Conversation #8

Women Working in Tech:
Making the Invisible Visible

Judith Owigar of AkiraChix

Judith Owigar is an African entrepreneur who uses technology as a tool to empower youth and young women. She believes that exposure to, education about, and actual use of technology can improve quality of life—and as such change the world for the better. Judith is a co-founder and the operations director of AkiraChix, a not-for-profit that aims to inspire and develop a successful force of women who create technology solutions, change women's perception of technology, and change Africa's future. She is also the founder of JuaKali, an online platform that links skilled manual laborers in Kenya's informal sector—commonly known as JuaKali workers (Kiswahili for "hot sun")—with employers in the construction industry.

What is the story behind AkiraChix?

A group of friends and I started AkiraChix in 2010. It all stemmed from the need to see more people like us in the field of technology. Three of us in the original co-founding team worked in the same company, and we constantly felt we needed to prove that our work was good enough. We were three women among the total of five developers, and outsiders from the neighboring company would come and ask, "Who actually codes in this office?"—then they would look at the dude. We felt invisible.

My generation grew up with the common stereotype that women have lower mathematical or critical thinking ability than men. This has affected how men view women in the workplace and also how women viewed themselves. It has led both men and women to question the place of women in science, technology, engineering, and math fields. Our personal experience as women developers led us to start a community for women in technology where we are visible, can support each other, and can grow our skills—because we wanted to be the best in our field!

What is the biggest fear when it comes to working in an environment that is male dominated?

One of my greatest fears was to be my true self as woman in a male-dominated space. When I first entered the technology space as a university student, my first thought was to find a way to fit in. At that time, I thought the best way to fit in and blend with the crowd was to act more like my classmates and play down my feminine attributes. The fact that I was a woman by itself made me stand out. My choice of clothing was greatly influenced by the fact that I did not want my womanhood to be the center of attention. It was easier for me to wear baggy clothes because I was not confident in my feminity. Over the course of the years, I have become confident in the fact that I am a woman and I am a technologist. I have come to realize that I need to hold both identities in order to be my true self. I think this is one of the underlying reasons why many women shy away from male-dominated spaces, because you feel like you have to give up a part of yourself to fit in. One of the reasons I believe AkiraChix is such a strong force is because we give women the freedom to be themselves.

When was the first time you realized that AkiraChix was going to work?

Our point of validation came when we participated in hackathons. There used to be very many hackathons at the iHub, and as usual there were always more men than women. In the early years of the iHub, most of the girls who participated in the hackathons were members of AkiraChix. We usually worked together as a team. The point of validation came when other women would come to the event and would look at us and ask to join us. From that moment on, it validated our point that there was a need to have a women-only space where women could take risks, fail, learn, and succeed.

What is the vision of AkiraChix?

AkiraChix's vision is to nurture generations of women in Africa who use technology to create solutions and positively affect their community. In order to make our vision a reality, we would like to have organizations like AkiraChix all over Africa. Ultimately, we would like to see more women join the field of technology. We will say that we have accomplished our vision when the representation of women in the field of technology is no longer an issue.

When we started building the technology ecosystem in Kenya, we used to copy a lot of what we saw in Silicon Valley. We used to read a lot in Mashable, TechCrunch, and so on. We read about all these start-ups that seemed to be overnight successes, with their massive valuations and big IPOs. For a moment, we felt like we were in Silicon Valley ourselves, forgetting that we live in Kenya, where very few people have much disposable income and when it comes to technology, they want to spend their money on something relevant. Very few people in Kenya use technology just because it is fun. We have realized that in order to sell in this market, the service needs to serve a real need or address a clear pain point. Over time we have realized that it takes more work to build a software-based business-to-client service than a business-to-business service—and we really had to rewire our thinking with regard to operating a technology business in our context.

As a co-founder of AkiraChix, I looked to Silicon Valley to give me answers on how to work on the issue of women's low representation in technology. But over time, I realized we had a better chance of solving the issue for ourselves right here in Africa, because the technology ecosystem was young and in its formative stages. If we tackled the problem before it became as institutionalized as it is in Silicon Valley, then we had a better chance of success. I came to see that we are operating at the best time to address this problem. Our hope is that, 20 years from now, women will account for more than 40 % of the workforce in the field of technology.

In order to achieve this vision, we want to scale to five training centers in towns and cities all over Africa. We also want to expand to the major urban centres within Kenya. And in order to reach more African women technologists, we plan to partner with hubs and co-working spaces all over the continent to support their initiatives of having more women represented in technology. We are currently developing the Akirachix model that we can share with interested people and organizations. This is the best way and time for us to write the story of African women in technology.

How did you create a community for women?

We started by having monthly meet-ups for women in technology. Over time, we realized that we were sharing a lot of information and knowledge among ourselves that other women could benefit from. We therefore decided to start a training program that targeted young women from low-income areas. We wanted to target young women who did not have an opportunity to be in the technology industry. Over time, we also started a high school program so that we could expose girls in secondary schools to careers in the technology industry. We had realized that many girls did not consider careers in technology, because they did not know about them, and if they did they did not see women whom they could identify with.

As we continue to grow our community of women in technology, we have also realized that we need to work with men in the industry as our partners. This is because the women we work with do not exist in a vacuum. They work and study with men in school or on the job. One of the

ways we have been doing this is by engaging men in our programs. Many of our trainers, for example, are men. On a wider scale, we encourage the members of our network to participate in events hosted at the iHub co-working space. One of our greatest realizations as AkiraChix was that we are a subcommunity within the greater tech community. We are not a separate entity. Recognizing this and communicating it to the tech community has made them more open to supporting our activities.

What are the kinds of struggles you get exposed to as a female entrepreneur?

There is a lot of sexism in Kenyan culture, and it is hard for a woman to be viewed as a competent leader. If a woman gets assaulted or battered, she usually gets blamed for it irrespective of how the man acted. It is usually considered to be the woman's responsibility to prevent such acts of violence. For women who are leaders in technology or leaders in other professions, the bar is set much higher. We are expected to navigate unwritten social rules when dealing with both men and women. There is also the assumption that marriage validates a woman's leadership abilities. This can make it harder for a young unmarried woman like me to get respect in certain circles.

Being a part of Acumen's East Africa Fellows Program has helped me understand and appreciate myself as an influencer in my community and helped me define my purpose. Through this experience, I no longer look down on myself just because I am young—and I strive to be an example in my speech, conduct, love, and faith.

How did it happen that you were on the same panel with Presidents Uhuru Kenyatta and Barack Obama at the Global Entrepreneurship Summit (GES)? What did it mean to you?

I was contacted two weeks before the conference and asked if I was interested in participating in a panel at the GES. I was asked to give a two minute pitch of any subject I would like to discuss. I gave a mini elevator pitch on Akirachix. At that moment I did not realize I would be giving a more refined version of that pitch while seated between the President of the US, Barack Obama, and the President of Kenya, Uhuru Kenyatta, two weeks later.

That experience gave validation to the work we as AkiraChix have been doing. On an individual level, I felt that I represented very many young African women who are trying to make a difference in their communities. At that moment on stage, I felt I was speaking for young women all over Africa.

Thank you, Judith!