

**H**aving started at the tender age of 16, Lelemba Phiri had to employ entrepreneurial skills she had learnt from her mother who ran a small business to take care of herself and the family. It is these early experiences and responsibilities in Zambia that seared the struggles of the African woman in the psyche of the young Phiri before she moved to South Africa where she heads an organization that funds African women enterprises, The Africa Trust Group.

A qualified accountant by profession with a degree in business management and currently pursuing a PhD in finance, Ms. Phiri embodies the determination to succeed against all odds. While in Zambia, the young lady landed her first job at an auto-shop in Lusaka where she served as an accounts assistant before being elevated to shop manager not long after. This gave her firsthand experience on managing finances, coordinating stocks, running orders facilitating sales and taking care of the customer relations portfolio for the business.

Her background in finance and business management has helped her to adequately analyse the needs of African women in business with greater clarity that goes beyond empathy. Working in partnership with a few associates, Lelemba Phiri went on to found a robust funding agency for African women in business.

Even though she had a stint at the Zambia Revenue Authority, it is her work in the corporate sector in South Africa that gave her vision the wings to fly. Serving as regional assets manager, the corporate outfit she worked in gave her a chance to travel widely across the African continent, providing her with deeper insights into the needs and struggles of the African woman entrepreneur.

According to World Bank, Africa leads the world in terms of numbers of women business owners. In fact, women in Africa are more likely than men to be entrepreneurs. Women make up 58 % the continent's self-employed population. The influence of women unfortunately diminishes drastically as one gets higher up the entrepreneurial echelons. It is this state of affairs that informs the mission of Africa Trust Group (ATG) and within the ambit of the Academy for Financial Education for Women and the Africa Trust Academy.

The Africa Trust Group invests in women entrepreneurs with businesses that demonstrate potential

for upscaling within three years. This includes entrepreneurs with a willingness to leverage technology, imbibe innovative approaches, demonstrate resourcefulness and have capacity to take up franchises for expansion.

ATG is currently focused on funding enterprises in the SADC region but with active plans to expand into the larger COMESA (Common Market for East and Southern Africa) region and East Africa in particular. The organization will continue with the funding of viable ideas and then go on to provide seed funding to get the business started. In this way, the organisation is attending to a section of the society and business sector that would otherwise be considered disadvantaged and high risk by the mainstream financial institutions.

The organisation is cognizant of the fact that the biggest obstacle women face when starting and growing any business is access to funding and ability to raise capital. And this is in spite of research that shows female-owned businesses consistently out-survive male-owned businesses in many industries. Lelemba Phiri has a passion for promoting women in Africa, with an intention to give them confidence to seek a place at the table of value creation through the kind of contextualized funding model that has been developed for them. A table that started with a fiscal outlay of over R100,000,000 and seeks to serve up an opportunity for outstanding female entrepreneurs whose businesses have the capability to grow to scale and who are interested in exploring means and ways of raising additional capital for their businesses. African women are the future of value creation and this iconic lady is the face that is inspiring that African women story.

Through the workings and interventions of ATG, the women beneficiaries are able to stand up to the business and social challenges that would otherwise impede their efforts to either grow or initiate an enterprise. The organisation headed by this entrepreneurial lady is empowering women to step into existing space and make the best of the opportunities at their disposal as SMEs continue to play a central role in the African industrialisation journey that is gathering pace fast under the AfCFTA protocols.

As a pillar that epitomizes hope for African women entrepreneurs, Lelemba Phiri sees Africa Trust Group growing into a funder of funds on the African continent and an agent of transformational change through supporting women entrepreneurs and managers.

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