

Empowering women in Africa as entrepreneurs, innovators

 By [Louise Marsland](#)

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Growing women's economic empowerment in Africa is what drives Irene Ochem, founder and chief executive officer of the Africa Women Innovation and Entrepreneurship Forum (AWIEF), which holds their annual networking conference, awards and expo in Cape Town next month.



Irene Ochem, founder and chief executive officer of the Africa Women Innovation & Entrepreneurship Forum (AWIEF).

The 4th AWIEF conference and expo takes place in Cape Town, South Africa, this year at the Cape Town International Convention Centre (CTICC), 8-9 November 2018, bringing 1200 women entrepreneurs, thought leaders, industry experts, academics, development organisations and investors, to accelerate the growth of women-owned businesses for Africa's inclusive economic growth.

The theme this year is, *Unleashing ideas: Innovation, sustainability and enterprise growth*. Ochem launched AWIEF in Nigeria, her homeland, in 2015, opening an office in South Africa a year later. She is highly qualified, holding bachelor's and postgraduate degrees, as well as an MBA in International Management acquired at the University of London; as well as postgraduate qualifications in project management, gender and trade-related issues. She speaks four languages and is a sought-after speaker and participant in international meetings on entrepreneurship, women and gender.

The inspiration for AWIEF came from her personal experiences in her own career, as well as in Europe when she experienced first-hand how women were being marginalised in the sciences field, for example.

"AWIEF is about supporting women entrepreneurship and also about showcasing success stories. I saw a lack of that on the continent. I wanted to put up a platform where these women can come and be celebrated."

Empowerment

Women make up about 50% of Africa's burgeoning and increasingly youthful population on the continent. Economically empowering women is very important to her, as is encouraging entrepreneurship and innovation among women on the continent.

"When I was also doing my MBA, I came to realise the importance of innovation as a driver to entrepreneurship. When I decided that I would do something in Africa, I travelled across Africa to speak with high level women in business and to discuss my idea and if this was something that was really needed."

After the first AWIEF event in Nigeria, Ochem realised that more than an annual conference and networking events were required.

"I realised I needed to establish a Pan-African organisation to carry out projects and address the different challenges that women entrepreneurs and leaders in Africa faced: accessing the market; accessing capital; creating networks; and getting the right information. The conference brought in the ecosystem and identified those challenges.

"But once we had identified those challenges, how did we address them? How did we encourage entrepreneurs going forward?"

The solution, Ochem realised, was to establish a non-profit organisation that could bring all the stakeholders together, with women entrepreneurs, to address policy and gender issues. This included the business community and also, inspirational women leaders to mentor the next generation of women leaders on the continent.

And so AWIEF was launched as a Pan-African non-profit organisation with offices in both Nigeria and South Africa, including the annual conference, awards and expo; as well as events all year round and programmes to mentor, fund and grow women entrepreneurs on the continent.



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AWIEF runs several programmes for women across the continent, such as the flagship AWIEF Growth Accelerator Programme for getting businesses “investment ready”; the FemBioBiz II Accelerator Programme in partnership with NEPAD/SANBio and funded by the BioFISA II Programme, which builds and supports the growth of women-owned and led businesses in the health and agricultural biotech and other technologies with impact on health, nutrition and food security.

The #VALUE4HER programme in partnership with the Technical Centre for Rural and Agricultural cooperation (CTA), an European Union funded institution headquartered in The Netherlands, which strengthens women’s agribusiness enterprises in Africa.

AWIEF, with sponsorship from Nedbank, has also hosted #AWIEFBusinessNetworking dialogues to share insight on the role women play in innovation and transformation.

Africa rising

The ‘Africa Rising’ narrative is clear: Africa has the fastest growing aspirant middle class in the world and will have the biggest youth population by 2030. The United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Agenda 2030, updated from the Millennium Goals and released in 2015, prioritises gender equality, good jobs and economic growth, as well as innovation, to reduce inequality in the world.

They dovetail with the African Union’s Agenda 2063, which also highlights the empowerment of women and girls and gender equality; as well as youth empowerment and job creation, as major goals.

Ochem believes launching AWIEF three years ago was at exactly the right time to create a purpose-driven organisation to contribute to the upliftment of women on the continent, particularly young women who need encouragement and support to become the entrepreneurs they aspire to be; and to also celebrate the women leaders on the continent who have achieved great things despite the odds.

Telling their inspiring stories is also a very important part of AWIEF’s work, hence the annual AWIEF Awards to recognise, honour and celebrate women entrepreneurs and business owners in Africa across various industry sectors, for their economic performance and contribution to Africa’s growth and social development.

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Ochem explains further: “I’m a Pan-Africanist, maybe because I’ve spent most of my working years outside of Africa. I didn’t know at the time to what extent AWIEF would make an impact – personally I aim big and see where I get to. I didn’t want to do something small. My goal was to give prominence to women in Africa, to give them a platform.

“We bring highly successful business women professionals and young, emerging entrepreneurs under one roof. All our speakers are the best you can get across the continent.”

The AWIEF conference is also a mentoring platform, where Ochem and her all-women team make sure they also facilitate attendance for young women entrepreneurs so they get to meet and connect and network with women leadership on the continent and be inspired by those who have achieved success.

AWIEF annual conference

The multi-stakeholder [AWIEF conference](#), taking place in Cape Town this year, includes representation from: government as it makes policies that should streamline gender economic empowerment programmes for women; the investment community; the media which should talk about the issue; women entrepreneurs; business service providers; and enterprise development agencies.

It is a testament to how globally connected Ochem is and the prominence to which she has elevated AWIEF in only three years, that she has received endorsements and support from global organisations such as UN Women, the African Development Bank (AfDB) and the European Union-funded Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA).

Partners and sponsors include: Invest Cape Town, City of Cape Town, Embassy of Sweden, Shell, Nedbank, ARC, Tsogo Sun, Venture Capital for Africa (VC4A), Cardova and Channel Africa, which will be live streaming the conference on 8-9 November from Cape Town.

As Ochem reiterated: “It is exciting. The entrepreneurship ecosystem in Africa is thriving with women playing significant roles. It is time their contribution is taken seriously, supported and amplified.”

“ A thread! <https://t.co/3hdYaULyhl>— AWIEF (@awieforum) [August 6, 2018](#) ”

ABOUT LOUISE MARSLAND

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