

How Vodacom's #CodeLikeAGirl initiative is helping drive diversity in STEM

By  Sindy Peters

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Launched in 2017, Vodacom's #CodeLikeAGirl initiative has since trained thousands from across Africa. The telco recently held an event to showcase the impact of the programme to date and why it's focused on driving gender diversity in STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths).



During the two-week-long #CodeLikeAGirl course, students are trained in computer languages, robotics and development platforms. By the end of the programme, each participant is able to develop their own website and present their work to the rest of their coding class.

Starting with just 20 participants in Tembisa, #CodeLikeAGirl now receives hundreds of applications each intake period. Vodacom aims to have reached 4,000 girls by the end of this financial year, equipping them with a STEM mindset and empowering them to become problem-solvers within their communities.

"One of the things that I really love about #CodeLikeAGirl and Vodacom's approach to it has been the fact that it really is a community initiative, so we're not getting people to sign and tie themselves down to Vodacom for the rest of their lives... It's about really understanding that we have a role in the community," said Njabulo Mashigo, HR director for Vodacom South Africa.

Challenging gender norms

According to a [Unesco report](#), only 35% of STEM students in higher education globally are women. While the #CodeLikeAGirl programme aims to help address this gender gap, Mashigo said it is also having a broader societal impact, challenging gender norms and cultural stereotypes.

"Representation matters and it's so important when we are able to create spaces where people can see themselves, where

young women can see themselves in the leaders that are in front of them. That, for me, is one of the by-products of a programme like this because it starts to challenge how people see the world, how people want to show up, and we continue to make this a priority for ourselves," said Mashigo.



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"We believe that planting a seed now, we are preparing our industry for a technology-ready future. Girls need encouragement because traditionally, they aren't thought of as innovators. With the right skills and a confidence boost, girls will feel empowered to aim for the skies – whether that's literally as pilots or astronauts, or as software developers, engineers, statisticians, or architects," Mashigo said.



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Sharing in a passion for STEM

Winner of the 2021 #CodeLikeAGirl edition Zainaaz Hansa shared her experience of the programme: "Participating in #CodeLikeAGirl, I was able to see the diversity in all the participants yet see that we are also quite similar and bonded by our shared passion for STEM.

"Listening to other women who have progressed through their careers speak of their challenges in a male-dominated field helps to encourage girls like us to stay resilient and persevere and continue to take risks."

ABOUT SINDY PETERS

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