



COMESA, EAC and ECOWAS launch networking platform to connect 50 million African women in business

50 Million African Women Speak platform provides information on starting and growing a business, and has a social networking feature for women entrepreneurs to learn from and do business with each other

Kigali, Monday, 25 November 2019 – A digital platform specifically designed to address the information needs of women in business and connect them via a custom-built social networking tool was launched today in Kigali, Rwanda.

The platform, known as 50 Million African Women Speak, was unveiled during the Global Gender Summit taking place in the Rwandan capital. It primarily seeks to help economically empower women by providing a one-stop shop for a wide range of financial and non-financial services that women need to start and grow successful businesses.

The initiative which is accessible at www.womenconnect.org is implemented by the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), East African Community (EAC) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). It will allow women in 38 African countries to find information on running businesses, accessing financial services, create business opportunities online and access training resources, ultimately contributing to their economic empowerment.

“I certainly believe that the creation of this platform is a very practical way of speaking to the general agenda of empowering women. I think a lot has been said and now we have come to a stage where we have practical initiatives such as this one,” said COMESA Secretary General Chileshe Kapwepwe.

Through a robust social networking functionality that has been embedded in the platform, women will have opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, mentoring and sharing information and knowledge, connecting via the web-based platform or through the 50 Million African Women Speak mobile app. The platform is touted as having the potential to unleash a dynamic online community of women entrepreneurs whose business activities transcend borders.

“Sixty five percent of the traded commodities in the East Africa region come from agriculture—a sector that employs 80% of women. This platform will help this big part of our population to expand markets and get new opportunities,” said Hon. Christophe Bazivamo, EAC Deputy Secretary General in charge of Productive and Social Sectors.

The 50 Million African Women Speak platform also obtained a ringing endorsement from ECOWAS' Commissioner in charge of Social Affairs and Gender, Dr Siga Fatima Jagne who said: *“At the level of ECOWAS, this platform perfectly fits within the scope of the programme on gender strengthened in 2005 by the Authority of Heads of State and Government through the adoption of the Gender Policy Document”*.

The platform comes at a time when Sub-Saharan Africa hosts close to 13 million formal and informal small and medium-sized enterprises with one or more women owners. Yet, only [16-20%](#) of women entrepreneurs are able to access long-term financing from formal financial institutions to scale up their businesses.

In addition, with a financing gap for women entrepreneurs across business value chains in Sub-Saharan Africa [estimated at \\$42 billion](#) by the African Development Bank, the 50 Million African Women Speak platform stands out as an unique solution to provide information on available financial products specifically designed with women entrepreneurs in mind.

Funded by the African Development Bank, the platform aims to connect at least 50 million women across the African continent. It is also expected to contribute to the African Union's Agenda 2063 for women and youth empowerment.

"I am very excited that it is technology-based because this is one of the issues we are trying to advance to make sure that we leverage on technology to have smart solutions that are reaching far more people. It collapses the distance so you can have someone sitting in Kenya or Malawi talking to someone in West Africa and sharing experiences," COMESA Secretary General Ms Kapwepwe added.

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Note to Editors

About 50MAWSP

Women play a critical role in the development of African economies. However, existing and potential women entrepreneurs continue to face gender-specific barriers such as limited access to information and networking opportunities, lower levels of education and business training, weak property rights that deprive them of collateral and tangible assets, legal barriers that impede their economic activities and cultural barriers that discourage them from thriving as entrepreneurs. As a result, women have challenges to access financial and non-financial services and so the size and growth of their businesses suffer.

By using Information Communication Technology (ICTs), some of these challenges can be alleviated, hence the establishment of the 50 Million African Women Speak Project, funded by the African Development Bank.

The 50 Million African Women Speak Project (50MAWSP) is contributing to the economic and social empowerment of women across 38 African countries through the provision of a networking platform (www.womenconnect.org) to access information on financial and non-financial services.

Funded by the African Development Bank (AfDB), the project targets 50 Million women in business and is implemented by the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the East African Community (EAC) and the Economic Community for Western African States (ECOWAS)