FROM INNOVATION TO IMPACT: WOMEN LEADING IN THE AI-DRIVEN FUTURE

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INTRODUCTION

Distinguished women in this room, captains of industry, builders of dreams, architects of nations, good morning. I stand before you not to flatter, but to sound an alarm dressed as an invitation. History is once again dividing humanity into two camps, they are those who will help own the future, and those who will merely survive inside it.

I am here to insist that women must not again, be counted among the latter but this time, the stakes are different. This time, the window is closing faster than any revolution before it. This time, the fire is not made of stone but made of silicon and it is already burning.

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I. THE LONG ARC OF POWER

When early humans discovered that they could strike stone against stone to make fire, they did not just gain warmth. They gained dominion. Fire cooked food, it extended the day, it protected communities and it separated those who controlled the tool from those who merely lived under its consequences. That was technology's first lesson. Whoever masters the tool eventually masters the terms of survival. Centuries later came the Agrarian Revolution.

Those who mastered soil, seed, sea and season accumulated land, wealth and power. Then came the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries. Steam, steel, factories, railways. A new economic aristocracy emerged- the Rockefellers. The Carnegies. The Vanderbilts. Then came the 20th century ICT revolution computers, software, the internet and the smartphones. Also, a new class of wealth emerged. The gates, The Jobs, The Bezos, The Zuckerberg’s. Now we are entering another revolution. The AI revolution and I believe it may become one of the greatest redistributions of economic power in human history.

However, there is something we must understand. Every technological revolution creates opportunities, but every technological revolution also creates new winners and new losers. The question is not whether the revolution will happen it has already happened. The question is who will own a piece of it?

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II. THE UNCOMFORTABLE MIRROR

Let us look honestly at the numbers. Women are approximately half of humanity, yet Forbes' 2026 billionaire list contains 481 women out of 3,428 billionaires, that is about 14%. That is an improvement from 13.4% the previous year. However, fourteen percent is still a long way from half. Look at corporate leadership in the year 2026, Fortune 500, a record where 55 companies are led by women approximately 11%. That is progress, but let’s look at the world's largest companies rather than only America's largest companies, the 2026 Fortune Global 500 has just 34 women CEOs. That is only 6.8%. The message is unmistakable that Women are moving upward but the center of economic power remains overwhelmingly male and now we arrive at the most important frontier of all - Artificial Intelligence.

According to new LinkedIn research published in August 2026, women accounted for only 26% of U.S. hires into AI roles in 2025. For non-AI occupations, women accounted for 50% of hires. The gap becomes even more dramatic at the top. Across 27 countries, women occupy only 13% of C-suite. AI leadership positions at AI companies- thirteen percent. The number should not frighten us, it should mobilize us because AI is not merely another technology. AI is becoming part of the infrastructure through which business, healthcare, finance, education, manufacturing, media and government will operate.

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If women are absent from the architecture of that infrastructure, then women will have less influence over the world that infrastructure creates.

There is another statistic that should concern every woman entrepreneur here. LinkedIn's latest research shows that between 2019 and 2026, the proportion of male founders with AI skills rose from 4.7% to 15.2%. Among women founders, it rose from 2.3% to 9.1%. That is progress. However, the gap is widening among founders and that is dangerous Because the AI revolution is not merely creating new employees, It is creating new founders.

New companies, new intellectual property, New fortunes, New industries, Ladies, we must therefore move beyond asking: How do I get a job in AI? We must begin asking:

What AI company can I build?

What problem can I solve?

What data can I own?

What intellectual property can I create?

What platform can I build?

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III. AI IS NOT JUST DESTROYING JOBS — IT IS REWRITING THE VALUE OF SKILLS

Let me kill one dangerous myth tonight. AI is not simply a job killing machine. It is a value-creating machine but it is also a value-redistributing machine. The World Economic Forum estimates that by 2030, global labour market transformation could create approximately 170 million jobs while displacing 92 million. That is a net increase of 78 million jobs.

Therefore, the future is not simply about the disappearance of work. It is about the transformation of work. The question is not. - Will AI take my job? the better question is What will AI make extraordinarily valuable and will I possess those skills?

The World Economic Forum identifies AI and big data as the fastest-growing skills through 2030, followed by networks, cybersecurity and technological literacy.

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It is also important to pay attention to something else - Creative thinking, resilience, flexibility, curiosity, lifelong learning, leadership and social influence are also rising in importance. This tells us something profound. The future will not belong only to the computer scientist; it will belong to the person who can combine Human intelligence + domain expertise + artificial intelligence.

The lawyer who understands AI, The doctor who understands AI, The banker who understands AI, The teacher who understands AI, The engineer who understands AI, The entrepreneur who understands AI, and The woman who combines her professional expertise with AI will increasingly be more powerful than the woman who possesses either one alone.

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IV. THE AI EXPOSURE PARADOX

Here comes the uncomfortable part - the International Labour Organization's latest 2026 research, covering data from 84 countries found that female-dominated occupations are almost twice as exposed to generative AI as male-dominated occupation. Twenty-nine percent compared with 16%.

In the highest-exposure category, the difference is even more dramatic: 16% of female-dominated occupations compared with only 3% of male-dominated occupation. Let us be intellectually honest, exposure does not mean extinction. For many occupations, the ILO says that the more likely impact is transformation of tasks, skills and working conditions rather than the disappearance of the entire occupation.

That distinction is extremely important. AI is not necessarily coming for women. AI is coming for tasks. When the task changes, the woman who knows how to use AI becomes more valuable. The woman who does not may become more vulnerable. That is the real challenge. So, the answer is not fear. The answer is fluency. The answer is ownership. The answer is leadership.

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V. FROM AI USER TO AI OWNER

A woman can work for an AI company and own none of it. She can use an AI platform every day and own none of its intellectual property. She can manage an AI division and possess no meaningful equity. She can sell through an AI-powered marketplace and own none of the underlying platform or data. So, my challenge is bigger than: "Get women into technology.“ My challenge is: Get women into ownership. Own the company. Own the patent. Own the dataset. Own the platform. Own the intellectual property. Own the shares. This is because employment gives you income. Ownership gives you leverage

There are four levels of participation in the AI economy. The first is the AI User. She uses AI to become more productive. The second is the AI Operator who redesigns her organization and workflows around AI. The third is the AI Builder who builds AI-powered products, services and companies. The fourth is the AI Owner who owns the data. The intellectual property. The platform. The company. The equity. My challenge to every woman in this room is: Do not stop at Level One. Use AI, Understand AI, Build with AI, then: Own what you build. There is a difference between being employed by the future and owning the future.

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VI. AFRICA'S $49 BILLION QUESTION

This brings me to Africa. Africa has the highest rate of female entrepreneurship in the world. Yet African women entrepreneurs face an estimated $49 billion financing gap. Think about that. Forty-nine billion dollars of potentially productive female enterprise that remains underfinanced. That is not merely a gender problem. That is an African economic problem.

The African Development Bank and its partners are now launching programs specifically designed to address this gap. In September 2026, the African Development Bank and AXIAN launched a program targeting more than 34,000 women-led businesses across five African countries, but financing alone is not enough. We must connect finance with technology and technology with markets.

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Markets with intellectual property and intellectual property with ownership.

We keep telling African women to become entrepreneurs, but entrepreneurship without adequate capital is often simply heroic survival.

The question should be Who will finance the African woman who has found the billion-dollar problem?

Who will write the first cheque?

Who will write the second?

Who will help her move from Lagos to Nairobi?

From Nairobi to London?

From London to the world?

Africa does not have a shortage of entrepreneurial women. Africa has a shortage of systems that turn women's ideas into scalable assets.

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VII. DO NOT CHASE AI — CHASE PROBLEMS

There is another opportunity we must not overlook – data. The world is entering an economy in which data is increasingly becoming a strategic asset, but Africa has a problem. Most of the data about Africa is incomplete, fragmented or poorly represented. That is also an opportunity.

Think about African healthcare. African diseases. African consumers. African languages. African agriculture. African women. African cities. African financial behaviour. African education. African climate patterns.

Who is collecting this data? Who is organizing it? Who is turning it into intelligence? Who is building the models? Who owns the resulting intellectual property?

These are not merely academic questions. They are billion-dollar company questions.

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The next great African AI company may not be the company that builds another general-purpose chatbot. It may be the company that possesses the best intelligence about an African problem that the rest of the world has never properly understood.

So, I want women in this room to begin asking: What data about African women is nobody collecting? What healthcare problem is nobody solving? What financial problem is nobody addressing? What agricultural pattern is invisible? What African language is underserved? What consumer behaviour is misunderstood?

Those questions can become companies. Those companies can become platforms, and those platforms can become global businesses.

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IX. THE CHARGE

So here is my charge to every woman in this room. Not a suggestion!

FIRST: LEARN THE LANGUAGE OF DATA

Not because it is fashionable, but because data is becoming one of the fundamental assets of the AI economy. You do not necessarily need to become a professional programmer. You must understand what data is. How it is collected. How it is analyzed. How AI uses it. How it can create value, and how it can create risk.

SECOND: SIT WHERE ALGORITHMS ARE APPROVED.

AI systems increasingly influence decisions about credit, recruitment, healthcare, customer service and resource allocation. If women are absent from the rooms where those systems are designed and approved, the perspectives and experiences of women may be insufficiently represented in the resulting systems. Do not wait to be invited into the room. Become technically fluent enough to walk into it.

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THIRD: FIND THE STARTUPS.

Do not merely seek employment in the next generation of technology companies. Build them. The latest LinkedIn data shows that women founders are acquiring AI skills, but male founders are acquiring them faster. We must close that gap. The next African unicorn should not merely have a woman on its management team. She should be the founder.

FOURTH: FUND THE WOMEN WHO ARE BUILDING.

If you have capital, deploy it. If you have networks, open them. If you have expertise, share it. If you have influence, use it. If you have an investment fund, look at women-led technology businesses. If you have a successful company, create a pipeline for women into technology leadership. If you are a woman entrepreneur: Do not apologize for wanting to build something enormous.

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FIFTH: TEACH YOUR DAUGHTERS DIFFERENTLY.

Tell your daughters that mathematics is not a male territory. Tell them engineering is not a male territory. Tell them robotics is not a male territory. Tell them artificial intelligence is not a male territory. Buy the laptop. Take her to the robotics club. Teach her to build. Teach her to question. Teach her to experiment. Teach her to fail. Teach her to own. This is because the girl who learns to code today may build the company that employs thousands tomorrow.

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X. DO NOT ASK FOR A SEAT — BUILD THE TABLE

For too long, women have been told: "Ask for a seat at the table.“ I want to go further.

Build your own table. Build your own company. Build your own platform. Build your own intellectual property. Build your own investment network. Build your own technology. Build your own ecosystem.

The women who will shape the AI century cannot be satisfied with being passengers in somebody else's vehicle. They must become the drivers., and ultimately: the owners of the road.

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XI. THE 12-MONTH CHALLENGE

Before you leave this room today, I want every woman here to make five commitments:

ONE: Learn one serious AI tool today not tomorrow. Start now.!

TWO: Use AI to redesign at least one process in your organization. Find something slow. Something expensive. Something repetitive. Ask: Can AI make this better?

THREE: Build one AI-powered product, service or prototype. It does not have to be perfect. It has to exist.

FOUR: Mentor one younger woman into technology. Your success should not end with you.

FIVE: Invest in, partner with, mentor or finance at least one woman-led technology venture. Ecosystems are not built by speeches but by people helping other people move. Imagine what happens if 100 women in this room do those five things over the next twelve months. We will not simply have attended another conference. We will have created an ecosystem.

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CONCLUSION

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Let me end where I began With fire. Every civilization has had its defining fire. Our ancestors mastered physical fire. Agriculture mastered the fire of the soil. Industry mastered the fire of steam and steel. The digital revolution mastered the fire of information. Now, humanity has entered the age of artificial intelligence, the age of the machine that can learn, reason, create and increasingly act. However, here is the question history will ask of our generation: Who held the match? And more importantly: Who owned the fire?

For too long, women have been extraordinarily good at creating value but insufficiently represented among those who own the platforms through which that value is multiplied. That must change. I want the next generation of African girls to see something different. I want a 15-year-old girl in Lagos to look at an AI company and not think: "That is where I might get a job.“ But say: "That is the kind of company I can build." I want a young woman in Kano to look at a problem in agriculture and see not only hardship, but data.

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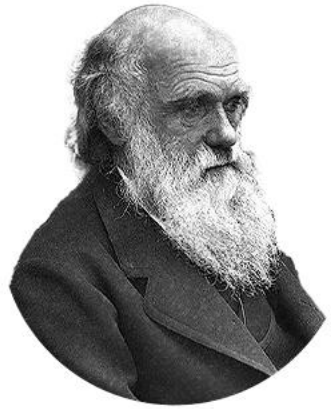
I want a doctor in Abuja to look at a healthcare crisis and see not only patients, but an AI opportunity. I want a woman entrepreneur in Lagos to look at her business and ask not merely: "How can I sell more?“ But: "What can technology make possible that was impossible yesterday?“ This is because Africa does not need women merely sitting at the table. Africa needs women designing the table, writing the algorithms, owning the platforms, creating the companies, financing the ideas, patenting the inventions, training the next generation, and converting Africa's problems into Africa's greatest businesses.

Ladies, the AI revolution is not asking us whether we are ready. It has already begun. The question is whether we will enter it as consumers or creators. As employees or owners. As spectators or architects. The fire is already burning. So do not merely warm your hands beside it. Build with it. Do not merely use the future. Own a piece of it. When the history of the AI century is eventually written, let one sentence be impossible to erase: African women were not left behind by the future. They helped build it. Thank you.

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"There is a tide in the affairs of men, Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries. On such a **FULL SEA** are we now afloat, and we must take the current when it serves, Or lose lose our ventures."
- WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



"It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change."
- CHARLES DARWIN



Higher education is in such a **FULL SEA** of Artificial Intelligence, Today!

Are you GAME? Is your Institution on BOARD?

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THANK YOU

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