

# Karen Nadasen provides insights to how PayU South Africa is empowering women

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As [Women's Month](#) draws to a close in South Africa, one is always surprised by how few positions in technology are filled by local women. Karen Nadasen, CEO at [PayU South Africa](#), is fulfilling her promise of a seismic shift towards women in technology, and women in her community.



Karen Nadasen, CEO at PayU South Africa

Karen heads up diversity and inclusion for PayU across the continent and is an advocate and avid supporter of women in STEM. She is regularly described as one of South Africa's most inspiring women in tech, nominated for IT Personality of the Year 2017, listed among 100 Most Influential Young South Africans 2017 and the Regional Winner (SADC) of Africa's Most Influential Women in Business and Government 2018.

In her dual roles as the new chairperson of the ECommerce Forum of South Africa (EFSA) and as PayU's CEO, she has taken a clear stance that diversity and inclusion need to move beyond lip service and into meaningful action and impact.

## Can you tell us a bit about yourself?

I've just entered my fifth year as the CEO of PayU South Africa, the most exciting and innovative financial technology company in emerging markets.

*“ I've led PayU South Africa through a transformation journey as we became part of a global organisation and redefined ourselves in the market. ”*

In this time we've partnered with formidable local and global business, enabling their participation and growth in the SA digital economy through the use of innovative, safe and reliable payments products. Today, we are a multi-billion dollar (per annum) processing house in SA, whilst globally we process payments for over six million people daily.

I've been involved in creating, designing and building software products throughout my career for local retailers like Shoprite and international technology giants such as Microsoft and Tencent.

I've worked with some of the brightest, most passionate people in technology, that have fuelled my desire and belief in the power we have to use technology to effect positive change, improve the lives of people, enable financial inclusivity and prosperity of women.

■ ***For those that don't know, what is PayU all about?***

Our vision at PayU is to create a world without financial borders where everyone can prosper.

*“ We drive financial inclusivity by giving people in the markets we serve the financial services they need to be included and thrive, through consumer and merchant lending products and 400+ payment methods, applicable to local consumers to ensure digital commerce gets the widest possible reach. ”*

We are a global company in 50+ growth markets including LATAM, EMEA, India and a number of Asian markets.

■ ***As the CEO of PayU. What has the "new normal" been like for the company?***

We made a decision to work from home from mid March and will continue to work remotely until we agree that it's safe to return to the office. Being a technology company, the transition and decision was easier than most. My priority was the safety of my staff and I am lucky to be surrounded by skilled professionals who are passionate about what they do.

*“ Understanding the balance of family life, we implemented a flexible calendar with block out periods to ensure that people could manage households and be effective at work. ”*

We also encourage a structured day as the days of sitting on video calls can become long and strenuous. The team performance has been phenomenal. We continue to keep the conversation open, and to be fair and kind to each other, as these are challenging times for us all.

■ ***Do you have any role models? If so, who?***

We live in exciting times, in that women are rising up like never before. I am so inspired by many of them and they encourage me to allow my own voice to be heard and carry out my purpose.

Melinda Gates, Jacinda Ardern, Jacky Wright CDO at Microsoft, Adrianna Marais of Proudly Human, our Naspers CEO, Phuti Mahanyele who is also the most phenomenal woman and Mariemme Jamme, the founder of iamtheCODE, an incredible initiative that aims to teach one million girls to code by 2030.

All these women are incredibly accomplished, they challenge socio-cultural norms, and are also dedicating their time to tackle poverty, diversity, inclusion and some of the most important factors that will create a better future for us all.

■ ***You have a successful career. Tell us about your journey.***

My interest in the technology field started as a young teenage girl and has never stopped. I was quite fortunate in that Computer Science was offered at my school, so I was exposed to coding from a relatively young age.

I was hired as a software developer during a graduate placement programme at university and started working at the Java development house in Cape Town as soon I completed my degree. Eager to learn I continued to study and work at a few companies before moving abroad for eight years.

*“ I’ve probably worked in almost every role in technology from software development, quality assurance, business and systems analyst, product and project manager, and more, in technology companies in SA, the United Kingdom, Germany, and China. ”*

I’ve been involved in Women in Technology, and championing Diversity and Inclusion at BP in the UK, in my early twenties. It was astounding to see the incredible work the women in Europe were doing, and their achievements particular in the STEM field. We don’t hear enough of these stories which are much needed to encourage more women into the field. This exposure really helped shaped my views.

I currently lead Diversity and Inclusion for PayU Africa and Chair the Ecommerce Forum South Africa (EFSA), where some of the top agenda points are on fostering financial inclusivity and empowering women through digital commerce. I have worked with incredible people, on projects that have made a difference in organisational growth and in the everyday lives of people.

#### ▣ **How do you maintain a work-life balance?**

PayU is a full-time job and I have many other interests and roles to fulfil, including that of a mum to a one and four year old.

*“ To be successful, I have to ensure my days are well planned, purposeful and intentional. ”*

I am up early every morning, as this allows me the necessary time, without distraction, to focus my mind, exercise and plan my day. I ensure that I list important, challenging or uncomfortable tasks at the top of my priority list and address these items first. This takes the weight off and gives me a sense of accomplishment for the day.

I am also fortunate in that the PayU culture allows for flexibility, and values professional contribution and output. As we don’t live in an equal society yet being a women still comes with additional responsibilities in managing family life.

Coming from a traditional background, I tried to emulate my examples growing up of what the responsibilities of women were in the household. Wanting more I found myself exhausted, resentful and burnt out. I had to adapt, redefine my beliefs, address the challenges and restructure my life, by getting the necessary help.

#### ▣ **You’re extremely passionate about technology - especially women in tech. What advice do you have to share with the future generation of leading ladies?**

Technology is neither male nor female. It is created by people - and the more diversity we can have, the better it will be suited to serve our needs and help solve problems.

*“ Don’t underestimate the role you have to play as a women in the technology sector. Technology will touch every aspect of our lives. ”*

Get involved in envisioning and creating the future you want to be part of.

#### ▣ **How is PayU empowering women entrepreneurs in building successful businesses?**

There is mounting proof that diversity equals prosperity for all, and that businesses with women on boards perform better. A McKinsey study on gender parity reports that if women participate in the economy identically to men, it would add up to \$28 trillion to annual global GDP in 2025. To put this into perspective, this is larger than the world's largest economy, the US, which stands at GDP of \$20.513 trillion. E-commerce allows flexibility that many women need.

*“ To promote women entrepreneurship in the e-commerce space we offer comprehensive platforms from marketplaces to financing products in many of our markets. ”*

Women in Tech South Africa reports that only 23% of technology roles are filled by women and this starts to dwindle as women make their way up the ladder. It's becoming more important to address the divide, with technology such as artificial intelligence exacerbating the lack of diversity even further, with increasing evidence on built in bias.

My involvement in the AI in Africa initiative, which has currently reach 30,000 girls in township schools, aims to bring design thinking concepts and expose girls to technology, to create curiosity and encourage their involvement from a young age.

*“ At PayU, and as part of a Naspers initiative we are partnering with a number of training institutes specialising in skilling people from disadvantaged backgrounds. We are currently working on a three-year programme to assist in training, mentorship, integration and readiness for the technology job market. ”*

At PayU, we are acutely aware of the lack of diversity and inclusivity in the markets we serve and have been working towards effecting change not only in our workplaces around the globe, but also in local communities. And whilst we strive to improve our work places with mothers rooms, flexible hours and remote working, there are incredibly challenging societal issues of gender-based violence that we face in our country.

Research shows that there is a strong link between equality at work and equality in society. In SA, in the last year, we have had more than 50,000 cases of reported sexual violence (approx. 144 daily). One in three women in our country will be sexually attacked. We cannot ignore the incredibly devastating effects that gender-based violence is having on our society and in our workplaces.

*“ At PayU SA, we offer self-defence and empowerment workshops to all female staff, and have implemented safety programmes that ensure women are able to get to the office and back home safely. We also offer free consultation sessions available at no cost to all employees and mental health and well-being workshops. ”*

In addition, we have partnered with the Bryan Habana Foundation to fund and distribute food in disadvantaged communities with focus on gender-based violence refuge centres for women and children, orphanages and educational institutes.

Women also contribute to the informal trading sector, so we need to direct them to technology that may be able to support them via education or financing - products like the app 'Spoon Money', which supports female street vendors to boost their business using loans, as well as stokvel principles and practices.

In addition, we led an investment of \$85 million in Remitly, a digital remittance service where the money transfer process is faster, affordable, and more transparent. This is a pertinent product in developing regions we serve where most of the young adults try to make a life outside of their birth area for a better future for themselves and their families.

### **■ What can governments do to help drive female leadership in SA?**

Curiosity and information is what is needed. You cannot be curious if you are being excluded and don't have access to information. You won't be curious if you are hungry, don't have access to clean water, and feel unsafe.

The government needs to demonstrate a clear plan to address basic needs and societal issues and make education a priority. Excessive data costs that impede learning and advancement need to be addressed as a priority.

Funding for women led initiatives need to be well structured, holistic and easily accessible, which it currently is not. If they are more transparent about initiatives, it is possible that women would apply or take part in these initiatives.

🍷 **As we draw to a close of Women's Month in South Africa, do you have any words of encouragement for all the women out there?**

We need you, “dangerous times call for dangerous women,” explains Pat Mitchell. There is no time like the present to rise up.

“ *Don't be limited by other peoples constrained thinking of who, or what, you should be. Prepare for, and embrace, the opportunities and the challenges that will come along the way.* ”

Know that there are others out there, and we are rooting for you. You can do it!

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