Profile:
The Asikana Network

Chisenga Muyoya

> It's extremely difficult for females in ICT to land their dream ICT jobs because it is still considered a male dominated field.
> – Ella Mbewe, cofounder of the Asikana Network

The Asikana Network is a women-driven group that aims to empower young women and equip them with information and communication technology (ICT) skills to help them in their various fields. Started in January 2012, Asikana, encouraged and supported by the BongHive[1] leadership, has grown into a vibrant and innovative network of young women determined to challenge the "male geek" stereotype. The founders of Asikana Network, Ella Mbewe, Chisenga Muyoya and Regina Mtonga, met at a highly technical training course held at BongoHive in December 2011. Having being the only three female participants, they were driven to form a support group for women in technology.

In his blog *Appropriating Technology for Social Justice and Human Development*, Tony Roberts writes: "Women find it particularly difficult to make their way in the IT field whether due to glass ceilings in the UK or the glass ladders in Lusaka" (Roberts, 2012).

Asikana has partnered with organisations that offer support and mentorship including BongoHive, Anakazi, and Akirachix[2] of Kenya. Through these partnerships Asikana is moving towards realising some of the goals they have set to achieve. An interactive networking platform for like-minded women which also provides a forum that promotes women's participation in ICT is an achievement Asikana has realised. A more ambitious and perhaps ongoing goal is advocating for policies and legislation that endorse the active involvement of women in the ICT sector.

Although women in Zambia (and across Africa) entering the IT industry face constant gender discrimination in the private sector, the Network believes that partnering with the private sector will help them achieve some of their goals. By providing training and capacity building in ICT skills as well as mentorship and facilitating placement for suitably qualified women, the private sector can potentially create a more inclusive environment for women "techies" and enable women to gain experience and confidence in their chosen profession. The Asikana Network targets three main groups of women. One is girls in high school. The women in Asikana believe in eliminating the stereotypical "I can't do that" thinking by working with the girls when they are young. They plan to introduce Asikana Network clubs in schools where girls can meet and receive mentorship and encouragement from other women who are already in the field.

A second group are college students and graduates. This group is made up of women who are either in college studying IT or who would like to branch off into the sector later on in life. They are sometimes already studying IT but simply require an extra nudge from other women in the field to practise it actively. The group also includes women who have completed their tertiary education and may not be sure what steps to take next.

The third group is made up of women in IT who are already working and have some ICT skills but simply wish to share their knowledge as well as pick up new skills from others. One significant achievement which has implications for furthering Asikana's aims beyond Zambia is the creation of a map of women tech hubs in Africa. This map includes brief information on what each tech hub does, as well as where it is located.

Ethel Ella Mbewe, a cofounder of the Asikana Network, explains why they created the crowdmap of women tech hubs in Africa:

"We aim to reach out to other women in technology initiatives in Zambia and Africa at large. We knew we were not alone and realised the need for a platform where we would meet and interact on the different challenges faced by most women in the tech field and together come up with solutions to overcoming these challenges – thus the crowdmap."

She explains how the map works. "The crowdmap maps all women in tech initiatives in Africa. Basically one has to submit a report to do with women in tech in Africa. Submitting a report can be done via email or Twitter and through the submit report button/page on the crowdmap. Once submitted the

reports have to be reviewed and verified before appearing on the crowdmap."

Thus far, 48 women in tech organisations in Africa have been mapped representing 15 African countries including Algeria, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Chisenga Muyoya, cofounder of the Asikana Network, explained who the organisation chose to make use of a mapping initiative:

> 'We think that crowdmapping is the perfect way to make visible the wealth of women's talent and enterprise springing up all across Africa. We want Women in Tech organisations out there to put themselves on the map, make themselves visible and help us to build a supportive and strong community of African Women in Technology.' (Bateman, 2012)

Muyoya continues with what they hope to achieve in the long-term:

> 'The success of high-profile women in technology projects like mFarm, http://mfarm.co.ke/, iCow, http://www.icow.co.ke/, and the active role played by organisations such as AkiraChix, http://akirachix.com/, means that in Kenya the position of women in technology has begun to improve. By strengthening their sister organisations in other African countries and by enabling them to network effectively with each other Asikana intends to contribute to improving the position of Women in Tech across the African continent.'

As Regina Mtonga says in an interview with Kayleigh Bateman,

> 'This is a very positive story about Africa that directly contrasts the negative stereo-typing of Africa as a continent dominated by poverty, corruption and hopelessness. The technology sector is booming in Africa and we want women's participation to be recognised and valued. We hope the map will help to increase demonstrate the wealth of women's talent across the continent.'

When asked about what impact Asikana hopes to have on women beyond those working in the IT industry, Chisenga Muyoya responded by saying, "Albert Schweitzer said that 'example is not the main thing in influencing others, it is the only thing.' We believe that by highlighting the activities and achievements of successful women in tech, women all over Africa will begin to believe that they too can reach for the stars."

Apart from the crowdmap, they have begun training in mobile app development, web development and basic IT skills. In addition, they have

trained 25 women in video production and editing.[3] Asikana Network has also initiated an outreach programme to train young school children, equipping them with basic computer skills. This project currently reaches 1 000 kids in 21 disadvantaged schools.

As Mbewe points out, to be successful in the technology field, women have to work twice as hard and be extremely resilient:

> 'We formed the Asikana Network for women facing these challenges to come together to support one another. We aim to change perceptions and behavior towards women in ICT and to level the playing field for those young women who come behind us. Hopefully they will not have to face the same obstacles and we will help them to succeed.' (Bateman, 2012)

And so the Asikana Network grows, with talented and determined women pushing against huge obstacles as a collective of young African women "techies."

For more information on the Asikana Network follow @AsikanaNetwork on Twitter or visit https://www.facebook.com/AsikanaNetwork.

Endnotes

1. Available at <http://bongohive.co.zm/>
2. All three organisations are engaged in promoting women's empowerment and development through technology.
3. Their films on women and technology are available at <http://www.youtube.com/asikananetworkzambia>.

References

Bateman, K. 2012. "Asikana Network puts African Women in Tech Groups on the Map", *Computerweekly.com*. Available at <http://www.computerweekly.com/blogs/witsend/2012/09/asikana-network-puts-african-women-in-tech-groups-on-the-map.html>.

Roberts, T. 2012. "Asikana Network – Zambia", *Appropriating Technology*. Available at <http://appropriatingtechnology.org/?q=node/8>.