

WEA Digital Innovation Challenge: Building Enabling Ecosystems for Women Entrepreneurs



Background

COVID-19 has transformed the world, significantly impacting economies and increasing unemployment worldwide. Supporting digital entrepreneurship to develop initiatives that leverage digital innovation, targeting the economic, ecological, political and social sectors, has the potential to impact the employment gaps and strengthen the quality of life of countries. However, entrepreneurship remains a male-dominated activity with a disparity of barriers for the other half of the population to contribute to innovation and the global economy. Closing the current gender gap requires stakeholders to work together to empower female entrepreneurs by challenging the existing business models and addressing the many obstacles they face to succeed in creating new technologies. Developing a more gender-inclusive digital innovation ecosystem can elevate the economy and society by creating more jobs and accelerating innovation which is critical for countries to thrive and recover from the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19.

Whilst the number of women operating their businesses is increasing globally, and female representation in business ownership has been positively correlated with the income level in countries, only one in three companies is owned by women globally¹. Women entrepreneurs significantly contribute to economic growth and poverty reduction worldwide. Yet, they still face legal, financial, and market inequalities that restrain their entrepreneurial success in most countries.

Access to finance is frequently identified as a critical barrier to growth for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises², where women are often underfunded and tend to struggle much more than men to receive resources and capital. Research suggests that women entrepreneurs face \$1.5 trillion financing deficits³. Globally, men are 3% and 6% more likely to borrow and save to start, operate and expand businesses than women⁴, discrimination by banks against women businesses out of bias is still present⁵, and in 2020 women-led start-ups received only 2.3% of VC funding⁶.

¹ Enterprise Surveys. Retrieved from The World Bank Gender Data Portal. Available at: <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/gender/>

² For example, see World Bank Enterprise Surveys. Available at: <http://www.enterprisesurveys.org/research/enterprisenotes/topic/finance>.

³ MSME Finance Gap, International Finance Corporation, 2017. <https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/03522e90-a13d-4a02-87cd-9ee9a297b311/121264-WP-PUBLIC-M-SMEReportFINAL.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=m5SwAQA>

⁴ Findex. Available at <https://globalfindex.worldbank.org/>
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/839755/The_impact_of_business_accelerators_and_incubators_in_the_UK.pdf

⁵ Do banks discriminate against women entrepreneurs? World Bank. 2019. Available at <https://blogs.worldbank.org/psd/do-banks-discriminate-against-women-entrepreneurs>

⁶ Women-led Start-ups Received Just 2.3% of VC Funding, Harvard Business Review, 2021. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2021/02/women-led-startups-received-just-2-3-of-vc-funding-in-2020>

Global efforts are being made to address gender parity in innovation by incubators, and accelerators⁷, providing resources, space, networking opportunities and access to capital for women entrepreneurs. It is critical to building women's experience and confidence to start their businesses, minimize unconscious gender bias and have more women start-ups funded.

Therefore, the International Telecommunication Union (“ITU”) in partnership with Women Entrepreneurship Accelerator (“WEA”) and Mary Kay Global, has launched the WEA Digital Innovation Challenge with the theme of *Building enabling ecosystems for women entrepreneurs*. This challenge supports the commitment of the Women's Entrepreneurship Accelerator (WEA) along with six other UN agencies and corporate partners to empower 5 million women entrepreneurs by 2030 and is aligned with the 2023 Commission on the Status of Women (CSW67) Priority theme of “Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.”

More than ever, it is crucial to maximize women's entrepreneurship impact in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by creating an enabling digital innovation ecosystem for women entrepreneurs worldwide. Thus, ensuring countries reap the benefits of the digital era developing the knowledge, skills and resilience needed to shape a sustainable and inclusive recovery from COVID-19 and other pressing global challenges.

Challenge Scope

The WEA Digital Innovation Challenge, in response to WEA's commitment alongside six UN agencies and corporate partners to empower 5 million women entrepreneurs by 2030, is co-organised by the International Telecommunications Union, WEA and Mary Kay Global. The Challenge will help identify scalable, innovative digital solutions that enable countries, societies, communities, institutions and individuals to develop a more gender-inclusive digital entrepreneurship ecosystem promoting an environment that supports the creation and growth of women-owned and women-led enterprises.

The Challenge objective is to **build vibrant and inclusive digital innovation ecosystems that empower women entrepreneurs** by supporting existing digital solutions developed by women-owned companies⁸ or with a minimum of one female founder or by women acting as micro-entrepreneurs or innovative change makers working towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

To increase the potential/ capabilities of the selected proposals/teams, the Challenge will open access to the Digital Innovation Challenge Acceleration Programme, providing: (1) capacity-building training, (2) a specialised mentorship scheme, (3) a network of

⁷ The Impact of Business Accelerators and Incubators in the UK, Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2019. Available at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/839755/The_impact_of_business_accelerators_and_incubators_in_the_UK.pdf

⁸ Women-owned businesses definition: <https://www.iso.org/obp/ui/#iso:std:iso:iwa:34:ed-1:v1:en>

change-makers, (4) a publication of the case in a Best Practice Report.

The WEA Digital Innovation Challenge will bring resources and expertise from various industries and sectors to support mentoring and capacity development for the selected innovators.

Milestones

Key Dates	Activities
7 December 2022	WEA Digital Innovation Challenge Launch
21 February 2023	End of WEA Digital Innovation Challenge Submissions
2 March 2023	Shortlisted Candidates Announcement
6 -17 March 2023 <i>(exact dates to be disclosed closer to the time)</i>	Pitch Competition Session and WEA Digital Innovation Challenge winners announcement
28 to 31 March 2023	Capacity Building Training Virtual Bootcamp
31 March 2023	Mentorship Programme starts
22 June 2023	Mentorship Programme ends
TBC	Certification Ceremony

Eligibility

- The challenge is open to governments, intergovernmental organizations, NGOs, private sector and start-ups, research institutions, academia and civil society organizations (CSOs) (“the Participants”). Only legally registered organizations/institutions [in an ITU Member State] are eligible to participate in this challenge.
- Consortia of organizations are open to participate in the challenge.
- Participants presenting a submission to the challenge must have at least one female member in the leadership team (e.g. founder, chief executive, or similar).
- Only one entry per Participant is permitted at this challenge. Submissions containing participants who submit multiple entries will be disqualified.
- Applying organizations/institutions must have an existing project or minimum viable product (MVP)* that:
 1. has already been implemented or tested

2. promotes and supports female entrepreneurship within digital innovation ecosystems
 3. demonstrates a new innovative project/prototype, outlining its potential for scaling up
 4. is a digital solution
- The participant representing the initiative must have availability to participate in a four-day virtual boot camp on the days of the Bootcamp for a two(2)-hour session per day and availability to meet their mentor and programme team until the end of the programme.

* An MVP is a product with enough features that can be used by early customers and receive feedback for future development.

Selection Criteria

The selection committee will use the evaluation criteria below for the shortlisting of 20 - 25 best submissions, as well as the final selection of the winning submissions. Each criterion has been assigned a percentage weight for scoring.

- 20% for Relevance: The innovation should demonstrate how it will fulfill the achievement of at least one of the Sustainable Development Goals.
- 15% for Adaptability: Should demonstrate its adaptability and replicability to the local context and global
- 15% for Sustainability: Demonstrate a business model that promotes sustainable and continuous impact in the short or long term.
- 15% for Viability: Demonstrate the viability of the solution in terms of its effectiveness and feasibility
- 20% for Partnership: Engagement with local and global partners in other countries to assure viability in local conditions, and to promote sustainability and scalability of the solution.
- 15% for Impact: The innovation must showcase how it has the potential and has already impacted lives and driven socio-economic benefit, especially among vulnerable and excluded populations.

Selection Committee

A selection committee of experts from the International Telecommunication Union (“ITU”), Women Entrepreneurship Accelerator (“WEA”) and Mary Kay Global (collectively, the “Organizers” and each, an “Organizer”) and supporting partners will convene to shortlist the 20 to 25 best submissions and the final selected proposals.

- The committee will be composed of at least five experts, including outside experts, with at least one member from ITU, WEA and Mary Kay Global.
- The committee will elect a chairperson, who will steer the deliberation for the selecting winning proposals. ITU, WEA and Mary Kay Global will provide the secretariat for the committee.



- The committee will first examine all submitted applications for an initial evaluation to shortlist candidates based on the strength of their application and the evaluation criteria.
- All shortlisted submissions will be provided with a Pitching package to prepare them for a “pitch competition” session.
- The selection committee will then convene to select up to 10 winning submissions based on overall performance and the evaluation criteria during a live pitching event.

The Award

The organizations/institutions whose submissions have been finally selected by the selection committee as the winning proposals** will, through their appointed representatives:

1. Attend a virtual boot camp to refine further their plans and milestones (e.g. market entry, deployment, impact traction).
2. Receive mentorship and support until the close of the programme
3. Their digital innovation solutions/prototypes will be recorded in a Best Practice report, to be produced by ITU.
4. Gain access to the Digital Innovation Ecosystem Network, a closed network of Changemakers for partnerships, knowledge sharing and networking.

** The final number of selected award-winning proposals will be at the discretion of the selection committee.

Additional Terms and Conditions for Participation in The Innovation Challenge

1. The WEA Digital Innovation Challenge: WEA Digital Innovation Challenge: Building Enabling Ecosystems for Women Entrepreneurs (the “Challenge”) is organized by the International Telecommunication Union (“ITU”), Women Entrepreneurship Accelerator (“WEA”) and Mary Kay Global (collectively, the “Organizers” and each, an “Organizer”). By submitting your application form for participation in the Challenge, you accept the present terms and conditions on behalf of your institution/organization.
2. You hereby warrant that all information submitted is true, complete, and up-to-date and that you are authorized to participate in the Challenge on behalf of your institution/organization. The Organizers reserve the right to verify your eligibility for participation in the Challenge as well as the accuracy of your submitted information. You represent that you are not related to any of the members of the Challenge’s selection committee, and that none of your relatives (up to the third degree) is employed by the Organizers.
3. You/your institution/organization (as the case may be) will retain all intellectual property rights on the content of your submissions. However, by participating in the Challenge you grant the Organizers a limited three-year, non-exclusive, global, royalty-free right and license to use, reproduce, communicate, demonstrate, make available for public, display, and distribute the content of your submission for the Organizers’ informational,



educational or awareness-raising purposes, via printed or digital or online media, including the Organizers' websites and the Challenge website. You represent that you (and/or your institution/organization, as the case may be) have the legal right to grant such license to the Organizers. You also permit the Organizers to use your name, likeness, video and/or photograph in connection with the Challenge, in any media, worldwide, at no remuneration.

4. The Organizers reserve the right to disqualify you if they reasonably consider that the information you have provided and/or your submissions do not comply with the terms, instructions and guidelines provided in the Challenge website (<https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Innovation/Pages/Challenges/WEA-DIC-2022.aspx>), the Challenge application form, as well as the present terms and conditions. By way of example, submissions which are not in English or which the Organizers consider to be off topic, advertisements for unrelated projects or otherwise not in accordance with the nature of the Challenge or the mission of the Organizers are subject to disqualification.
5. If your submission is among those finally selected by the selection committee, notwithstanding the terms of such agreement, you will be required to provide updates on the progress of your implementation of your proposal over the course of the year up to three years. These updates may consist of responses to emails or telephone interviews. You understand and agree that the Organizers may create content based on your updates, such as success stories, blog posts, photos or social media postings which may be published on the Organizers' websites, the Challenge website, as well as other communication channels and made available to the public, at the Organizers' discretion.
6. You are not allowed to use the Organizers emblems or the logos of any their events in any online or offline communication, without the prior written permission of the respective Organizer.
7. All submissions must not: a. violate the intellectual property rights of third parties; b. be illegal under applicable national laws and international law; c. depict or incite hatred, defame, abuse, harass, stalk, threaten a specific person or social group, incite violence or conflict or otherwise violate the legal rights of third parties (including those of privacy and publicity) and d. violate the terms of use of any social media service, website, mobile application or any other platform used in connection with your submission. You agree to release and hold harmless the Organizers from and against any and all claims, expenses, and liability arising out of or relating to your (and your institution's/organization's) participation in the Challenge and the content of your submissions.
8. You acknowledge and agree that your participation in the Challenge is free of charge but does not entail any right to compensation of any kind or to reimbursement of any expenses incurred from such participation.
9. The Organizers are not responsible for any lost, late, corrupted, mutilated, or misdirected submissions, or submissions not received within the established deadlines.
10. You acknowledge and agree that the Organizers are entitled to modify the content of the Challenge website and/or the present terms and conditions and to abbreviate, modify, suspend, cancel or terminate the Challenge (partially or in its entirety) without any



- obligation (present or future), by notifying you via an announcement at the Challenge website (<https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Innovation/Pages/Challenges/WEA-DIC-2022.aspx>).
11. The Organizers reserve the right to make all final decisions regarding the Challenge. Nothing herein shall be considered to be a limitation or a waiver of the privileges and immunities of the Organizers, which are specifically reserved.
 12. The participants in the challenge commit to comply with the “Code of Conduct to Prevent Harassment, Including Sexual Harassment, at United Nations System Events”, which is applicable to all ITU meetings, conferences and events wherever they take place. Further information is available at <https://www.itu.int/en/delegates-corner/Pages/default.aspx>
 13. The winners (mentees) participating in the mentorship programme are solely responsible for their actions. The mentors are not responsible for the decisions and actions made by the winners. The Mentorship Management Team and ITU will not be held responsible for:
 - a) Any of the advice given by the mentors to the mentees and vice versa.
 - b) Any decision and action taken by the mentor and the mentee.
 - c) Any misconduct from mentors, mentees or other participants during the duration of the Programme.”)