

tech for good



Celebrating sisterhood and the power of safe spaces for women to talk, question, learn and feel seen is at the heart of what Khwela Womxn aims to achieve. Binwe Adebayo finds out more...

Illustrations by xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

While most of our social media scrolls these days bring up a range of polished Instagram images, offbeat TikTok videos and heated debates on Twitter, the digital community is not only about content and commerce. For the women (or, as they iterate the word – womxn) behind Khwela Womxn, digital and tech spaces have opened up the possibility for connection, community and social change for South Africa's women. With a clear target of 100 000-women strong network, the team has worked to leverage easy-to-use, affordable online spaces and the help of expert volunteers to create programmes that support the empowerment of women.

And it's a notion well-founded. While much research into online communities has leaned towards its current consumer and content dynamics, other scholars have argued that a 'digital commons', which supports equity and co-creation, could have important impacts on everyday life and in the case of Khwela, tangibly change the circumstances of women living in South Africa.

Co-founder Grizelda La Cock explains, "We help historically marginalised womxn by equipping them with opportunities for experiential learning, financial growth and access to safe peer-mentorship spaces (sisterhood circles), so that they can shift their mindsets and

elevate themselves personally and professionally. We leverage technology to reach womxn who may otherwise lack access.'

And it seems to be working. While different participants may access Khwela through various programmes or platforms, their galvanised network is already immense. They have over 16 400 followers across social media and their WhatsApp mentor bot, Alora, has engaged with 6609 unique users. The Alora bot enables women to pop the word 'Hi' into a WhatsApp message and be connected with 'Alora', a sage, savvy bot who's able to answer questions about anything – from personal development to career planning, time management to kicking off a side hustle. This clued-up, digital big sister is ready to support and educate women from wherever they are. Elsewhere, the sisterhood circles also encourage peer-to-peer learning (having hosted 469 women), where mentors are partnered with mentees, and facilitate connections between like-

minded people. The monthly 1-hour masterclass, along with experiential assignments, allows for learning on a personal development, but also technical level. But ultimately, while the hard skills are important, the sense of community remains central to Khwela's focus.

'Working for an organisation focussed on impact gives me a sense of belonging, pride and purpose – I'm not just working a 9-5 but actually making a difference. The experience that has had the biggest impact on me to date is the sisterhood circles; I've realised that even though we might be from different areas, backgrounds or stages in our lives and no two experiences are the same, we can all connect and relate to a feeling. Bringing us closer and lifting the burden of feeling alone,' says Grizelda.

The ability to leverage the virtual community is a powerful one. While spaces like the boardroom, the classroom and even religious institutions were once the seat of knowledge and



power sharing, a democratised and digitised approach to community building allows more people – and especially more women – a place at the table, shutting down the traditional barriers like gender discrimination, class, education, social standing and, especially in South Africa, language.

While the tech does the mechanical heavy lifting, it is the Khwela women themselves who make it functional and activate its potential. For Lebo Kumalo, an alumni of the Khwela programme, the experience seems to have delivered what the founders intended: 'Through the classes, I've also met wonderful women who have become sisters, in a circle that's a safe space – I feel I belong. I've also been able to identify the leadership approach that resonates with me, and going forward, I am confident that through this programme, I will come out a winner. My dreams have been reignited,' she says. ●
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