

Celebrating inspiring, passionate and dedicated WOMEN IN ICT

by Masiyaleti Mbewe • photograph by Nicola Gallagher / United Nations Namibia.

Assembled at the Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST), the impactful Namibia Women in Computing Conference (NWIC) 2018 was an inspiring communion of women brought together by their love of technology and its advancements in Africa. Gathered in the NUST Mining Auditorium was a scene straight out of the pages of a best-selling non-fiction feminist manifesto.

We all watched in awe as Shuri, the princess of the fictional first-world African kingdom of Wakanda, ameliorated the lives of the people around her with an ease and a confident precision that left us all speechless. For many people, especially women in computing, seeing a character of colour represent an often erased, overlooked and underestimated group of people was a breath of the freshest binary bits of air.

Namibia Women in Computing chair Dr Anicia Peters started off the conference, facilitated by director of ceremonies Marly Samuel, with a powerful yet humorous opening speech that touched on the various expectations and stereotypes women in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) industry face. With a particular focus on March and its affiliation with celebrating women internationally, Peters highlighted the importance of institutions creating and supporting local computing initiatives focused on empowering women, “Google and the Google Development Group have doubled their sponsorships to the NWIC because they consider the capacity and retention of women in ICT as a very important developmental factor,” Peters said before introducing Faustina Caley, chairperson of the parliamentary standing committee on ICT and innovation.

Caley gave an unflinching speech that encompassed the various challenges that women still face in the ICT industry: “Women make up 50% of the world’s population, but globally men are still dominating the field with about 80% of ICT and technology designers being male.” Caley went on to add that, “In Namibia, generally our figures for women in ICT look much better than most countries in the world and we graduate more women than other countries, but there is still room for improvement.”

Despite these favourable numbers, the parliamentarian

stressed that, “Africa in general needs to wake up because, the world is revolving and we are lagging behind the other countries surging forward, we need to walk the talk and propel our economies to greater heights. With technology advancement it’s possible,” adding, “We cannot be left behind. I urge the NWIC to urgently look into the matter, capacitate and encourage more women and girls to enter the ICT field – especially as Developers and ICT Designers.”

To help urge and inspire this growth in the ICT industry, Vasti Nuule, FNB Namibia’s first female IT auditor, gave an interesting and informative presentation that assisted in widening the spectrum of alternative career choices for women in ICT. One of those is the profession of IT auditing, which involves monitoring an institution’s network infrastructure to increase security. “There are so many different things one can venture into when studying something ICT-related and becoming an IT auditor is one of them,” Nuule encouraged.

Much to the crowd’s admiration, Grade 11 Windhoek Technical High School student and PYTHON Executive Scholar Member and Programmer, Queen Namene took to the NWIC podium and gave a talk on her programming journey as a young girl in the ICT world. “I’ve been programming for 2 years now and I’m happy to be exposed to other women in the ICT world today as it is a very male dominated industry. So many girls quit because of some of the challenges they face, so it’s inspiring to see other successful women in this field,” Namene said, before giving a dynamic and impressive demonstration of a web application prototype she is working on that is able to search for words, their meanings, synonyms and antonyms. Namene plans to improve this application by enabling





it to translate words into Namibian and African languages as well as to translate local slang words.

Meke Namindo, a professional fitness instructor and nutritional advisor gave a lively and fun talk about general health misconceptions as well as the importance for women in the ICT industry to keep physically and mentally fit.

Perhaps one of the most engaging presentations was a panel discussion by the Internet Society of Namibia on Mitigating Online Violence Against Women. Panelists Muenazo Tjiroze from the Office of the First Lady, Sabine Witting from the UN, Emilia Nghikembua from CRAN, Alna Dall from One Africa as well as Dr. Peters spearheaded the discussion on the violence women are subjected to online as well as the possible solutions to help curb these atrocities.

This panel discussion invited victims of online violence to give accounts of the horrific crimes that befall women on online social media platforms. From stalking and revenge porn to slut shaming, women in Namibia are often victimised and shamed for merely being women online.

Nashilongo Gervasius Nakale, the facilitator of this panel started off the discussion with a statement that gave insight to the issue at hand: "Unequal access to finance, education and technology are some of the obstacles that many Namibian women face getting online. For many women who go online, gender discrimination and marginalisation are common, perpetuating inequalities established offline but amplified online."

Dall then added, "It's an issue of representation. Very few

women engage with content online, we are trying to regulate the industry instead of creating safe spaces for women within the online community," Witting highlighted the developmental goals that the UN were trying to implement such as creating spaces where marginalised people can both access communication devices and be online safely.

CRAN's Nghikembua also explained the many ways in which the laws of Namibia needed to change in order to make online spaces safer for women, with Tjiroze adding, "One of the things the Office of the First Lady recognises is that there is a need to address issues such as online violence. This is a broad problem that we face in which young women are especially vulnerable. Bullying online seems to take a gendered form." The well-rounded panel discussion provided a great platform for this important conversation and highlighted how safe spaces for women in ICT are essential, on and offline.

NWIC 2018 was an eye-opening and inspiring space where women were encouraged to pursue their dreams in a field that is often reserved for men. Thought provoking and innovative, the conference showed that the Namibian ICT community recognises the need for more women to engage in careers and activities in the ICT field. The conference was a much needed stage for those aiming to achieve this, and by so doing bring about a more inclusive and diverse ICT community in Namibia.

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