

Africa Storytelling Challenge— Notable Submissions: In Sharon Adisa's Words

Committed to championing scientific innovations and advancements, Adisa is affecting change in her community and throughout Africa—and this year's judges of the Africa Storytelling Challenge lauded these impressive efforts. Recognized as a runner-up in this year's contest, Adisa shares her essay submission below.

It is not strange to walk into the technology department of any organization or company and spot four gentlemen against one woman. In fact, I've even gone too far, just visit any computer science or Information Technology or Management Information Systems class; this situation is replicated across the board. I happened to be in the one of the mentioned disciplines when I joined campus and we were only two girls against eleven men in our class. I found this very unsettling. Going through primary and secondary school, I had never felt "as if I was in the wrong place" until now. So, after campus, I got an IT internship and it was clear to me the gender gap that existed when it came to women and men pursuing technology related careers.

I set out on a journey just to find out how deep-rooted this gap went and that's why I started Shaboard, a social enterprise that seeks to mentor and train girls and young women in Technology, Leadership and Entrepreneurship. But why should I bother?, one may ask. Since 2015, I have visited different primary schools, high schools, entrepreneurship events and one campus and one thing was clear, the technology (STEM), leadership and entrepreneurship sectors were underrepresented by women. Do women fear venturing into these fields or is it a case of lack of role models?

While on a CSR activity during a young leaders training forum, we visited a primary school in the middle-income area of Nairobi. So, I entered one of the classes and there were two boys leading the class in Mathematics. I waited till it was done then stepped in to encourage the pupils, something I had come to do. So, I posed a question to the class and asked how many girls loved mathematics loved mathematics. No one raised their hand. So, the next time I asked who loved Mathematics. Your guess is as good as mine, more than ten boys raised their hands straight up while I could see one girl struggling to raise her hand up. Then there were murmurs from behind of girls trying to point at one of them saying that she was the best in Maths. But why didn't she raise her hand? Could this be a case of negative stereotypes that have been engrained in girls that they aren't supposed to be seen or that Mathematics is a tough

discipline that only boys are allowed to shine in? It is important for mentorship to start as early as primary schools where negative stereotypes persist about the abilities of girls in STEM subjects that contribute to their loss of confidence.

During one of the tech events where I was a panelist, I wrote down a list of top women in Technology and entrepreneurship in Kenya and asked the almost all women audience if they could identify any or all of the women. It was structured in a way that if I called out the name of a woman, you stand up if you know her. I expected that majority of the women could recognize industry leaders but that was not the case. There was only one name that had at most fifteen women standing up. After the forum, I also sat down to try and write down different young women trailblazers in entrepreneurship and technology sectors that I knew about, just on top of my head, and amazingly enough, I couldn't even get past ten. So, I had to research online and the same few names were the ones reappearing. But why could we not identify women who were supposed to be our mentors?

But then, how many women publications do you know of that showcases the work of women leaders, entrepreneurs and women in technology in Kenya at the moment? How many women-focused technology and entrepreneurship hubs exist in Kenya? If they are there, how are they distributed within the country? Achieving reduction in digital gender divide means women across the country being able to benefit from opportunities brought about by new technologies, something that seems to be currently concentrated in the urban areas. For example, few women have been able to harness the opportunities of ICTs and leverage the use of internet in their businesses. Without access to ICTs, women are at a bigger risk of being left out as agents of change in an ever changing global environment.

My passion is to see more women involved not just in the consumption of technology but also in the development or decision making. Diverse and inclusive decision-making in Leadership, Technology and Entrepreneurship is directly proportional to positive economic development.

My conclusion is that women stories are not being told as frequently and wide enough as they should, that's why it was difficult to identify role models in the industry. The Shaboard blog seeks to fill this gap by showcasing different young women in Technology, Leadership and entrepreneurship in order to inspire the next generation of young women leaders, technologists and entrepreneurs. These industries need more than enough role models who would encourage girls from as early as primary schools to university students in order to positively build their mindset and shift their paradigms regarding the venturing into the three mentioned sectors. There are few girls and women involved in different innovations and their stories need to be told far and wide. I am taking a stand to tell these stories, will you join me on this journey?

The content and views presented here are those of the individual Challenge participant.

About the Africa Storytelling Challenge

The inaugural [Champions of Science—Africa Storytelling Challenge](#) took place between May and August 2018. Open to all scientists doing innovative work in Africa, the contest drew more than 100 submissions. An independent selection committee of scientists, policymakers and science journalists reviewed the applications and selected the winners. Each winner will be awarded \$5,000 and will have the opportunity to share their stories at the 2019 American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) annual meeting in Washington, D.C.