

***Empowering Women and
Gender Minorities as Media
Practitioners:
The Ascend Programme
- HEVA Fund***

Since its establishment in 2013, HEVA Fund, headquartered in Kenya, has actively empowered creative practitioners and entrepreneurs across diverse sectors, including fashion, digital content and television, live music, cultural heritage, and gaming. Operating in Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Tanzania, the HEVA Fund has provided innovative financial models and training to foster growth and sustainability in the creative sector.

In 2022, in partnership with Africa No Filter, the HEVA Fund launched the Ascend Programme, a pilot initiative to empower emerging media practitioners. It specifically focused on cisgender women, trans men and women, and non-binary and gender non-conforming media practitioners from urban and rural areas involved in human rights activism or journalism, LGBTQIA+ activism, traditional and innovative digital media, social media, and content creation.

Women and gender minorities grapple with the significant challenge of representing themselves in an empowering manner that preserves their dignity in a context where the mainstream narratives either erase or silence them or often perpetuate misogynistic and discriminatory values. The Ascend Programme provided a learning space for marginalised emerging media practitioners - 15 participants in total - equipping them

with the technical skills necessary to tell their stories more effectively and amplifying their perspectives in a way often overlooked in mainstream narratives. Through the Ascend Programme, participants could connect with facilitators from the LGBTQIA+ community, share their lived experiences, and bring their narratives to life using forward-thinking and innovative practices. This approach fostered a community of creatives and media practitioners, encouraging mutual support and empowering them to take ownership of the narratives and imagery related to their own experiences.

The Ascend Programme fell within HEVA's ongoing OTA Strategy, which is aimed at fostering competitiveness and growth for women-owned and women-led creative businesses. Over time, this strategy evolved into an inclusive, industry-agnostic initiative, extending its focus to all dynamic business founders and owners. As such, the programme extended its reach to media practitioners from gender minorities, responding to the growing demand for the development of new media spaces that allow women and gender minorities to express themselves, share their viewpoints and shift stereotypes. To accomplish this, it offered participants a combination of masterclasses, one-on-one sessions, group presentations and networking opportunities.

HEVA Fund ensured the programme was customised to fit the participants' needs and interests. They designed the curriculum based on their applications and preferences, covering topics such as media, culture, and politics, growing your voice and audience locally and internationally, content creation, and making short audiovisuals work for you. Additionally, they provided one-on-one mentorship sessions to empower participants, helping to enhance their creative projects into innovative and sustainable businesses by increasing their potential for external investment and future-proofing them against the challenges they are most likely to face in growing their young businesses. In some cases, participants also received a stipend to support their growth in individual media engagements and practices by buying equipment and software to create and produce their own stories.

Given its brief duration, it was developed to be as interactive and participatory as possible, ensuring participants could benefit most from the experience. As its project manager explained:

“We discovered effective methods to encourage student engagement and one approach involved allowing students to create presentations for their peers and the facilitator. We also offered one-on-one sessions to help students learn how to effectively voice their ideas,

fostering empowerment and confidence among participants.”

Njeri Gitungo, Project Manager

Through these components, the programme gave participants valuable insights into shifting how women and individuals from gender minorities are depicted in media, planning content and crafting compelling pitches for local and international media outlets based on empowering narratives.

The Ascend Programme showcased HEVA's commitment to promoting inclusivity and fostering success and growth in individuals, especially those from marginalised communities. Likewise, its cultural sensitivity and diversity representation, with local and accessible media experts facilitating the training, played a crucial role in the programme's success despite its short duration.

Initiatives aimed at amplifying the voices and stories of media practitioners from marginalised or underrepresented groups often encounter challenges related to competition for resources and influence. Many organisations operate in silos, despite sharing similar objectives, which hinders collaborative efforts.

There is also a general assumption that media practitioners will effortlessly connect. Still, trans, non-binary and

gender non-conforming media practitioners individuals often find themselves compelled to seclude for safety. The Ascend Programme established a safe learning and networking space, promoting an environment where participants broaden their perspectives through respectful exchanges between them. Creating such a space was a vital part of the programme from start to finish:

“Safety was a primary concern when issuing the call, so we avoided making a public announcement. Instead, we leveraged our established networks and communities to reach our target audience.”

Njeri Gitungo, Project Manager

This focus led to impactful knowledge sharing and networking between participants, facilitators and HEVA, paving the way for participants to develop future collaborations and a community of creatives. Since the Ascend Programme, HEVA has created new partnerships, enabling it to further its mission.

The Ascend Programme's interactive and participatory nature empowered participants to recognise the impact of their voices and stories. It also equipped them with writing media content and audiovisual production skills, fostering a more comprehensive approach to their media practices.

Learnings:

- ▶ ICSOs can implement gender-expansive fellowships or training programmes, supporting individuals whose gender identity expands beyond traditional binary male and female categories to generate more inclusive and safe spaces for networking and access training. This inclusivity can also be extended by targeting individuals in refugee camps or from diverse nationalities.
- ▶ Organisations should prioritise targeted programmes to foster connections and networking among emerging media practitioners, explicitly focusing on empowering women and gender minorities.
- ▶ Online training can allow organisations to reach individuals from peri-urban and rural areas to participate without travelling. Support for internet access is necessary to guarantee participation.

HEVA wanted to create a platform to share public-ready content from the applicants. However, given that many businesses were in their early stages with a steep learning curve, it was not possible. A longer programme duration (over eight weeks) in a potential second iteration would be beneficial.

- ▶ ICSOs should consider developing mid to long-term mentoring programmes to allow the incorporation of more practical sessions, further enhancing the participants' creative businesses.