills gaps across technical and non-technical roles; and persistent underrepresentation in leadership positions. Together, those challenges create a complex ecosystem that constrains women's full participation in the digital economy; they require coordinated responses addressing the broader ecosystems in which they operate.

Through the eTrade for Women initiative, we are committed to fostering more inclusive digital economies. By highlighting both structural barriers, as well as the resilience and innovation of women digital entrepreneurs, this report offers valuable insights to policymakers, development partners and ecosystem players working to promote inclusive digital transformation.

It is my hope that the report will help inform evidence-based policymaking and contribute to strengthening support systems that enable women entrepreneurs to thrive and lead in the digital era.

I take this opportunity to express my sincere appreciation to all the women entrepreneurs who shared their perspectives and experiences in the preparation of the report.

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Table of contents

Boxes

Figures

Tables

Executive summary

The present report represents one of the most comprehensive endeavours to date to document and analyse the realities of women digital entrepreneurs in developing regions. Combining survey responses from 94 entrepreneurs across Africa, Asia and the Pacific, the Balkans and Latin America and the Caribbean with qualitative interviews from 33 entrepreneurs in 13 African countries, it sheds light on a vital – yet underresearched segment – of the digital economy.

Women across the global South are increasingly turning to digital entrepreneurship as a pathway to economic empowerment, innovation and community impact. However, their journeys are marked by persistent and intersecting challenges. Chapter I is focused on exploring those emerging trends and the knowledge gaps that remain in this uncharted territory. It underscores the gender digital divides, not only in access to technology but also in business ownership, leadership representation and access to finance. It is argued that digital entrepreneurship holds transformative potential for women, allowing them to transcend traditional roles, build visibility and establish new entrepreneurial trajectories, often with successful results. Nevertheless, such potential remains largely unrealized due to structural, institutional and cultural barriers.

Chapter II contains a detailed profile of a sample of members of the eTrade for Women Communities, led by UNCTAD, capturing their demographic characteristics, motivations, business models and operational environments. Their businesses are micro-, small or medium-sized enterprises, active in sectors such as e-commerce, information and communications technology services or digital marketing. Despite relatively high levels of ambition, their growth is still constrained by limited access to formal financing – more than 80 per cent rely on personal savings – and by challenges related to digital infrastructure, discrimination in fundraising and networking environments and underrepresentation in leadership roles.

Chapter III is focused in greater depth on sub-Saharan Africa. It highlights that business ecosystems remain difficult to navigate for women in that part of the world due to uneven digital infrastructure, low levels of digital trust and high operational costs. Findings capture the complex interplay between societal expectations and entrepreneurial drive. Interviewees highlight that women face high expectations to fulfil multiple roles in their families and communities, while simultaneously feeling a strong sense of duty to use their businesses to create social impact. Many entrepreneurs are driven by a desire to improve local systems – from education and health to job creation and digital inclusion – yet must constantly overcome external questioning, internalized bias and gender stereotypes.

The report concludes, in chapter IV, with a call to strengthen policy support and institutional frameworks that enable entrepreneurs to thrive and contribute to economic development. It identifies a series of recommendations, stemming from the interviews with the entrepreneurs, including the need for tailored capacity-building, increased access to finance through grants and credit facilities, expanded access to local and international markets and ecosystem-level support that reflects the realities of their operating environments.

By capturing both quantitative information and personal narratives, this analysis contributes critical insights into a nascent body of literature and provides empirical foundations for evidence-based policymaking. It calls for coordinated action by Governments, development partners and the private sector to address the structural inequalities that continue to limit women's participation in the digital economy.

Above all, it shines a light on the fact that supporting women digital entrepreneurs is not only a matter of equity, but also a strategic imperative for inclusive and sustainable development.

Chapter I

Women digital entrepreneurship in focus: bridging knowledge gaps

The chapter underscores the scarcity of empirical data and research on women digital entrepreneurs, particularly in developing economies, and calls for more context-specific analysis to inform inclusive digital policy and support frameworks. It also presents the mixed-method methodological approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data, that was adopted for a nuanced assessment.

A. Introduction: a persistent gender gap in digital entrepreneurship

Digitalization is a powerful driver of innovation and productivity gains. By lowering production costs and providing businesses with access to wider markets, digitalization has made it easier to trade goods and services. Over the past two decades, many micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) worldwide have emerged with innovative business models, from e-commerce stores and marketplaces to online health services and digital payment solutions.

Entrepreneurship is an important source of income for women in developing countries. In fact, women in developing countries are more likely to start their own businesses than in high-income countries: approximately 25 per cent of women in low-income countries and 13 per cent in lower-middle income countries start their own business compared

with about 10 per cent globally (GEM, 2024). However, women-led businesses tend to be smaller and concentrated in sectors with relatively low added value and low levels of technological sophistication, such as in agrifood processing or textiles.

Having more women involved in the digital economy represents untapped potential for economic empowerment and productivity gains in developing countries.

In a rapidly evolving digital economy, empirical evidence on women in digital business remains limited. While some studies have documented the gender gap in digital entrepreneurship, few capture women's specific experiences and challenges. Existing research often focuses on high-tech, high-growth startups – a segment in which women are significantly underrepresented.

B. Objectives and scope of the report

The present report contributes to the broader dialogue on inclusive digital economies by offering evidence-based insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by women digital entrepreneurs in developing countries, with the goal of informing targeted policy action and fostering women's full participation in the digital economy.

The report examines the profiles and experiences of women entrepreneurs who are all members of regional communities linked to the eTrade for Women initiative, which is led by UNCTAD.

Those women have all founded digital businesses and operate in developing and least developed countries. They face distinct challenges often overlooked in research focused on advanced economies. While the report includes insights from entrepreneurs based in various regions to enable cross-regional comparisons, it offers a more in-depth analysis of entrepreneurs based in Africa.

Such a focus is particularly timely, as Africa is undergoing significant regional integration efforts – notably through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) – which place strong emphasis on harnessing digital trade and promoting women entrepreneurship. Findings can help inform and support those objectives.

Moreover, the report showcases the valuable contributions women-led businesses make as drivers of digitalization. Ultimately, it aims to support efforts to enable the full participation of such businesses in the digital economy.

C. Key definitions

For the purposes of the present report, "digital businesses" are defined as businesses engaged in activities that are enabled by digital technologies. Such a term encompasses a broad spectrum of MSMEs, from traditional businesses leveraging digital tools, such as e-commerce stores selling goods and services online, to innovative digital start-ups that have developed technology-driven solutions and services, including financial technology (fintech), educational technology (EdTech) and various services powered by artificial intelligence.

MSMEs are enterprises with fewer than 250 employees. More specifically, micro-enterprises have less than 10 employees, small enterprises have between 10 and 49 employees and medium-sized enterprises have between 50 and 249 employees.

It is important to distinguish between various types of digital businesses, as they reflect different entrepreneurial approaches.

On the one hand, many women entrepreneurs are digitizing traditional MSMEs, utilizing e-commerce platforms and social media to sell their products or services online and broaden their market reach. Such businesses are often found in the retail, fashion and services sectors.

On the other hand, there are a few women-led start-ups that are driving innovation through the development of new technology-enabled business models, with a high potential for scalability. They include information and communications technology (ICT) services, software development, fintech, healthcare technology, agricultural technology and platform-based enterprises with the potential for scalability.

Both types of digital businesses play a significant role in economic growth and job creation, yet their unique needs and challenges necessitate tailored support.

D. Research design and methodology

The present report offers a comprehensive analysis of the lived experiences of women digital entrepreneurs from developing economies, drawing on data collected through the eTrade for Women initiative, a network of women leading digital businesses across Africa, the Arab region, Asia and the Pacific, the Balkans and Latin America and the Caribbean.

The analysis is based on a mixed-methods approach, integrating survey data and in-depth qualitative interviews. Such an approach enables a nuanced understanding of both common trends and region-specific dynamics, offering evidence-based insights to inform more inclusive digital entrepreneurship policies.

1. Survey of women digital entrepreneurs across the global South

As part of the quantitative analysis, survey data was collected from 94 women digital entrepreneurs across 33 developing countries[2], who operate registered companies in the formal sector.

An electronic questionnaire was distributed to members of the eTrade for Women Communities to better understand their backgrounds, businesses, challenges and experiences. A multilingual survey (available in English, French and Spanish) was sent by email to 317 entrepreneurs across Africa, Asia, the Balkans and Latin America and the Caribbean in 2024. Of those who received the email, 200 opened it and 94 completed the survey, representing a response rate of approximately 30 per cent.

Respondents came from 33 countries spanning the Balkans, Central and South America, Eastern, Central and Southern Africa and Asia and the Pacific (for regional analysis, 88 respondents were categorized as residing in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa or Asia). Thus, in tables and figures providing regional comparisons the sample size is 88 and all percentages are rounded. The response rate was similar across regions and reflects the distribution of members within the eTrade for Women Communities. Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for the largest share of members (approximately, 50 per cent), followed by South-East Asia and the Pacific (20 per cent) and Latin America and the Caribbean (18 per cent).

2. Qualitative interviews with women digital entrepreneurs in Africa

In addition, in-depth narrative interviews were conducted with 33 women digital entrepreneurs from 13 sub-Saharan African countries, namely: Benin, Burundi, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Uganda and United Republic of Tanzania. Those interviews offered a regional lens and deeper understanding of the women's lived experiences.

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[2] Argentina, Benin, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, Chad, Chile, Colombia, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Fiji, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Lebanon, Malaysia, Mali, Namibia, Nigeria, North Macedonia, the Philippines, Rwanda, Senegal, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Togo, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania.

Participants were selected to represent the wide variety of cultural and economic differences across sub-Saharan Africa. Purposeful sampling (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) was employed to capture diverse perspectives and achieve theoretical density (Charmaz, 2006). For instance, the country of origin and the level of maturity of the business were used as criteria to choose interviewees.

The analysis of the data collected is based on the analytical procedures introduced by Gioia, Corley and Hamilton (2013), who recommend a three-step process that categorizes responses, develops second-order themes and ultimately forms an aggregate dimension. That procedure is combined with an abbreviated grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), which uses coding, categorizing and memo-writing to develop theoretical models:

- All research team members independently listen to the interview transcripts;

- Each researcher writes codes, using brief descriptions of the text and highlighting important emerging themes;

- The authors conceptually overlap initial codes into "aggregate dimensions" (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013), representing the particularities of African women founders.

The analysis is focused on the lived experiences of the women who participated in the interviews. The analysis explores the structural and institutional challenges that they face in building and scaling their businesses, as well as key enablers that have supported their entrepreneurial journeys. Specifically, it examines how they perceive and navigate barriers related to gender roles and cultural norms, access to finance, digital infrastructure and connectivity, the policy and regulatory environment and opportunities for cross-border trade.

Chapter 2 analyses the quantitative data to identify common trends and regional differences.

In chapter III, deeper insights are derived from the interviews of African digital entrepreneurs.

E. Literature review: what is known and what is missing

1. Women's uneven participation in the digital economy

Despite gradual progress, **a gender gap in entrepreneurial activity persists.**

According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (2024, p. 10), "one in ten women, compared to one in eight men, were starting new businesses in 2023". Moreover, "in 2023, one in 16 women owned an established business, compared to one in 10 men".

The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (2024) explains that digitalization can help new businesses reduce operational costs, improve data capture, track key metrics, engage remotely with employees and customers and

reach larger audiences. Digital technologies enable scalable innovations, enhance product adaptability and support experimentation, which can lead to dynamic business models and increased organizational agility (UNCTAD, 2022; Benjjani, Göcke and Menter, 2023).

Despite such opportunities, women entrepreneurs are much less represented in the digital economy than men. That gap results in missed economic opportunities and may exacerbate existing gender inequalities. The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (2024) identifies three reasons for the lower rates of digital tool usage among women business owners: challenges related to access and affordability, diverse

digitalization needs in different industries and a general discomfort or disinterest that women may have towards digital technology.

However, following the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, there was a significant increase in the adoption of digital technologies. More than half of women entrepreneurs surveyed by the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor expressed an intention to adopt new digital technologies for their businesses. Moreover, they were 4 per cent more likely than men to report immediate plans to enhance their digitalization efforts. In addition to reducing the gender gap, harnessing the potential of the digital economy is crucial from a broader socioeconomic perspective. Women entrepreneurs have consistently demonstrated their ability to drive economic empowerment and societal transformation through job creation and poverty alleviation in their regions. In other words, women entrepreneurs often aim to positively affect the communities in which they are based (Corrêa et al., 2024).

2. Digital entrepreneurship as a means of economic empowerment

Recent work by Kelly and McAdam (2023) and McAdam, Crowley and Harrison (2020) demonstrates how digital platforms enable women to challenge traditional norms, shape their identities and cultivate supportive communities that reinforce their entrepreneurial identities. McAdam, Crowley and Harrison (2020) show that digital entrepreneurship and the use of digital technologies offer possibilities for women constrained by social and cultural practices, a particular occurrence in their study's setting in Saudi Arabia. For many women, transitioning from traditional employment to digital self-employment represents more than a career shift. Kelly and McAdam (2023) argue that such a shift is a liminal experience marked by entrepreneurial identity transformation.

Digital entrepreneurship is increasingly recognized as a **transformative space for women in terms of economic empowerment and as a medium for personal and social emancipation.**

Women can trial and adopt entrepreneurial personas, facilitated by digital platforms related to social media, e-commerce and communications. That enables women to explore new roles and ultimately support their identity development as digital entrepreneurs. Online, women find peers with similar challenges and aspirations (Kelly and McAdam, 2023), which can be particularly powerful in situations in which offline support is limited or shaped by conservative norms (McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2020).

First, it offers flexibility, allowing women to integrate their work into their daily lives, which is especially beneficial for those with caregiving responsibilities. Second, due to these responsibilities, it offers lower barriers to entry and more flexibility than brick-and-mortar businesses, reducing business costs. Moreover, digital platforms can foster networks and customer relationships, which broaden their market reach to grow their customer base beyond local markets (Sirimanne and Adhikari, 2023). That is illustrated in a report by the Cherie Blair Foundation for Women (2025), in which the Foundation shows that women entrepreneurs in low- and middle-income countries leverage digital technologies to enhance their business growth and productivity, particularly through their use of digital marketing and online payment systems.

3. Barriers facing women in the digital space

While digital technologies offer abundant potential benefits, accessing these advantages can be challenging for marginalized groups.

Digital entrepreneurship is "a resource-based activity, requiring capital investment, technical knowledge, access to online marketplaces and supporting hardware and software" (McAdam, Crowley and Harrison, 2020, p. 351). Moreover, women digital entrepreneurs can face additional gender-based challenges (Corrêa et al., 2024), making digital technologies both a facilitator (Bejjani Göcke and Menter, 2023) and a barrier for female digital entrepreneurship.

Women digital entrepreneurs encounter cultural barriers, societal discrimination or biases, gender-based harassment, privacy concerns, limited technology and digital skills, lower confidence in technology-related roles, a lack of female role models, restrictive family roles (work-family conflict) and unequal access to financing (UNCTAD, 2022; Corrêa et al., 2024; Cherie Blair Foundation for Women, 2025). Those challenges "restrict women's ability to fully capitalise on the benefits of technologies that could support their business growth" (Cherie Blair Foundation for Women, 2025, p. 6).

4. Uncovering knowledge gaps

A nuanced understanding of the experiences of women entrepreneurs leading digital businesses is essential for designing effective policies to support them in overcoming challenges. However, policy design cannot follow a one-size-fits-all approach because the outcomes and drivers of entrepreneurship are location specific (Ortega-Argilés, 2022). That view has been emphasized in several studies (Alhajri and Aloud, 2024; Corrêa et al., 2024), highlighting that social, cultural and local norms, religion, regulatory constraints and economic factors shape the lived experiences of women digital entrepreneurs across different contexts. Those factors may act as "boundary conditions" for women in specific contexts (Ughetto et al., 2020, p. 309). That makes it imperative to narrow the gap in our understanding of how different contexts (and ecosystems) shape the intentions and behaviours of women digital entrepreneurs (Alhajri and Aloud, 2024).

Also, in many Least Developed Countries (LDCs), women's work and entrepreneurial activity remains restricted by law.
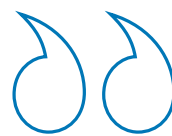
According to UNCTAD (2018), 32 LDCs have laws barring women from certain types of employment, and 6 require additional procedures for women to start a business. While digital platforms can offer new opportunities to bypass some of these barriers, a deeper understanding of the structural gender inequalities and legal constraints that continue to affect women's full participation in the digital economy is needed.

Over and above the calls for cross-country research (Berman et al., 2024), Chrysostome, Barnard and Ila (2024) argue that significant gaps remain in the current body of knowledge on African digital women entrepreneurship – a relatively new phenomenon.

We do not yet know enough about how women entrepreneurs use technology to drive their businesses, nor much about the characteristics of the female entrepreneurs involved in this new phenomenon in African countries.

Chrysostome, Barnard and Ila, 2024, p. 3

The present report contributes towards addressing those gaps by providing ways in which appropriate, tailored, context-based supportive policies can be designed with a particular focus on Africa.

Chapter II

Profiles of women digital entrepreneurs in the global South

This chapter presents a detailed overview of survey data covering 94 women digital entrepreneurs in developing countries. It examines demographic profiles, business models, motivations and perceived challenges – including work-life balance, access to mentorship and networks, and exposure to gender discrimination. Such a comparative analysis lays the groundwork for a deeper exploration of entrepreneurs operating in sub-Saharan African in the chapters that follow.

Key findings

The entrepreneurs surveyed are highly educated and driven by personal passion and experience. Most are married with dependants, facing particular work-life balance challenges, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Societal pressures influence their entrepreneurial paths, with many operating in male-dominated sectors. Over half report having faced discrimination in professional settings.

The businesses studied are typically young and small, with most entrepreneurs acting as sole founders. The businesses create employment, including for women, but face significant liquidity constraints. Many rely on personal savings due to limited access to affordable financing.

Key barriers to business growth include liquidity constraints, high operational costs, limited cross-border expansion opportunities and sometimes complex regulatory environments. Challenges seem to be more acute in sub-Saharan Africa.

As regards cross-border trade, 60 per cent of businesses export, although typically at low intensity. Sub-Saharan Africa exporters tend to export to multiple African markets, while Latin American exporters report greater export challenges.

Policy priorities identified include improved access to finance, including through greater public support mechanisms. In addition, entrepreneurs in sub-Saharan Africa stress the need for training and improved digital infrastructure; those in Asia call for better market access and access to mentorship; and those in Latin America emphasize inclusion in public procurement and stronger local market opportunities.

A. Navigating leadership: profiles and perceptions of women digital entrepreneurs

1. Demographic profiles

Almost half of the respondents are aged 35–44, 57 per cent are married and 73 per cent have dependants (table 1). Age distribution varies significantly by region, with Latin America skewing older and sub-Saharan Africa skewing younger. Only a third of the women indicated are single and 27 per cent have no dependants. Respondents with no dependants are more prevalent in Latin America (41 per cent) and Asia (33 per cent) and lower in sub-Saharan Africa (16 per cent). Respondents with three or more dependants dominate sub-Saharan Africa (44 per cent).

> **Table 1**
> **Demographic profile of respondents**
> (Percentage)

Age		Marital status		Number of dependants	
18–24	4	Married	57	None	27
25–34	26	Single	33	1	17
35–44	46	Divorced	9	2	32
45–54	20	Widowed	1	3	7
55–64	4			4 or more	19

The respondents are generally highly educated. Approximately 43 per cent of them reported having a Master's degree, while 44 per cent hold a Bachelor's degree. Higher education is vital in reducing inequalities and creating various positive effects, such as fostering networks among peers and professionals. Moreover, approximately 29 per cent indicated that they had pursued education abroad, facilitating international network development. Such global connections can give women access to potential buyers, diverse perspectives and valuable resources.

The entrepreneurs are from diverse professional backgrounds, with experience in fields such as technology/information technology and sales/marketing. Their personal experiences were among the key motivations for starting their businesses. Other significant drivers included a passion for the industry and capitalizing on identified gaps in the market (figure 1).

➤ **Figure 1**

**Motivations for starting a digital business (share of respondents
indicating a factor as "extremely" motivational)**
(Percentage)

	0	10	20	30	40	50	60
Financial independence					43		
Passion for the industry					46		
Flexible working hours					42		
An identified market gap					45		
Personal experience						52	
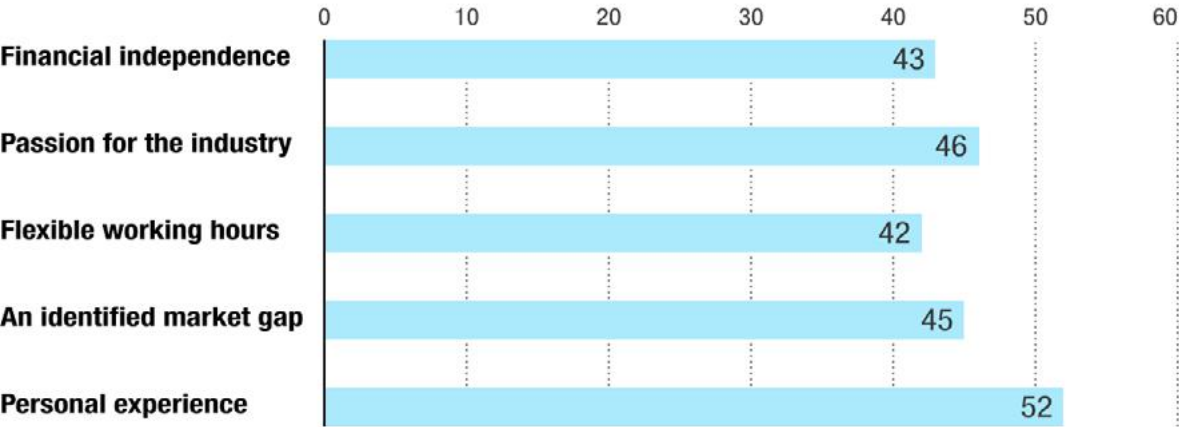
Financial independence was a top driver for respondents in Latin America, where more than half mentioned it as an "extremely" motivational factor, compared with 40 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa and 33 per cent in Asia (table 2). Passion is consistently identified as a "very" or "extremely" motivational factor. Flexible hours are less of a motivator in sub-Saharan Africa than in Asia and Latin America. The market gap is also consistently considered important across all regions, as is personal experience.

Table 2

Reasons for starting a business by region

(Percentage)

Motivation	Degree of motivation	Sub-Saharan Africa	Latin America	Asia
Financial independence	Not at all/slightly	16	18	10
	Moderately	18	9	10
	Very	27	18	48
	Extremely	40	55	33
Passion for the industry	Not at all/slightly	2	5	0
	Moderately	18	9	10
	Very	36	41	43
	Extremely	44	45	48
Flexible working hours	Not at all/slightly	24	14	10
	Moderately	27	23	10
	Very	22	14	24
	Extremely	27	50	57
An identified market gap	Not at all/slightly	2	5	0
	Moderately	7	0	14
	Very	43	55	52
	Extremely	44	41	33
Personal experience	Not at all/slightly	7	9	10
	Moderately	18	9	14
	Very	31	9	24
	Extremely	44	73	52

2. Perceptions of work-life balance and gender roles in the digital space

The demographic profiles suggest that most of the women are deeply embedded in family structures, which aligns with their perceptions of how balancing work and family responsibilities affects their lives (figure 2). Half of the respondents indicated that balancing work and family responsibilities had a "significant" to "major" impact on their lives. That is most pronounced in Latin America (59 per cent), followed by sub-Saharan Africa (52 per cent) and Asia (43 per cent).

Figure 2

Impact of the need to balance work and family responsibilities
(Percentage)
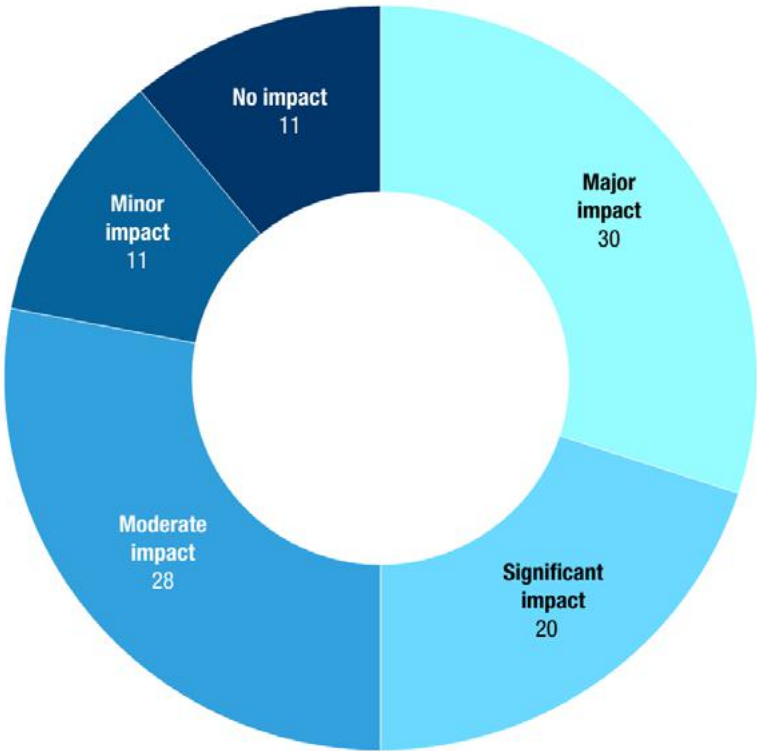
Regional comparisons offer a nuanced understanding of the experiences faced by entrepreneurs (table 3). Regarding the impact of the expectations around family responsibilities, 60 per cent of respondents in sub-Saharan Africa face "significant" or "major" challenges in their entrepreneurial journey, possibly reflecting having more dependants.

Respondents also encounter notable social and cultural barriers. In sub-Saharan Africa, 29 per cent of the respondents reported that societal pressure to conform to traditional behaviours had a "significant" impact on their entrepreneurial journey and 20 per cent experienced societal pressure as a "major"

impact. That reflects a deeper cultural resistance to women in business. In Latin America, 46 per cent of the respondents face "significant" or "major" cultural expectations that affect their entrepreneurial journeys, while for 40 per cent of those in sub-Saharan Africa cultural norms had a "major" impact.

Across all regions, working in male-dominated industries is seen as a "major" or "significant" barrier, especially in Asia. Respondents in sub-Saharan Africa felt more moderate effects from stereotypes and were less hindered by negative leadership assumptions, which potentially points to a growing recognition of their capabilities.

In both Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, many respondents feel that they are not taken seriously by investors. In Asia, 58 per cent of respondents identified that as having a significant or major impact, while in sub-Saharan Africa, the figure was 48 per cent.

Respondents in Asia also highlighted difficulties related to networking, mentorship opportunities and a lack of role models. Limited access to business networks was reported as a major obstacle (the combined share of the "significant" or "major" impact was 53 per cent). Moreover, limited mentorship opportunities are also a challenge for most (58 per cent) respondents in Asia. It can be argued that even with lower numbers than in Asia, the lack of networking or mentorship opportunities in sub-Saharan Africa still presents a notable barrier.

Table 3

Perceived impact of work-life balance, social barriers and networking challenges on business/life, by region
(Percentage)

	Impact	Sub-Saharan Africa	Latin America	Asia
Work-life balance and family expectations				
Expectations around family responsibilities	None/minor	18	23	33
	Moderate	22	27	19
	Significant	44	32	38
	Major	16	18	10
Expectations in relation to women prioritizing their family over their career	None/minor	24	36	29
	Moderate	33	23	29
	Significant	29	36	29
	Major	13	5	14
Balancing work and family responsibilities	None/minor	20	18	33
	Moderate	27	23	24
	Significant	27	23	10
	Major	25	36	33

Social and cultural barriers

Cultural norms regarding women in business	None/minor	29	27	33
	Moderate	31	27	38
	Significant	16	32	24
	Major	24	14	5
Societal pressure to conform to certain behaviors	None/minor	16	32	29
	Moderate	36	32	43
	Significant	29	23	19
	Major	20	14	10
Perceptions of women's leadership abilities	None/minor	29	32	38
	Moderate	38	18	14
	Significant	18	27	29
	Major	16	23	19
Stereotypes about women's capabilities in relation to technology	None/minor	22	27	29
	Moderate	38	18	24
	Significant	20	32	29
	Major	20	23	19
Not being taken seriously by peers	None/minor	41	55	48
	Moderate	27	23	33
	Significant	20	14	10
	Major	11	9	10

Not being taken seriously by investors	None/minor	32	32	19
	Moderate	20	32	24
	Significant	25	18	29
	Major	23	18	29
Working in male-dominated industries	None/minor	25	9	14
	Moderate	25	36	19
	Significant	27	23	38
	Major	23	32	29
Lack of recognition and visibility	None/minor	39	27	38
	Moderate	25	27	19
	Significant	14	36	33
	Major	23	9	10

Networking and support challenges

Limited mentorship opportunities	None/minor	45	45	24
	Moderate	25	32	19
	Significant	14	14	29
	Major	16	9	29
Limited access to business networks	None/minor	30	43	10
	Moderate	30	13	38
	Significant	19	26	24
	Major	21	17	29
Lack of female role models	None/minor	41	50	24
	Moderate	30	23	29
	Significant	18	9	38
	Major	11	18	10

In general, approximately 78 per cent of all respondents emphasized the significant role of networks for their businesses, indicating that networks were among the most valuable assets for small businesses (figure 3).

Figure 3
Impact of networks
(Percentage)

Slightly important (1)
Not important (1)
Moderately important (19)
Quite important (39)
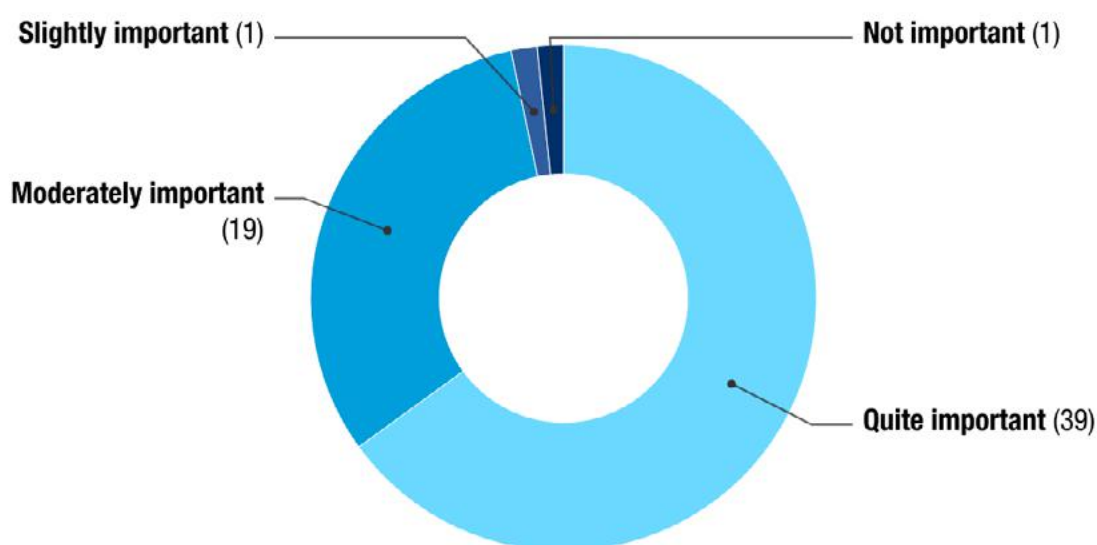
Note: Percentages reflect respondents' ratings of the importance of professional networks to their success as digital entrepreneurs on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 equals "Not important" and 5 equals "Extremely important".

More than half of the respondents have experienced discrimination, which was most prevalent in Latin America (68 per cent), followed by sub-Saharan Africa (58 per cent) and Asia (43 per cent). Among those who experienced discrimination, for respondents from sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, it mostly occurred during client interactions (62 per cent and 64 per cent, respectively). Among respondents in Asia, it was mainly during funding pitches and networking events (63 per cent).

B. Key features of the digital businesses

1. Business types

Among respondents, the most common form of business type is a limited liability company (38 per cent), followed by a sole proprietorship (30 per cent). Limited liability companies dominate in sub-Saharan Africa (58 per cent), while sole proprietorships are more prevalent in Asia (38 per cent) and Latin America (32 per cent). Corporations are more common in Asia (29 per cent) and Latin America (32 per cent), but rare in sub-Saharan Africa (2 per cent).

Approximately 40 per cent of the respondents are sole founders, while those with co-founders typically partner with their spouse, partner or friends. Most businesses surveyed are relatively young (less than six years old), with 37 per cent having been in operation for three years or less (figure 4). The industries in which these businesses operate are mostly e-commerce, followed by digital marketing and ICT services (consulting). E-commerce is the dominant industry across regions, particularly in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, whereas businesses in fintech, healthcare, education, agriculture and digital marketing are more prevalent in Latin America.

Figure 4
Number of years in operation
(Percentage)
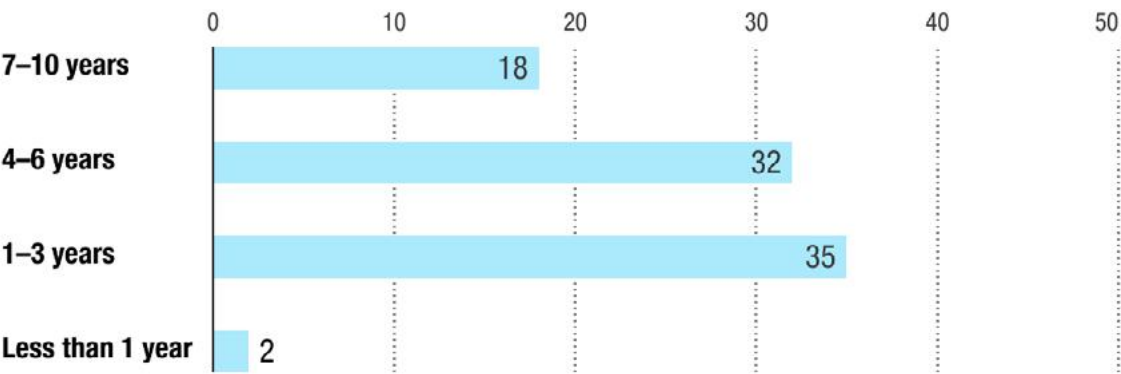
2. Business size

Although the businesses are mainly micro- or small enterprises (table 4), they contribute to job creation (including of informal workers) and women's empowerment. Half of the entrepreneurs have businesses with an annual revenue of less than $50,000, and about two thirds of them employ between one and nine employees. Overall, in 62 per cent of the companies women comprise the majority of the workforce. Micro-businesses (between one and nine employees) dominate across all three regions: sub-Saharan Africa (69 per cent), Latin America (68 per cent) and Asia (48 per cent). Respondents in sub-Saharan Africa also had the highest percentage (64 per cent) of small businesses in terms of annual revenue. Respondents with medium-sized businesses (50 or more employees) are prevalent in Asia (10 per cent) and not at all in either sub-Saharan Africa or Latin America. The region with the largest number of businesses employing a workforce in which women are in the majority is Latin America (64 per cent). Equal gender representation is more common in sub-Saharan Africa (22 per cent).

➤ **Table 4**

Businesses by annual revenue, number of employees and gender distribution
(Percentage)

Annual Revenue		Number of employees		Gender distribution of employees	
Less than $50 000	50	None	2	Mostly women	62
$50 000–$100 000	23	1–9	65	Equal number of men and women	20
$100 001–$250 000	16	10–49	31	Mostly men	18
$250 001–$500 000	7	50–249	2		
More than $1 000 000	3				

Most (66 per cent) of the younger businesses (less than three years) generated less than $50,000 in annual revenue. In contrast, older businesses often generate annual revenues that exceed $100,000 (53 per cent of businesses between the ages of 7 and 10 and 43 per cent of businesses older than 10 years).

3. Digital maturity

Respondents exhibit varying levels of digital maturity (figure 5). Some 19 per cent report having entirely digitized operations, including developing in-house digital software and solutions. Another 32 per cent demonstrate high digital maturity, with most business functions being digitalized, while 27 per cent have moderate digital maturity, with only key processes being digitalized. High digital maturity is shared across all regions, with the highest representation in Asia (43 per cent) and Latin America (41 per cent). The share of respondents with the lowest digital maturity rate was in sub-Saharan Africa (24 per cent). Relatively high levels of digital maturity enable businesses to leverage various digital technologies.

The most adopted technologies include cloud computing and storage, customer relationship management solutions, data analytics and business intelligence tools, online payment gateways and digital wallets. Such businesses mainly target other businesses as primary customers, followed by consumers. Considering regional differences of their primary target markets, the former is dominant in Latin America (83 per cent) and Asia (57 per cent), whereas the latter is most prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa (51 per cent).

Most businesses across all regions reported having their own platform (between 86 and 89 per cent). Those platforms enhance business operations, while social media has become an increasingly utilized digital channel. High social media usage is reported across all regions, albeit to varying degrees (80 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa, 81 per cent in Asia and 59 per cent in Latin America). Use of e-commerce marketplaces is notably lower, ranging from 7 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa to 38 per cent in Asia.

Figure 5
Levels of digital maturity
(Percentage)
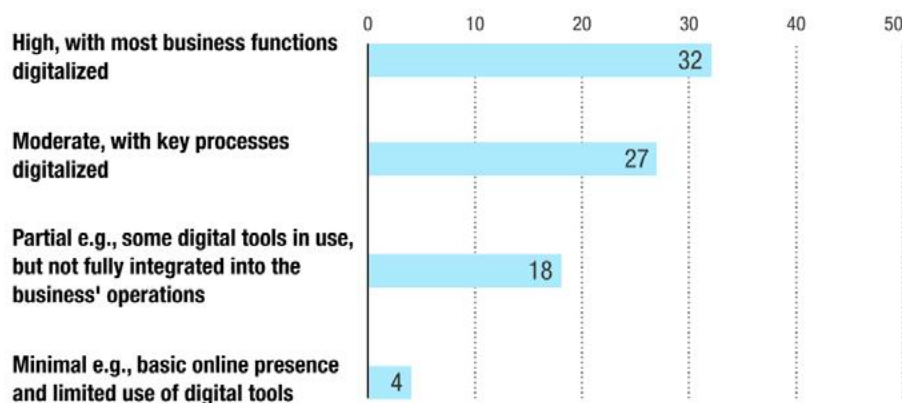
C. Obstacles to business growth

1. Constraints in access to capital

In terms of funding sources, personal and family savings are the most common across all regions (figure 6). Respondents within Asia and sub-Saharan Africa reported the greatest use of personal savings. While that may be desirable in terms of enabling control over decision-making, it may restrict growth potential. Support from friends and family is a secondary but significant funding source, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (44 per cent). Access to formal loans is low across all regions, indicating challenges with formal financing. As such, 35 per cent of the businesses are still in the pre-seed funding stage. Significantly, few respondents indicated other funding sources.

Figure 6
Stage of funding
(Percentage)
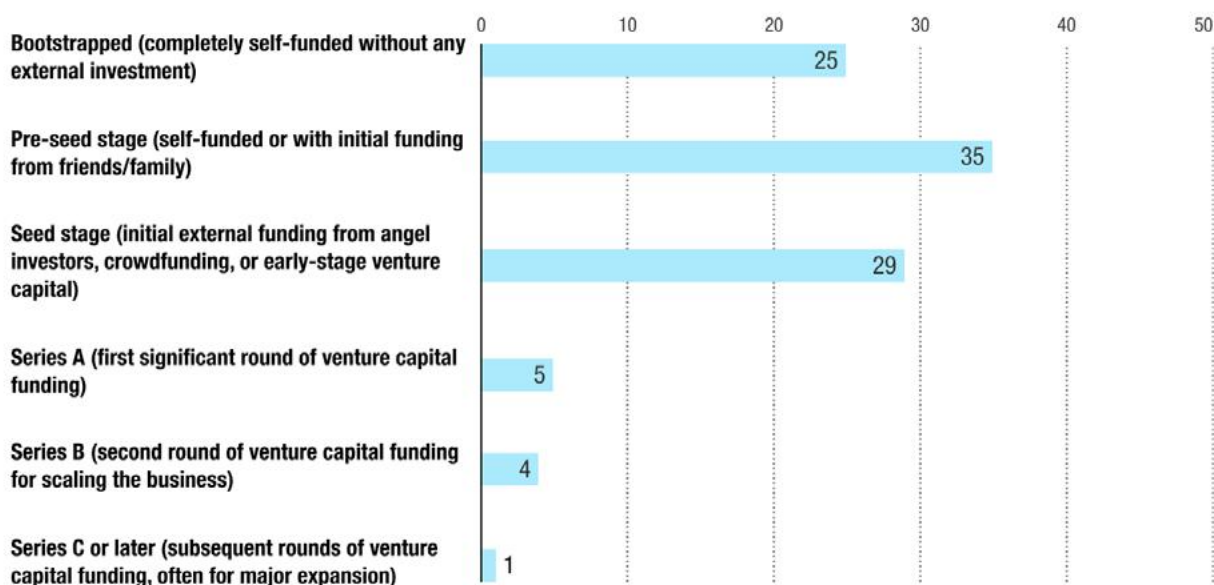
Most bootstrapped businesses are in early annual revenue stages (52 per cent earn less than $50,000). Pre-seed companies are also small in terms of revenue, even more so than bootstrapped ones (62 per cent earn less than $50,000), which may be attributed to product testing or the like. Those in the seed stage of funding are more evenly spread out across revenue categories (37 per cent earn under $50,000 and 33 per cent earn between $100,000 and $250,000).

That is also the case for those businesses in series A funding, while some still have smaller revenue turnovers (40 per cent), others have scaled significantly (40 per cent have an annual revenue of more than $1,000,000).

Overall, the respondents experience various capital-related challenges (table 5.a). High interest rates and a lack of access to funding-related resources and training are among the more severe barriers experienced.

> **Table 5.a**
>
> **Share of respondents indicating that capital-related challenges are "very" or "extremely" challenging, by region**
> (Percentage)

Capital-related challenges		Total	Sub-Saharan Africa	Latin America	Asia
Financial constraints and challenges	Issues with cash flow management	47	42	64	38
	High interest rates	68	69	82	52
	Insufficient revenue or profit margins/collateral	57	71	45	38
	Early-stage business with a limited track record	48	51	45	43
Business model and investor perceptions	Perception of higher risk in digital businesses	48	58	36	38
	Lack of understanding of the digital business model by investors	44	53	23	48
Skills and knowledge gaps	Difficulty in preparing detailed financial projections and reports	44	62	23	29
	Lack of fundraising skills	50	64	35	48
	Lack of access to funding-related resources and training	52	56	45	52

There are notable differences among the regions when considering the mean scores (five indicates the highest challenges and one the lowest). Respondents in Latin America report the most significant difficulties with high interest rates (mean = 4.18) and cash flow (mean = 3.87) among the regions. In contrast, respondents in sub-Saharan Africa reported the greatest challenges related to insufficient revenue or profit margins/ collateral (mean = 4.00) and experiencing a higher perceived risk of digital businesses (mean = 3.64). That may explain why those businesses are still relatively small and do not use external funding sources. For respondents in sub-Saharan Africa, a lack of access to funding-related resources (mean = 3.56) and fundraising skills (mean = 3.73) is more challenging than in other regions (table 5.b).

Table 5.b
Mean challenge scores, by region
(on a scale of 1 to 5)

Region	Mean Score SSA	Mean Score Latin America	Mean Score Asia
Issues with cash flow management	3.22	3.86	3.10
High interest rates	3.87	4.18	3.48
Insufficient revenue or profit margins/collateral	3.98	3.41	3.29
Early-stage business with limited track record	3.51	3.23	2.81
Perception of higher risk in digital businesses	3.64	3.05	2.95
Lack of understanding of the digital business model by investors	3.56	2.82	3.10
Difficulty in preparing detailed financial projections and reports	3.62	2.86	2.81
Capital: Lack of fundraising skills	3.73	3.09	3.24
Lack of access to funding-related resources and training	3.56	3.18	3.19

The following figure provides a comparative view (figure 7). In sub-Saharan Africa, the most frequently cited barrier is insufficient revenue or profit margins/collateral (71 per cent). In contrast, that issue is less prominent in Asia (38 per cent) and Latin America (45 per cent).

In Latin America, high interest rates stand out as the top challenge, reported by 82 per cent of respondents. Meanwhile, in Asia, both high interest rates and a lack of fundraising training were cited by 52 per cent of respondents.

> **Figure 7**
> **Capital constraints by region**
> (Percentage)

	Sub-Saharan Africa	Latin America	Asia
Issues with cash flow management	42	64	38
High interest rates	69	82	52
Insufficient revenue or profit margins/collateral	71	45	38
Early-stage business with a limited track record	51	45	43
Perception of higher risk in digital businesses	58	36	38
Lack of understanding of the digital business model by investors	53	23	48
Difficulty in preparing detailed financial projections and reports	62	23	29
Lack of fundraising skills	64	35	48
Lack of access to funding-related resources and training	56	45	52

2.   Regulatory and market access constraints

In addition to capital-related constraints, respondents also experience numerous other challenges related to laws and regulations, consumer behaviour and trust, payments and transactions, logistics, and markets and competition (table 6). Again, there are notable differences among the regions. Sub-Saharan Africa (mean = 2.78) reports more significant issues in relation to digital connectivity than Latin America (mean = 1.50) and also higher challenges (mean = 3.60) in relation to the

costs of digital infrastructure compared with Latin America (mean = 3.00). Across all regions, difficulties in hiring/retaining digital talent remain high, but most notably in sub-Saharan Africa (mean = 3.71). Asia reports significant difficulties in relation to rules and regulations (mean = 3.62), while Latin America reports fewer issues in this area (mean = 2.59). Sub-Saharan African entrepreneurs report the greatest challenges (mean = 3.51) in data management and cybersecurity. Similarly, those in sub-Saharan Africa face more significant issues (mean = 3.49) in relation to trust in digital payment solutions than Asia and Latin America.

➤ **Table 6**

Regulatory and operational barriers by region: share of respondents rating each barrier as "very" or "extremely" challenging
(Percentage)

Barriers	Total	Sub-Saharan Africa	Latin America	Asia
Regulatory and legal barriers				
Complex and/or cumbersome rules and regulations	34	42	0	52
Intellectual property rights protection and enforcement	40	42	27	48
Data protection: compliance issues with data protection laws and localization requirements	38	49	23	29
Infrastructure and connectivity				
Digital connectivity: limited or unreliable internet	19	29	0	19
Digital infrastructure: high hardware and software costs	48	56	32	48
High shipping costs, unreliable delivery services, and disruptions in the supply chain	47	58	23	48
Talent operations and management				
Talent management: difficulties in hiring and/or retaining digitally skilled workers	56	62	45	52
Difficulties in maintaining a consistent presence across multiple channels	45	40	41	62
Resource allocation: trade-offs between maintaining current operations and investing in new technologies or new market opportunities	61	58	59	71
Security and data management:				
Data management and cybersecurity: issues with data storage, risk of data breaches and cyber-attacks	41	58	14	33

Market and consumer challenges				
Lack of market information	42	47	32	43
High levels of competition in target markets	39	33	45	48
Low levels of digital literacy among potential customers	41	49	32	33
Low levels of trust among potential customers	34	42	23	29
Diversity of customers' behaviors	38	49	23	29
Payment and transaction challenges				
Limited choice of digital payment solutions	32	47	18	14
Lack of consumer trust in digital payment solutions	38	51	18	29
Handling different payment systems and currencies across countries	40	53	36	14
Managing transaction fees and ensuring secure payment processing	36	42	27	33
Managing exchange rate fluctuations	43	60	23	29
External environment				
The macroeconomic environment and political instability (uncertainty)	53	56	59	38

D. Policy and government support

The respondents highlighted many policy suggestions that they believed would be beneficial to their entrepreneurial journey (table 7). In general, the most frequently recommended policies were related to financial support, improved market access and opportunities, skills development and capacity-building initiatives. Regional nuances also show that respondents in sub-Saharan Africa require more policies oriented towards capacity-building; those in Latin America would welcome more public sector market access, while those in Asia require better local and international market access. To assess regional priorities, the frequency of mentions for each policy measure was calculated as a percentage of total respondents within each region.

Table 7

Most requested policy measures by region
(Percentage)

Category	Policy	Total	Sub-Saharan Africa	Latin America	Asia
Infrastructure and regulatory improvements	Improved digital infrastructure	33	36	14	48
	Simplified business registration and compliance procedures	25	22	23	33
	Measures to improve data protection laws and regulations	20	24	5	29
	Measures to improve consumer protection laws and regulations	15	20	0	19

Financial support	Public support to give women-owned businesses greater access to funding (grants, loans, subsidies, credit facilities)	83	80	86	86
Market access and opportunities	Support for accessing local and international markets	65	62	59	76
	Promotion of women-owned businesses in public procurement bids and contracts	64	56	82	62
Skills development and capacity building	Training and capacity-building to enhance women's entrepreneurial and digital skills	66	69	55	71

Table 8
Most important government support measures by region
(Percentage)

Government support	Total	Sub-Saharan Africa	Latin America	Asia
Access to technology	3	7	0	0
Financial assistance (grants, loans, subsidies)	43	40	55	38
Training and capacity-building	3	4	5	0
Mentorship and coaching	5	4	0	10
Networking opportunities	8	9	9	5
Market access support	32	31	23	43
Legal advisory services	5	2	9	5
Other	1	2	0	0

E. Trading across borders

Access to international markets is often cited as a major opportunity for businesses going digital. In the survey, approximately 60 per cent of respondents indicated that they were already exporting. Cross-border sales are most prevalent among the businesses in Latin America (68 per cent) and sub-Saharan Africa (64 per cent), while in Asia less than half sell abroad. However, for the vast majority of exporting businesses, the domestic market remains their most important (table 9).

Of those that export, 18 per cent export to only one country, slightly less than two thirds (63 per cent) export to 2 to 4 countries, 13 per cent export to between 5 and 10 countries, and the remainder (7 per cent) export to more than 10 countries. A higher number of export destinations (more than two) is most common in sub-Saharan Africa. For example, one business sells across Africa through a digital profiling platform for the gig economy. While some exporters trade with countries beyond Africa, cross-border trade is more common among exporters in sub-Saharan Africa.

Table 9

Characteristics of businesses that export, by region

(Percentage)

Export characteristics		Sub-Saharan Africa	Latin America	Asia
No. of export destinations	1	0	47	22
	2-4	75	47	67
	5-10	14	7	11
	10+	11	0	0
Export intensity	1-25%	64	73	78
	26-50%	22	13	22
	51%+	14	13	0

Note: "Export intensity" is the percentage of sales generated in international markets.

Exporting entrepreneurs find exporting quite challenging (table 10). Some 14 per cent of entrepreneurs exporting both goods and services found it "very difficult" and 35 per cent "difficult". Latin America reported the highest perception of difficulty in exporting both goods and services, while it was perceived to be easier for some in Asia.

In recent research, UNCTAD (2024) indicated that women-led e-commerce businesses encountered greater regulatory burdens and reduced capacities, primarily due to their smaller size, as they were more likely operating as MSMEs. Such businesses are often concentrated in less profitable sectors, such as agriculture and textiles, in which non-tariff measures are more common. Moreover, they experience longer customs clearance times due to gender-specific supply-side

constraints that make it more difficult for them to comply with technical regulations or standards. Those limitations include: limited access to resources and land, lack of skills and education, as well as time poverty and mobility constraints. While based on a different pool of entrepreneurs and data sources, the present findings may help shed light on the relatively low export intensity observed among respondents and the difficulties that they reported, such as limited access to information or limited capacities (table 10). The differences in how barriers are perceived also create a valuable opportunity for future research.

Table 10

Exporters' perceived difficulties in exporting goods and services, by region
(Percentage)

		Total	Sub-Saharan Africa	Latin America	Asia
Exporting goods is:	Very difficult	14	15	21	0
	Difficult	36	30	50	33
	Neutral	30	33	21	33
	Easy	16	15	7	33
	Very easy	4	7	0	0
Exporting services is:	Very difficult	14	16	21	0
	Difficult	32	24	50	38
	Neutral	30	40	14	25
	Easy	18	16	14	38
	Very easy	2	4	0	0

Note: N=88 respondents, of which 52 are exporters. In relation to the question on exporting goods, responses were received from 27 businesses in sub-Saharan Africa, 14 in Latin America and 9 in Asia. In relation to the question on exporting services, responses were received from 25 businesses in sub-Saharan Africa, 14 in Latin America and 8 in Asia.

While data shared in the present chapter reveal region-specific similarities and challenges, they offer only a partial picture. To better understand the challenges and strategies of women digital entrepreneurs – particularly in sub-Saharan Africa – it is essential to go beyond quantitative data. To the next chapter delves into the experiences of women digital entrepreneurs across 13 African countries. That sheds some light on how they navigate personal, societal and systemic barriers and how their resilience, innovation and community-driven leadership are shaping digital ecosystems from the ground up.

Chapter III

Experiences of African women digital entrepreneurs

This chapter presents an in-depth analysis of the experiences of 33 women digital entrepreneurs from 13 sub-Saharan African countries. Insights reveal how deeply embedded gender roles, limited infrastructure and fragmented ecosystems shape women's entrepreneurial journeys across the continent.

The interviews capture the voices of women founders from Benin (2 participants), Burundi (1), Cameroon (2), Ethiopia (1), Ghana (1), Kenya (12), Mali (1), Namibia (1), Nigeria (5), Rwanda (1), Senegal (2), Uganda (3) and the United Republic of Tanzania (1). Across diverse country contexts, they share a common drive to overcome systemic barriers, scale solutions with limited resources and redefine what it means to be business leaders in Africa's digital economy.

Key findings

The interviews revealed that local contexts across sub-Saharan Africa significantly shape women's entrepreneurial experiences, with cross-country disparities in digital infrastructure, institutional support and societal attitudes towards women in business.

Women digital entrepreneurs in Africa are strongly motivated by a sense of purpose, viewing their businesses as a means to uplift communities and address local needs.

They demonstrate remarkable resilience navigating structural and cultural barriers, while managing multiple roles within their families and communities.

For many, social impact takes priority over financial returns, with businesses perceived as a means to promote education, health, digital inclusion and job creation. However, an overemphasis on social objectives can sometimes hinder the growth and long-term sustainability of their businesses.

To unlock their potential, women digital entrepreneurs need greater support to strike a balance between social impact and sound business strategies. Country-specific differences also highlight the need for

A. Perceptions of the business environment

This section explores how interviewees perceive the business contexts in which they operate.[2]

In Kenya, several of the entrepreneurs interviewed emphasized a supportive culture for collaboration, a proactive embrace of technology and a strong middle class that encourages consumption and investment in new ventures. One founder (#32) highlighted that: "In Kenya, we are very driven by technology and innovation. We are very hungry to innovate, and I think that stems from the M-Pesa innovation and many others, such as iHub, that have shown what is possible."

Another founder explained (#2): "Kenya is very easy, because people are more friendly and they know how to work together. When you arrive and you present your business, if Kenyans can help you and can see that they have an opportunity to work with you, they can just say 'okay, can we work together?'."

However, entrepreneurs from some other countries described their business environments as being more restricted, which required strong personal networks and persistence. One interviewee (#7), comparing Burundi to neighbouring Rwanda, remarked: "Oh, Kigali is very developed, but here in Burundi it's very closed, you must use a network, you must be deep in a relationship with different people."

Similarly, the difficulty in finding straightforward addresses or establishing robust digital channels can pose obstacles for both consumers and businesses. Despite those barriers, for example, in Cameroon, respondents there viewed the country as possessing untapped potential, as long as entrepreneurs remained resourceful and willing to adapt.

In Nigeria, its large population and pressing social needs offer vast opportunities. At the same time, frequent policy shifts, bureaucratic hurdles and inadequate infrastructure can slow progress. One interviewee (#18) stated that: "Nigeria is hard. It's like everything is just created to be hard … from a regulatory standpoint it's bad, because it just takes longer for approvals to get done … and your business can be wiped out by regulatory changes."

Nevertheless, respondents highlighted the resilience Nigerian entrepreneurs demonstrate, as stated by #24: "Nigerians thrive on survival, so we have the energy to survive." Despite the demanding environment, many still saw enormous promise, noting that the "unstructuredness" of Nigeria created space for innovative solutions.

Elsewhere, the United Republic of Tanzania appears to be bolstering opportunities for women, reinforced by the role of women in political leadership. One founder (#20) recalled initial challenges in securing funding that changed once Samia Suluhu Hassan took office as President: "She came into that position stating, 'I do prioritize women'. Before, it used to be 'you're a woman, you can't control the money; you're a woman, you can't navigate tech society.' But from that point on, there were no limitations." Meanwhile, interviewees from other countries, including Senegal and Ethiopia, highlighted specific obstacles, such as high living costs for maintaining up-to-date equipment or unexpected Internet blackouts lasting weeks or even months. Those kinds of circumstances underscore the need for perseverance and adaptability in fast-evolving contexts.

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[2] In accordance with United Nations editorial policy, the quotations that appear in this chapter have been lightly edited, while preserving the original meaning and intent of the interviewees. Verbatim reports are available upon request.

Figure 8 contains a comparison of women's perceptions of digital infrastructure quality with their views on the level of support for entrepreneurship. The data reveal wide disparities across countries on the continent. For example, Kenya and Nigeria are perceived by entrepreneurs as having well-developed digital infrastructure, as well as collaborative and encouraging business cultures. In contrast, entrepreneurs in Burundi and Cameroon reported low-quality digital infrastructure alongside limited institutional and cultural support for entrepreneurship. Findings highlight the importance of adopting context-specific strategies and investing in both infrastructure and ecosystem-building to foster inclusive digital entrepreneurship.

Figure 8
Perceived quality of connectivity and support for entrepreneurship

- Benin, Burundi, Ethiopia and Mali
- Cameroon, Senegal and Uganda
- Ghana, Namibia, Rwanda and United Republic of Tanzania
- Kenya and Nigeria
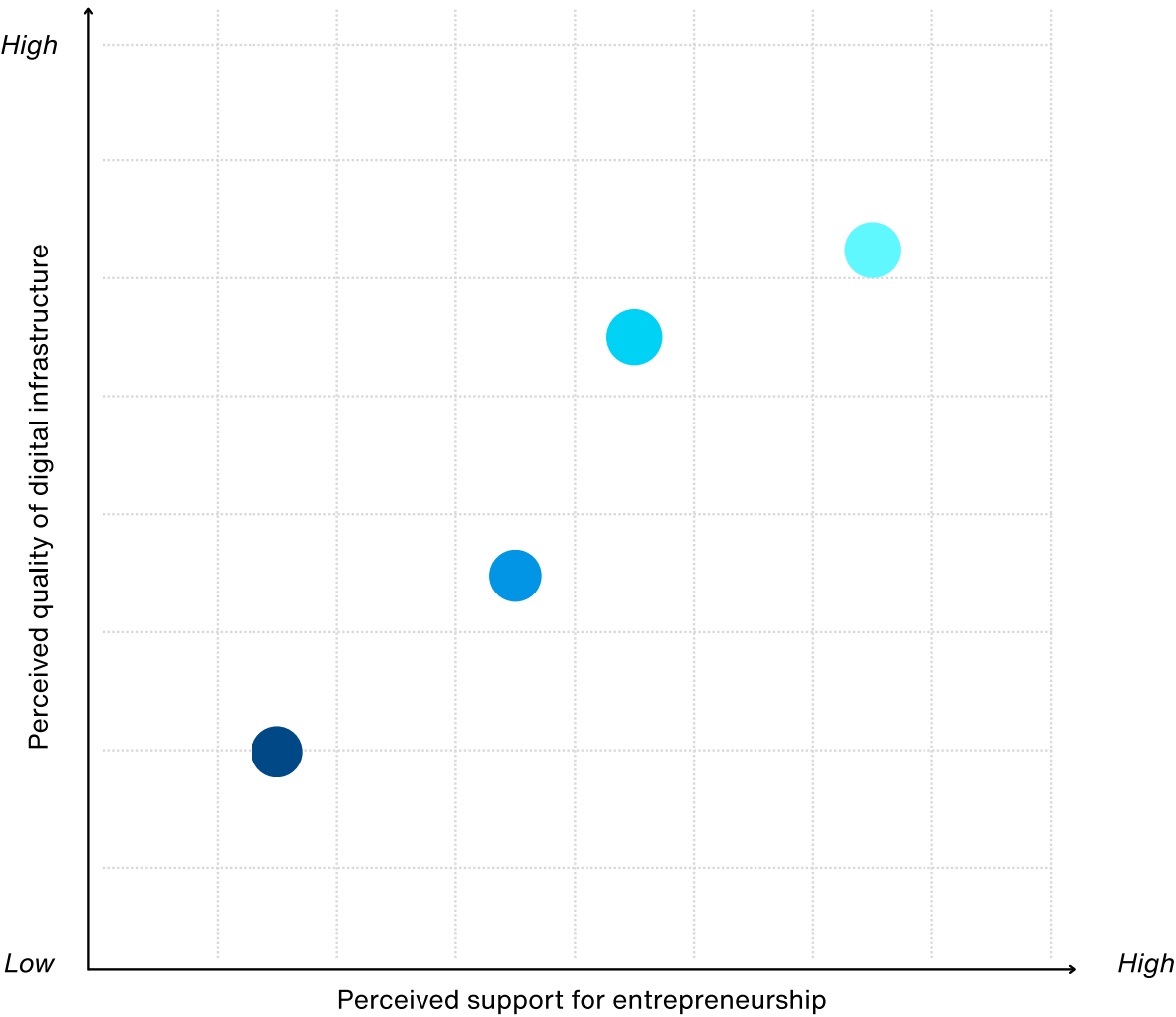
Source: UNCTAD.

B. Social expectations shaping women's entrepreneurial journeys in Africa

The present section explores the experiences of the interviewees, focusing on their daily activities, perceived opportunities and the barriers encountered. Four overarching themes – or "aggregate dimensions" – emerge that characterize their shared realities: (a) strong motivation to pursue business as a means of helping others; (b) a high degree of personal resilience and determination; (c) frequent prioritization of social impact over purely economic objectives; and (d) clear

drive to scale businesses as a strategy to extend support and benefit communities.

Figure 9 presents the results of the analysis of participants' testimonies. It lists the 12 thematic categories – or "first-order codes" – that emerged from the interviews and groups them into the four broader aggregate dimensions that capture key aspects of the experiences of the entrepreneurs.

> **Figure 9**
> **First-order codes and aggregate dimensions**

Aggregate dimensions

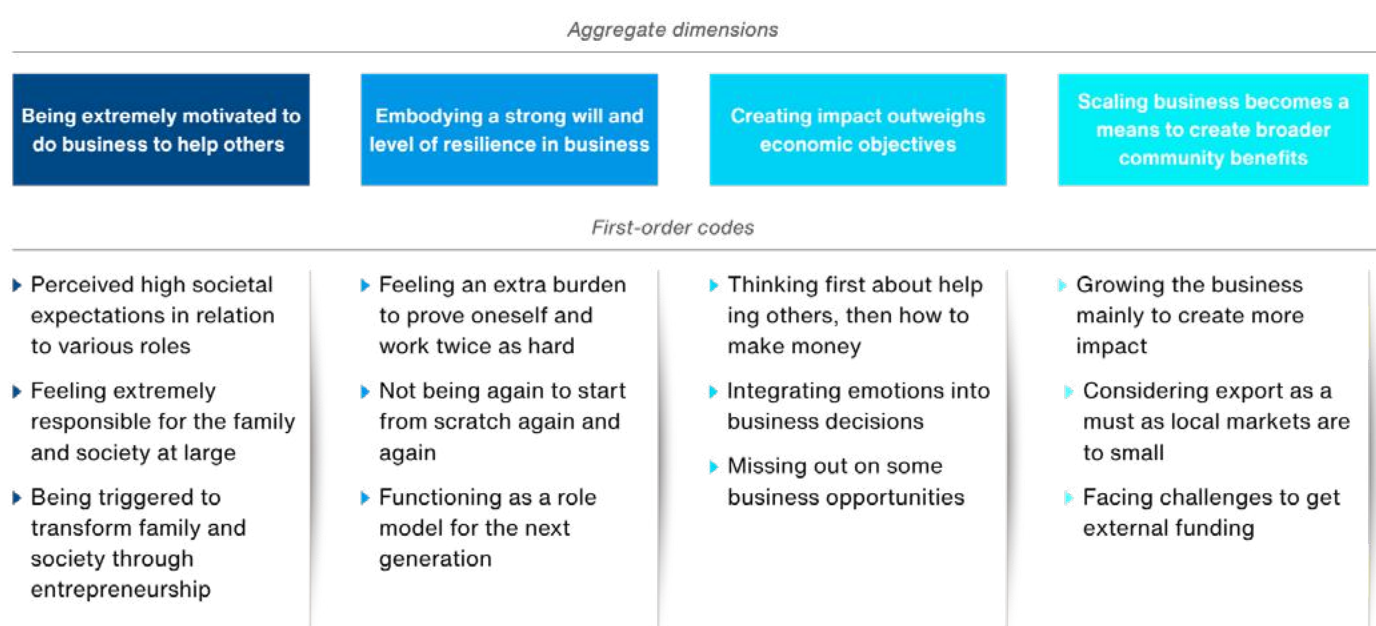| Being extremely motivated to do business to help others	Embodying a strong will and level of resilience in business	Creating impact outweighs economic objectives	Scaling business becomes a means to create broader community benefits

First-order codes

▸ Perceived high societal expectations in relation to various roles	▸ Feeling an extra burden to prove oneself and work twice as hard	▸ Thinking first about helping others, then how to make money	▸ Growing the business mainly to create more impact
▸ Feeling extremely responsible for the family and society at large	▸ Not being again to start from scratch again and again	▸ Integrating emotions into business decisions	▸ Considering export as a must as local markets are to small
▸ Being triggered to transform family and society through entrepreneurship	▸ Functioning as a role model for the next generation	▸ Missing out on some business opportunities	▸ Facing challenges to get external funding

Source: UNCTAD

The remainder of the chapter presents the analysis of participants' testimonies, organized by the four aggregate dimensions.

It includes selected quotations to illustrate their responses and perspectives.

1.   Being extremely motivated to do business to help others

(a)   Perceived high societal expectations in relation to various roles payment solutions than Asia and Latin America.

In general, the interviewees perceived high societal expectations to fill multiple roles.

Located in Nairobi – working with three co-founders and using her home as an office – #26 highlighted the multitude of responsibilities women entrepreneurs faced, both at work and in their personal lives. She recounted her own experience of juggling family obligations, including caring for a child with special educational needs, alongside her professional ambitions:

It's possible, but it's definitely challenging. As a woman, particularly in Africa, you often find yourself putting in significantly more hours. The reality is that the hours in your day aren't fully your own. Often, the only time you can truly claim for yourself is during the moments meant for rest. From around the age of 15, societal expectations around nurturing and caregiving begin to take hold and these expectations often compete directly with professional or entrepreneurial ambitions. So it's important to understand that pursuing your passion will require intentional effort and sacrifice. The world places many demands on women and, in many cases, you're expected to meet those responsibilities before you can focus on your own goals. Let me give you a personal example. I'm a mother – my son is now 17 – but I've raised a child with special needs, navigated the complexities of being an expatriate working in a foreign country, and gone through a divorce. So if you think about it, in a 24-hour day, the demands placed on me add up to much more than that. I'm expected to be fully present in one area, then also give eight hours elsewhere – and when you add it all up, it's as if I'm being pulled in 32 different directions. But no one sees it that way. To others, it still looks like a 24-hour day. The reality is: we simply don't have the time.

Similarly, #1, from Mali, underscored the physical and emotional toll that pregnancy could impose on women entrepreneurs, particularly when they must continue to meet high expectations:

There are times when it's genuinely exhausting – like now, for example, I'm pregnant and it's not easy. You're tired, but there's still so much that needs to be done. At the same time, you feel the pressure to lead by example, and that's not something that comes easily every single day. The expectation remains that you need to perform as if you're not pregnant at all. There's little room for slowing down. On top of it all, you're expected to manage your emotions privately – and that's not easy, not every day.

Another interviewee, #11, who has spent most of her life in Nigeria, pointed to broader societal and cultural barriers faced by many women in the region. She explained that, in addition to external obstacles, there could also be a lack of internal or family support for women who wished to break with traditional life plans:

One of the biggest challenges I've faced has been the lack of support – and I don't just mean external support, but internal support as well. As a woman, especially when I wanted to pursue further education, I found myself alone and had to figure things out by myself. That is particularly true in the African context – and even more so in the Nigerian context— – there's often a predetermined path you have to follow. It's almost like a script written before you were born: you go to school, then high school, then university, then you get a job – or you probably get married first and then get a job. That path is still seen as the standard, like in the Bible.

Taken together, that illustrates the various social, cultural and personal challenges confronting women entrepreneurs across sub-Saharan Africa, including competing expectations, multiple roles and, in some cases, a lack of internal support networks.

(b) Feeling extremely responsible for the family and society at large

Building on high and sometimes competing expectations, several interviewees described a profound sense of responsibility, both for their families and the broader society.

#14, from Uganda, emphasized the importance of sharing knowledge and speaking positively about her country:

> *I really appreciate questions like this because I feel a sense of responsibility to share knowledge. At the risk of disrupting our Internet connection, I'd love to turn on my camera – just so that you can see the big smile on my face as I say this. I truly see this as a wonderful opportunity to talk about what Uganda is and what it represents.*

In a similar vein, #3, who originally comes from a rural area in Uganda but is now living in Kampala, underscored how entrepreneurship brought a heightened sense of duty that extended beyond personal gain:

> *One of the most powerful things entrepreneurship offers is a deep sense of responsibility – not just for oneself, but also for the impact you create in the community around you. That's why I've always encouraged many people – not only the youth – to consider starting a business.*

Here, the sense of responsibility emerges not only as an internal driver but also as a collective duty, reflecting the pivotal role those women founders play in their communities.

(c) Being triggered to transform family and society through entrepreneurship

Many respondents viewed entrepreneurship as a powerful way to uplift their communities and address persistent challenges.

#1 from Mali – a country less developed than, for instance, Kenya – felt compelled to attend events, advocate for improvements and build her business, driven by the hope that future generations would be spared from the same obstacles:

> *This is something I often say, even when I'm tired and still make the effort to attend community meetings for advocacy. I remind people that the work I'm doing isn't really for my own generation. For many of us, the opportunities simply weren't there. What drives me is the hope that our children, our younger sisters, won't have to fight for the basics – things like access to the Internet or technology. I want them to grow up in a world where these barriers no longer exist, where they can find these resources already in place. The younger generation should not have to face the same struggles we've had to overcome.*

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Meanwhile, #5 from Benin aimed to transform the existing health system by emphasizing prevention rather than treatment:

> *The way I see it, our current health systems are heavily focused on treatment – we wait until someone gets sick, and then all the energy and resources go into curing the illness. But my vision is different. I'm driven by the question: what solution, what technology can I bring to the market that focuses entirely on keeping people healthy in the first place? That's the guiding principle of my life. And the day I achieve that – when I see a real shift towards preventive care – then I'll be able to say, with peace in my heart, that I've fulfilled my purpose.*

#32, a serial entrepreneur from Kenya, has played a pivotal role in shaping the local ecosystem in Nairobi. Currently, her focus is on closing the financing gap for African MSMEs; she explained during the interview that she was building up her business for Africa:

> *We're not doing this for ourselves – we're doing it for Africa, and for future generations. For me, this isn't just a job or a way to earn a living. It's a passion, a purpose. I'm deeply committed to bringing the ecosystem together to tackle the challenges we face and create lasting solutions.*

2. Embodying a strong will and level of resilience in business

(a) Feeling an extra burden to prove oneself and work twice as hard

While building their ventures, many of the women interviewed described a persistent need to prove themselves within male-dominated fields, often feeling that they must work twice as hard to establish their reputation.

#4 shared her struggle with family expectations, highlighting how a desire to study technology had set her on a challenging path that had forced her to leave Uganda:

> *I hesitated when you asked what I studied – because for many people, the answer is simple: "I studied engineering" or "I did a degree in this or that". But for me, it was a real struggle. I came into serious conflict with my parents, who wanted me to study human resources management. I knew without a doubt that I didn't want that – I wanted to pursue technology. At the time, technology was just emerging as a field, and I remember my mother insisting on choosing another path. What followed was nearly a year of tension and resistance at home. They even brought in therapists to try to convince me to choose a subject considered more "appropriate" for girls. In the end, it led to a breaking point. I was told that if I couldn't follow the path they had chosen, then I needed to go out into the world and let it teach me. And that's how I ended up in London – with just £50 to my name – determined to follow my own path and study what I believed in.*

#9, from Kenya, recounted comparable challenges in securing the trust of potential clients, especially given her technical background in a traditionally male sphere:

> *I've faced many situations in which even by just being present in a client's company, you can feel the doubt in the room. From the moment you start speaking, it's clear they're not fully listening; instead, they're assessing you, trying to decide whether you're truly capable of doing the job. There's a constant sense of having to prove yourself. So yes, it's been challenging. You have to work harder, go the extra mile, just to earn the same level of trust and recognition.*

Along the same lines, #29 from Senegal recounted her experience of seeing women, even at the trainee level, tending to work harder:

" *As a woman, you often have to prove yourself more than a man – to show not just that you can do the work, but that you can exceed expectations. I see this clearly when I hire trainees in my company. The young women tend to be more energetic and go above and beyond, because they're aware of how much harder they have to work to be taken seriously. They know the path is more difficult and they meet it with determination.*

From a Nigerian perspective, #11 noted that stereotyping had compelled her to justify her presence and capabilities in professional settings:

All of this feeds into persistent stereotypes. As a woman, I've come to realize that I constantly have to prove that I'm worthy – worthy of being in the room, of being heard of being taken seriously. Meanwhile, my male counterparts often don't face that same pressure. When a man walks into a room, the default expectation is that he belongs, that he will lead and command the space. But for me, as a woman, the first expectation isn't leadership – it's justification.I have to prove that I deserve to be there, that I've earned my place, that I've worked hard and that I belong at the table. That constant pressure – to overcome stereotypes, to prove your value, and to push forward even without consistent support – has been one of the most significant challenges that I've faced as a woman. "

Meanwhile, #13, also from Kenya, described how male colleagues initially expected her to perform domestic chores during a professional event. By politely but firmly declining, she asserted her role and expertise:

> *I once listened to a podcast that talked about embracing our soft power and it really struck a chord with me. It helped me reflect on my own experiences navigating male-dominated spaces.*
>
> *When I was just starting out, I attended a professional event in Mombasa. I was the only woman among 10 men. During a tea break, the moderator announced that we could step out, grab some tea and return as the programme would continue. But somehow, it was quietly assumed that I would be the one to serve everyone. The men remained seated while I was expected to go and fetch tea for each of them – one by one. That was the moment I decided to speak up, kindly but firmly. I said, We all have five minutes. If I spend mine serving tea, I'll miss out on the same learning opportunities that you're getting. We're all here because of the impact we have in our communities – I'm here to learn, just like you. That simple act of standing my ground made a difference. It was a small shift, but a meaningful one – a reminder of how important it is to claim your space, even in subtle ways.*

(b)   Not being afraid to start from scratch again and again

The demands of proving oneself and working twice as hard often give rise to remarkable resilience among interviewees, enabling them to push through severe setbacks.

#13, based in Nairobi, faced a devastating incident when her factory burned down overnight:

> *It was really, really draining. The fire happened at night, at around 3 a.m., and I received various phone calls. It was a complex building, so it was not just my business, there were several of them. By the time I got there at 5 a.m., the fire truck had not arrived yet. The firefighters arrived at the scene at around 9 a.m. Everything was down. The whole three floors of the building were down, everything was burnt.*

Despite those circumstances, she immediately began rebuilding her operations:

> *This year, we've had to start from scratch and, for now, production has returned to the house. I've repurposed one of the rooms to serve as a temporary factory. At this stage, there's no immediate need to hire additional staff, but based on the prospects we're seeing, we expect to return to a full-scale production space by February next year. Hopefully, that will allow us to create more jobs and rebuild stronger.*

#5, located in Benin, also demonstrated unwavering persistence when working with a government entity whose slow processes threatened her business's financial stability:

> *The challenge is that the decision-making process can be very long and complex. Meanwhile, money and resources to make the partnership work have already been invested – and if you don't have strong cash flow or financial backing, it can be fatal for your business. We experienced this first-hand in 2021 during a project we were working on with a ministry that finally didn't go through, and we had to start all over again. It was a tough but valuable lesson.*

Those accounts highlight the interviewees' strong will and determination when confronted with major obstacles, as they repeatedly show that they are not afraid to begin again if necessary.

(c)   Functioning as a role model for the next generation

A key source of motivation for many of the entrepreneurs is the desire to serve as role models and inspire future generations.

#4 based in Uganda, for example, is committed to changing how women are perceived in technology, particularly in coding:

> *I've always loved giving people hope – that's why I speak to women openly and readily. Nothing should define your worth or limit your potential. I lived in South Africa during apartheid, but I never allowed that to shape how I connected with others. Some of my closest friends were white, because I chose not to be bound by those divisions. I believe in rising above the labels and choosing connection, confidence and courage.*

In Nigeria, #12 focused on being a role model within her own family, demonstrating persistence and commitment to her three daughters::

> *I have three daughters, and my youngest is just 7 years old. Since she was 5, I've been having conversations with her about starting a business.*

> *Over time, we've had many of these talks. She's seen me build my own business from the ground up – she's watched me stay consistent, put in the work, cry on the hard days and celebrate on the good ones. She's witnessed the full journey and now she's genuinely excited about starting her own business someday. That means so much to me – it's incredibly important.*

Another entrepreneur from Nigeria (#31), currently scaling her technology-driven business, underscored her desire to prove that women were equally capable of building large ventures:

> *Beyond my ambition to build a global company, I also want to show that women can build big businesses. It's important to me to set an example for other female founders coming after me – to create a path that says, if she can do it, then so can I. I want to be part of changing the narrative and expanding what's possible for women in business.*

Those examples illustrate how digital women entrepreneurs actively shape the narrative around women's roles in entrepreneurship and technology, driven by the desire to pave the way for a new generation.

3. Creating impact outweighs economic objectives

(a) Thinking first about helping others, then how to make money

Many interviewees placed creating impact and helping others above their financial goals.

#17, from Cameroon, illustrated that mindset through her commitment to improving educational outcomes, particularly for children with disabilities:

> *My business is very much impact-driven, particularly because it's rooted in education. I truly believe that education has the power to transform communities – and that's especially true in mine. For us, it's not just about the financial side; the real value lies in the change we see happening every day. We stay in business because of the impact that we witness – when a child lights up because they're finally understanding something, when their grades improve, when they're promoted to the next class. It's especially powerful when we work with children with disabilities and see our teaching help unlock their potential. That's what drives us forward. That's what makes it all worthwhile.*

#14, based in Uganda, highlighted a similar priority – creating jobs for the

country's youth – while noting the country's evolving economic landscape:

> *The economy is growing and being part of that growth has been incredibly fulfilling for me. There's real gratification in knowing that I'm contributing – not only by creating jobs, but also by being part of a larger transformation. I've seen the progress first-hand. From what it was in 2019 to where we are in 2025, the change is remarkable. I believe that I read recently – either earlier this year or late last year – that Uganda is now one of the fastest-growing economies in Eastern Africa. In fact, it's a hopeful and inspiring story.*

#3 (also from Uganda) underscored how secondary financial gain could be when meaningful impact was at stake:

> *When you're truly making an impact in someone else's life, money becomes secondary. What matters most is the difference you're making in that person's journey. Over the years, many of those I've mentored have gone on to attend university, secure jobs and build meaningful careers. Some of them still write to me with messages of appreciation and many have referred others for mentorship. That, for me, is the greatest reward – and I'm always glad to keep paying it forward.*

> **Those examples reveal that, for many women digital entrepreneurs, the desire to uplift others and effect positive change often takes precedence over purely economic considerations.**

(b) Integrating emotions into business decisions

Many interviewees emphasized the role emotions played in their entrepreneurial choices, underscoring that business decisions often went beyond purely economic considerations.

#15 (from Nigeria), for instance, reflected on her initial focus on helping others and the subsequent realization that a sustainable, profitable model was equally important:

> *I've come to realize that, as a woman, I often lead with emotions in business – I focus on helping first, before thinking about sustainability or profitability. I was so focused on supporting others, on helping people increase their sales, that I lost sight of some of the key components needed to build a profitable and scalable business.*

Meanwhile, #1 (from Mali) shared her struggle with overthinking and the challenge of balancing empathy with assertive decision-making. She recognized the importance of making sound business choices while still caring about her stakeholders' feelings:

> *In the beginning, it really wasn't easy – and even now, I wouldn't say I've mastered it. I've always been a friendly and approachable person, but over time I've learned to set boundaries when necessary. That said, I'm also an overthinker. I might be doing well in business, but I often don't have peace of mind. I find myself constantly questioning my decisions – wondering if I've made the right choice or if I've unintentionally hurt someone's feelings. Sometimes, even after making a decision, I go back and check in with the person involved. But, in most cases, when I look closely, it really is just about the work. I invest my time, energy and money into this business every year, so it's important to me that things are done properly. When they're not, I feel a responsibility to step in, guide and explain. I think where I still need support is in managing emotions – especially in finding peace with my decisions and not overthinking every step. That's an area I'm still working on.*

(c) Missing out on some business opportunities

In some instances, the emphasis on social impact and emotional considerations can lead women digital entrepreneurs to bypass potentially lucrative deals.

#15 (Nigeria) offered a particularly striking example:

> *There was a time when an investor offered me $10 million, but it came with a condition: he wanted us to shift our model. Specifically, he wanted us to move away from our local market partnerships with women and instead create a broader ecosystem – in which the women's component would be reduced to just one service among many. I found myself saying no. I literally walked out of that meeting because I couldn't understand why he wanted to take something so meaningful – our work with seven women in local markets, serving entire communities – and turn it into just another checkbox in a bigger system. In hindsight, if I had been more business-oriented or more emotionally balanced at the time, I might have been able to lead that conversation differently. Maybe I could have found a way to preserve our mission while still exploring the opportunity. But in that moment, standing by our purpose felt more important than the deal on the table.*

Another illustration comes from #32 (Kenya), who has successfully expanded her venture and secured funding from international investors. Nonetheless, she mentioned that she would consider walking away from a deal if the investor did not share her commitment to creating impact. As she explained:

> *We've been very intentional about ensuring that both the capital we receive and the people we bring on board truly believe in our mission and vision. For us, that alignment is absolutely essential – it's not just about resources, it's about shared values and purpose.*

That reflection illustrates the tension between having a firm commitment to social values and the practical business considerations that are often necessary for sustained growth. Such decisions highlight how some women founders weigh ethical or social priorities more heavily than purely financial gains.

4. Scaling business becomes a means to create broader community benefits

(a) Growing the business mainly to create more impact

Rather than focusing on expansion for its own sake, many interviewees viewed scaling as a way to support a greater number of people.

#19 (from Kenya), for instance, planned to enlarge her network of artisans significantly by exporting:

> *One of the things that truly drives me is the number of artisans I work with. At this stage, I'm currently working with around eight or nine artisans – some part-time and others we bring in as needed. I also have five full-time tailors on the team. But my dream is much bigger. I want to work with 100 to 200 artisans, which means scaling up significantly. That's why I'm really focused on expanding into export markets – because reaching that level of impact*

requires thinking globally and growing the business beyond local borders.

#11 (Nigeria) emphasized the transformative impact of her company's growth on the community, illustrating how scaling could facilitate job creation and meaningful work:

> *What truly inspires me – and keeps me motivated – is seeing the people we're building these solutions for. They are at the core of everything we do. I think about our partners on the other end of the line – the individuals who, without this work, might never have had the opportunity to earn the income they're making today. You see the life-changing impact they're having in their communities, the value they're bringing to the market. You see people gaining employment, contributing meaningfully to society and finding purpose in the work that they do. Knowing that we've helped create access to jobs that otherwise might not have existed – that's what fuels me. It's a constant reminder of why this work matters.*

Those examples show how scaling up is frequently linked to the ambition to extend social benefits, whether through job creation or empowering local communities.

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(b)   Considering export as a must as local markets are too small

For some entrepreneurs, expanding into international markets is not merely an option but a requirement for growth.

#20 (United Republic of Tanzania) explained that the domestic market, particularly outside of Dar es Salaam, offered limited potential, prompting her to seek opportunities in neighbouring countries, such as Kenya:

We're really looking forward to expanding internationally. The local market presents significant challenges, especially when it comes to growth – largely because there's still a noticeable gap in technological adoption and access to the Internet. Many are still lagging behind and that makes scaling more difficult. We've already reached 200 schools locally, but we can't afford to remain stagnant. There's so much potential beyond our borders and we're ready to tap into international markets to grow our impact even further.

Similarly, #16 (Uganda) noted that she could only reach a small segment of users within Kampala, since Internet coverage in other parts of the country remained limited. That constraint drives her to look beyond national borders:

Access to the Internet is still a major concern. If you're selling online in Uganda, your market is mostly concentrated in Kampala, because that's where the majority of people are connected. Transportation is relatively easier within the city, but reaching customers outside of Kampala is much more difficult, which significantly limits your market reach. That's why I believe having a robust digital infrastructure is so important – not just for growth, but for survival as a business. It allows you to move beyond Kampala, beyond Uganda, and reach regional or even global markets. By expanding your digital reach, you're not only addressing the limitations of the local ecosystem, but also creating access for people in other countries to engage with your services. In doing so, you're also offering a solution to some of the cultural and structural barriers that exist here.

Those perspectives underscore the importance of robust digital and physical infrastructure for entrepreneurs who hope to expand beyond their local ecosystems, making export a strategic necessity rather than a discretionary growth option.

(c)   Facing challenges to get external funding

As women digital entrepreneurs pursue growth, often involving international expansion and exports, the question of funding becomes central. Many of those interviewed shared a common feeling of being underfunded.

In some cases, gender stereotypes seem to play a role, as #18 from Nairobi explained:

Since you're investing in my business, I understand that as an investor, you naturally want to know more about the person behind it. That's fair. But I've been asked questions like, "Do you have a family?" or "When are you planning to start one?" – and, honestly, I don't even have the answer to that myself. So it feels unfair to be expected to provide a timeline for something so personal and unpredictable. It makes me question why such intimate details are considered relevant to the investment decision. These kinds of questions can feel intrusive, and it's not always clear how they actually relate to the fundamentals of the business or its potential.

However, #15 (Nigeria) added another perspective, suggesting that underfunding might also stem from the lack of a solid business model or the hesitation to pitch with the same level of conviction as male counterparts:

In my experience, many investors don't seem genuinely committed to supporting women-led businesses. It often feels like women's ventures are viewed through an emotional lens, rather than as serious, strategic opportunities. I have met investors who are willing to invest, but time and again, it seems that we, as women entrepreneurs, struggle to present our businesses as clearly profitable and scalable. And even when we do, we sometimes lack the same level of conviction or assertiveness that male entrepreneurs tend

to bring to the table – saying with confidence, "This is where your money should go".

In a similar vein, #33 (Ethiopia) reflected on feeling unprepared to attract investors due to missing fundamental requirements:

I would love to bring investors on board, but I recognize that I may not be fully investor-ready just yet. While I've developed my own accounting system to manage the business, I don't yet have the typical three years of audited financials that investors usually look for. I only began formal audits two years ago – because that's when I transitioned into operating more formally as a business. It's a work in progress and I'm actively building that foundation.

In those varied accounts, interviewees highlighted both external biases and internal hurdles, underscoring the complexity of funding challenges for digital women entrepreneurs.

While many women digital entrepreneurs exhibit remarkable resilience, a strong sense of responsibility and a deep commitment to societal impact, these same attributes can, at times, overshadow the importance of driving economic growth and pursuing viable business models. When they overemphasize social objectives, this can inadvertently limit their businesses' scalability and long-term viability. By becoming more intentional about balancing social impact with solid financial strategies, women in the digital economy can harness their potential to both expand their businesses and benefit their families and communities. Fostering awareness of how priorities are set and clarifying the lenses through which business decisions are made is, therefore, crucial for maximizing the broader social returns these entrepreneurs are poised to deliver.

Chapter IV

Recommendations and conclusions

This final chapter focuses on the role of public policy in fostering more gender-inclusive digital ecosystems to unlock opportunities for women not only as users and consumers of technology or informal and occasional digital sellers, but as business leaders, innovators and drivers of inclusive digital growth.

It outlines policy recommendations for the international community to support inclusive digital economies. Those policy recommendations are tailored to the context of sub-Saharan Africa and are informed by the findings of the survey and qualitative interviews presented in the previous chapters, in which the analysis highlighted the key challenges and priorities expressed by women digital entrepreneurs in the region. While the number of women surveyed and interviewed is not statistically representative of all women digital entrepreneurs, the recommendations included in this chapter are grounded in the insights and recurring themes drawn from their answers and reported experiences. The final section of the chapter will outline the main conclusions.

As highlighted in previous chapters, women digital entrepreneurs across developing regions must navigate the same barriers as their male counterparts, while also confronting an added layer of constraints shaped by persistent gender norms and expectations, unequal access to resources and support systems and underrepresentation in decision-making spaces.

It is therefore crucial to counteract the structural barriers and gender-specific constraints of the digital economy that women face.

Insights gathered from the present report call for targeted measures to level the playing field for women and enable them to fully participate in and benefit from digital transformation.

A. Recommendations and policy actions

1. To enhance women's ability to capture value from the digital economy by participating in high-growth industries, such as fintech or artificial intelligence, and integrating their businesses into regional and global value chains

Entrepreneur's voice: "Beyond my ambition to build a global company, I also want to show that women can build big businesses." (#31, Nigeria)

Challenge: women entrepreneurs remain underrepresented in higher-value segments of the digital economy across sub-Saharan Africa, due to technology-skills gaps, cultural norms and limited access to capital. Addressing those challenges requires incentives in relation to capability-building and value chain inclusion.

Policy actions:

- ‣ Embed specific, measurable goals for women's participation in high-growth digital sectors within national ICT, digital economy or e-commerce strategies, for instance on women-led ventures in fintech, healthcare technology, EdTech or artificial intelligence.

- ▸ Promote digital upskilling and technical support programmes, including by exploring the possibility of offering incentives for women to enter emerging technology sectors.

- ▸ Support girls and young women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics education to build a talent pipeline, from school to start-ups. Leverage existing government-funded innovation hubs to provide mentorship, networking and resources specifically for women-led digital enterprises.

- ▸ Design procurement policies that set targets or provide incentives for contracting women-led digital service providers in public sector projects (box 1).

- ▸ Collect data on the role of women's entrepreneurs in the digital economy.

Box 1
Incentivizing public procurement from women-led businesses

The International Trade Centre and UN-Women launched the Global Campaign on Gender-Responsive Public Procurement in 2024.

The aim of that initiative is to address the significant disparity in public procurement – women-owned businesses receive only about 1 per cent of government contracts, despite comprising one third of all businesses globally.

The International Trade Centre estimates that public procurement accounts for up to 40 per cent of gross domestic product in some developing countries.

In addition to raising awareness among policymakers and the public about the importance of integrating gender considerations into procurement practices, the campaign invites Governments to commit to specific actions, such as adopting national definitions for women-owned businesses or setting targets for the share of contracts awarded to such businesses.

It includes a capacity-building component to enhance their competitiveness in bidding for public contracts.

Source: https://www.intracen.org/news-and-events/campaigns/women-in-public-procurement

Box 2
Mainstreaming gender equity objectives in information and communications technology or e-commerce strategies or related development plans: the case of Rwanda

In its ICT Sector Strategic Plan (2024–2029), the Government of Rwanda recognizes that access to infrastructure is critical to the participation of women and youth in the digital economy. By aiming at bridging the digital gender connectivity gap, Rwanda seeks to foster equity and unlock untapped potential that can contribute to its national development goals, including the upskilling of youth and women for a technology-driven future and the creation of 50,000 jobs in the ICT sector.

Source: https://www.minecofin.gov.rw/index.php?eID=dumpFile&t=f&f=11342
&token=393aadd8a3d29f4a7e58208ee524359716daba6d

2. To enhance women's participation in e-commerce and digital trade

Entrepreneur's voice: : "It would be helpful to also include something on export – such as training on international trade. Sometimes you're looking to export to a certain country, but it's difficult to find information on the export or import laws. Having a better understanding of these would make a big difference." (#23, Kenya)

Challenge: women-led digital businesses in sub-Saharan Africa rarely export at scale. To realize the untapped potential, targeted interventions that help women entrepreneurs expand their use of e-commerce platforms and engage in trade should be implemented. Complex registration processes, high transaction and logistics costs and cross-border payment issues often deter MSMEs, including high-growth ones, from tapping into regional and international markets.

Policy actions:

‣ Explore modalities to offer more visibility for onboarding and compliance procedures on e-commerce platforms and trade portals, specifically targeting women-led digital MSMEs, including by leveraging existing trade promotion agencies and national bodies.

‣ Facilitate access to information and to tailored export-readiness training programmes, including on standards, intellectual property, customs procedures and international payments.

‣ Leverage the AfCFTA Protocol on Digital Trade and the Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade that promote regional trade inclusion, including for MSMEs, and women's increased participation in an African single market (box 3).

Box 3

African Continental Free Trade Area Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade

As part of their negotiations to establish AfCFTA, which was signed in 2018, the member States of the African Union adopted a Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade. As an integral part of the broader AfCFTA framework, it is designed to create an enabling trade environment that ensures women and youth can seize the opportunities presented by continental integration, including those emerging from digital trade.

To that end, the Protocol outlines key areas for action, including access to finance, capacity-building, digital trade and protection against harassment. Notably, article 17 on digital trade requires member States to "ensure digital regulatory and institutional frameworks support Women and Youth in Trade to facilitate access to digital trade platforms, tools and solutions to trade". While digital trade is also addressed through a dedicated AfCFTA protocol, its inclusion here highlights the importance of targeted digital policies to help women harness the benefits of regional trade.

That marks one of the first instances in which a regional trade agreement includes a standalone, legally binding instrument that addresses the challenges faced by women in trade. The Protocol represents a critical step towards mainstreaming gender into trade policy and implementation.

Source: Stuart (2024) and Alemayehu (2024). The Protocol is available at https://africanlii.org/akn/aa-au/act/protocol/2024/free_trade_area_on_women_and_youth_in_trade/eng@2024-02-18

Leveraging the African Continental Free Trade Area: the Nigerian Digital Services Survey

> The Nigerian Digital Services Survey was launched in 2025 by the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Investment to gather insights directly from digital entrepreneurs. Developed in the context of implementing AfCFTA, it invites digital service providers – including women-led businesses – to share information about their operations, business models and market expansion. The data collected will enable the Government to map the digital services ecosystem and identify specific needs across the sector. Such a bottom-up approach can inform regional policy negotiations and contribute to shaping a more enabling environment for digital entrepreneurs.

Source: https://survey-app-y55lb.ondigitalocean.app

3. To expand access to capital

Entrepreneur's voice: : "In my experience, many investors don't seem genuinely committed to supporting women-led businesses. It often feels like women's ventures are viewed through an emotional lens, rather than as serious, strategic opportunities." (#24, Nigeria)

Challenge: women-led digital businesses face systemic barriers to accessing capital to support the growth of their businesses, particularly in the "missing middle" segment, in which their financing needs are too large for microcredit but perceived as too small or too risky for traditional investors. Public capital could absorb risks to further unlock commercial capital at scale. Moreover, a gender-lens approach to improving access to finance for women digital entrepreneurs across the African continent must combine the development of tailored funding solutions that better reflect women's needs and constraints with targeted capacity-building to enhance their investment readiness.

Policy actions:

‣ Encourage the development of financial products tailored to early-stage digital businesses led by women, including microfinance, crowdfunding and peer-to-peer lending to grow the pipeline of the next generation of digital founders.

‣ Develop policies and investment frameworks to strengthen venture capital and alternative financing for start-ups and digital businesses, including women-led ones. Promote government-backed grants, first-loss capital or a guarantee facility for high-growth women-led technology businesses, including in partnership with financial institutions (box 5).

‣ Support training and mentorship programmes in investment readiness, valuation, pitching, investor engagement and negotiation, tailored to women founders, to enhance their knowledge of funding options and strengthen their fundraising skills.

‣ Encourage the collection of gender-disaggregated investment reporting from government-backed accelerators, fintech and innovation hubs.

Box 5

Promoting credit guarantee programmes to unlock women's access to capital

In 2020, the Central Bank of Mauritania established a credit guarantee fund for small and medium-sized enterprises, with the African Guarantee Fund as a strategic partner. That mechanism aims to issue partial guarantees to banks and financial institutions to encourage them to increase their lending to small and medium-sized enterprises. The fund is targeted at women and young entrepreneurs with viable projects who are currently unable to access bank financing due to the high collateral requirements imposed by traditional banking institutions. The fund is also aimed at strengthening the capacities of entrepreneurs through training on project creation, as well as accounting and financial management.

Launched in 2019, the Africa Digital Financial Inclusion Facility is an initiative managed by the African Development Bank to enhance access to and use of digital financial solutions, particularly for women and MSMEs across Africa. The facility invests in projects along three strategic pillars: digital financial infrastructure; policy and regulation; and products and innovation. There is an emphasis on gender mainstreaming, with 60 per cent of all funded projects being designed to reduce gender gaps in access to resources. The initiative helps to unlock opportunities for women digital entrepreneurs by improving access to affordable and secure electronic payment services, and by strengthening the digital infrastructure that is critical to their business operations. One example is the Africa Fintech Platform, a project funded by the facility to create a gender-responsive digital platform that will enable fintech associations across Africa to pool resources, share knowledge and build stronger partnerships.

Source: https://fgm-sa.com/fr (in French) and https://www.adfi.org

4. To expand women's leadership in the digital space

Entrepreneur's voice: : "You sit and make suggestions, or hear suggestions, and wonder – what century are we operating in?" (#4, Uganda); and "As a woman, you often have to prove yourself more than a man." (#29, Senegal)

Challenge: women remain vastly underrepresented in leadership roles in the technology sector, limiting their influence over decision-making processes that shape the digital economy. As illustrated in the report, while women's choices to take part in the digital economy are influenced by personal and socioeconomic factors, deeply rooted gender norms and a lack of role models often restrict their aspirations and success. Women digital entrepreneurs across Africa would benefit from better access to strategic networks and to platforms that amplify their voices and increase their visibility in the digital economy.

Policy actions:

‣ Promote gender-sensitive policies across economic and social spheres, including in the technology sector, to help reduce gender biases; and foster campaigns that challenge gender stereotypes.

‣ Promote the visibility of women digital entrepreneurs as "changemakers" by showcasing their contributions to innovation and inclusive development, and engage public institutions, in partnership with the private sector and civil society, in recognizing and celebrating their impact (box 6).

‣ Explore ways to better balance women's professional and personal responsibilities.

‣ Support networks of women entrepreneurs for them to share experiences, resources and build social capital, which are crucial in navigating the often isolating path of digital entrepreneurship.

‣ Create opportunities and promote
inclusive policymaking by ensuring
women entrepreneurs are represented
in consultations on the digital economy,
public-private dialogues, forums, and
national and regional events.

Box 6

**Promoting the visibility of women digital entrepreneurs as
"changemakers": the eTrade for Women Advocates**

The eTrade for Women initiative draws strength from a distinguished group of women digital
entrepreneurs known as the eTrade for Women Advocates. They have built successful
technology-driven businesses and have a proven track record of generating significant
impact in their ecosystems. As Advocates, they play a pivotal role in promoting women's
leadership in the digital economy.

Appointed by the UNCTAD Secretary-General for a two-year mandate, the Advocates serve
as influential voices in their respective regions and globally, bringing the perspectives and
needs of women digital entrepreneurs to the fore. Their presence in national, regional and
international forums, such as the General Assembly, the World Trade Organization Public
Forum and other high-level events, ensures that the voices of women entrepreneurs are
heard where decisions are made.

For instance, Patricia Zoundi Yao, a former Advocate for French-speaking Africa, participated
in numerous policy dialogues at the national level in Côte d'Ivoire and provided input for the
Start-up Act (2024). At the regional level, she took part in consultations on the e-commerce
strategy of the Economic Community of West African States. Since 2021, as the president
of the Executive Council of the Movement of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises in Côte
d'Ivoire, she represents more than 2,500 businesses.

The impact of the Advocates resonates beyond their businesses, helping to shift societal
perceptions, inspire the next generation of women digital entrepreneurs and drive systemic
change towards a more gender-inclusive digital development.

5. To leverage existing partnerships for increased synergies at the continental level

Entrepreneur's voice: : "I think one of the
problems we have in Africa is that we may need
better regulation. But let's be mindful of SMEs
and start-ups when making these regulations,
so they don't become another layer of red tape.
My one big ask or wish to my government
would be, let's control our narrative, let's be out
there and actively begin changing narratives.
Advertise, attend global events and create a
narrative around your country." (#14, Uganda)

Challenge: multi-stakeholder partnerships are
essential to mobilize political will and combine
the strengths and expertise of diverse actors
in shaping an enabling environment in which
women-led digital businesses can thrive. To
ensure women entrepreneurs are not left behind
in the digital transformation, Governments,
development organizations, international
financial institutions, civil society, private sector
companies and entrepreneurs themselves must
join forces. Joint action can overturn stereotypes,
unlock access to capital and technology, boost
digital literacy and help women-led businesses
grow and expand into global markets. Public-
private collaboration is also essential to align
enabling policies with innovation objectives.

Policy actions:

- Leverage national platforms bringing together public institutions, private sector stakeholders, development partners and women entrepreneurs to develop inclusive e-commerce and digital strategies and regulations   (box 7).

- Foster public-private partnerships to design and fund targeted programmes that provide women digital entrepreneurs with access to training, mentoring and digital tools.

- Support regional knowledge-sharing mechanisms to scale up successful initiatives and foster peer learning among countries and communities.

- Promote research to gather sex-disaggregated data and generate policy-relevant insights on barriers and success factors for women's participation in the digital economy.

Box 7
Bringing public, private and development partners together: the eTrade Readiness Assessments

UNCTAD eTrade Readiness Assessments provide comprehensive reviews of national e-commerce ecosystems, identifying challenges and offering key recommendations across policy areas, to leverage e-commerce as a driver of development. UNCTAD also supports Governments in developing e-commerce strategies. Both processes result from thorough multistakeholder consultations and rigorous validation, involving public and private sector actors, development partners and civil society, including women digital entrepreneurs.

As part of that initiative, the E-commerce Strategy for Rwanda was finalized in 2023. The eTrade for Women Advocate for English-speaking Africa, Clarisse Iribagiza, a successful woman digital entrepreneur who served as a champion and role model in the region, took part in high-level discussions on the Strategy, sharing her insights on how to support digital businesses, particularly those led by women.

Such processes contribute to fostering more inclusive digital ecosystems, by ensuring that the voices of diverse stakeholders inform policy processes and are reflected in the strategic priorities and implementation plans of Governments.

Source: UNCTAD (2023)

B. Conclusions

This report has sought to shed light on a new generation of women digital entrepreneurs, especially in Africa, who are navigating complex environments to build businesses, foster innovation and drive local digital transformation. Drawing from both survey data and in-depth interviews, it has demonstrated how such women are not only contributing to economic development but also challenging long-standing gender norms and advancing inclusive digital ecosystems.

Across the regions surveyed, women digital entrepreneurs encounter a shared set of challenges: limited access to finance, the burden of caregiving responsibilities, underrepresentation in leadership and persistent gender biases in technology and business, as the most recurrent ones.

In sub-Saharan Africa, respondents face those constraints more acutely. They report the highest caregiving burdens, greater impact from cultural expectations, more severe limitations in digital infrastructure and the lowest levels of digital business maturity. Challenges in financial inclusion are also particularly pronounced, with African women reporting a greater reliance on personal savings, a lack of investor confidence and high interest rates. While networks and community-based support systems are viewed as vital enablers, access to mentorship, professional ecosystems and business services remains uneven and limited; African entrepreneurs often depend on informal support systems and peer-driven communities.

Despite those structural challenges, women in the region are building cross-border ventures and playing catalytic roles within their ecosystems – mentoring others, advocating for digital inclusion and scaling solutions adapted to local needs. Their contributions to economic transformation and digital inclusion in Africa are both substantial and underrecognized.

The findings call for more coordinated policy responses that go beyond support for entrepreneurship and that recognize both the systemic barriers and the transformative potential of women digital entrepreneurs.

Interventions should be context-specific and designed with a gender lens, prioritizing affordable digital infrastructure, inclusive financing mechanisms, accessible business support services and platforms for increased visibility and recognized leadership.

Digital transformation must be inclusive to be truly transformative. Unlocking the full potential of women-led digital businesses in Africa is not only vital for achieving gender equality, but also for driving resilient, inclusive and sustainable digital economies across the continent.

UNCTAD and its partners have an important role to play in guiding, funding and monitoring that shift.

Annex

A. Profiles of interviewees

Interviewee	Country of origin (and location of business if different)	Family Status	Children	Product/service	Export	Export destinations
1	Mali	Married	Pregnant	Service	Not yet, but planning	Burkina Faso, Togo
2	Cameroon (Kenya)	Married	yes	Product	Yes	Cameroon, Senegal, United States
3	Uganda	Married	yes	Service	Yes	Ghana, Malawi, South Sudan
4	Kenya (Uganda)	Single	no	Service	No	
5	Benin	Married	yes	Service	Yes	Côte d'Ivoire, Mali
6	Kenya	Married	yes	Service	No	
7	Burundi	married	yes	Service	Yes	Mali
8	Ghana	Single	no	Product	Yes	Benin, Kenya, Nigeria, Togo
9	Kenya	Married	yes	Service	Yes	Sierra Leone, Uganda
10	Benin	Married	Yes	Service	Yes	Togo
11	Nigeria	Single	no	Service	No	
12	Nigeria	Married	yes	Service	Yes	Ghana, Kenya, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
13	Kenya	Married	yes	Product	Yes	South Africa, United States
14	Uganda	Married	yes	Service	No	
15	Nigeria	Married	yes	Service & Product	Yes	China
16	Uganda	Married	yes	Service	Yes	Kenya, United Republic of Tanzania
17	Cameroon	Married	yes	Service	No	
18	Kenya	Single	no	Product	Yes	Nigeria

19	Kenya	Single	no	Product	Yes	United States
20	Tanzania	Single	no	Product	Yes	Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda
21	Kenya	Single	no	Product	Yes	Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Africa, United States
22	Kenya	Single	no	Service	No	
23	Kenya	Married	yes	Product	Yes	United States
24	Nigeria	Single	no	Service	No	
25	Kenya	Married	yes	Product	Yes	Germany, Nigeria, United States
26	Kenya	Divorced	yes	Service	Yes	Côte d'Ivoire, Zambia
27	Namibia	Widowed	yes	Product	Yes	South Africa
28	Rwanda	Married	yes	Service	No	
29	Senegal	Divorced	yes	Service	Yes	Côte d'Ivoire, Switzerland
30	Senegal	Married	yes	Service	Yes	United States
31	Nigeria	Single	no	Service	Yes	Côte d'Ivoire
32	Kenya	Married	yes	Service	Yes	Uganda
33	United States (Ethiopia)	Married	yes	Product	Yes	Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Nigeria, Togo

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