Roya Mahboob co-founded the Afghan Citadel Software Company, a small pioneering technology business. She is also co-founder and CEO of the Digital Citizen Fund, which helps girls and women in developing countries gain access to technology, connect virtually with others across the world, and obtain the skills needed to succeed in today’s expanding global market.

What was the motivation for starting Afghan Citadel Software Co. and how has it developed?

I, my youngest sister Elaha Mahboob, and two other friends started my first software development company in 2010. The company began as part of the Herat Information Technology Incubator Program and then grew quickly as I hired many women programmers and bloggers. I became the first female tech CEO in Afghanistan, and I have been seeking to set an example of leadership for young women throughout Afghanistan.

How has your experience been as an entrepreneur interacting with the private sector, particularly with digital platforms?

Because of the discrimination that women face in Afghanistan, it was very difficult for me in the beginning. By reaching out to the private sector via digital platforms, I was able to raise funding and support from people outside of Afghanistan. Their support was a great part of my success in starting Afghan Citadel Software Co.

What are the opportunities and challenges that the company has faced?

The challenges I faced as a child did not go away when I became an executive. I had less access to commercial financing or loans than men did in the same profession. In Afghanistan, 81% of businesswomen cannot access necessary resources to run their companies. Additionally, Afghanistan has problems involving corruption, security, technical skills, labour and infrastructure. Cultural barriers, which limit free movement of women in their daily lives, also affect their professional activities.

Especially in the beginning, my company struggled. I made it a priority to hire women, but many others would not work with a woman or company mostly made up of women.
I believe through technology we managed to overcome these difficulties. I realized that social media could give women in conservative countries a digital voice. Digitization can connect them with other parts of the world and change their world – allowing them to live beyond the borders they have always known.

As an employer, what changes in your business environment would you like to see?

One thing that could improve is the use of technology. In addition to helping free women from restrictions in conservative societies, technology upgrades our operations and raises productivity.

In every business, we must also provide necessary training to increase the skills of our employees and establish standards so that employees know what the company expects from them.

Small business is the most powerful generator of jobs and economic activity. Governments, communities, policymakers and service providers should work together to create an environment and policies that foster the ecosystem of start-ups. It should be easy to establish a new company. We need creative solutions that help start-ups grow and ease their access to finance, legal counsel and trade.

In your entrepreneurial and non-profit work, do you see gaps between skills people gain through education and those needed for employment? What could we do to bridge such gaps?

We need to hire employees with skills that meet the job description, but these are often lacking. The education system is not adequate, focusing more on theory than practical work. Such gaps are even greater for women in conservative societies, because cultural barriers prevent girls from getting the training they need.

At Digital Citizen Fund, we aim to bridge the gap between schools, education and job markets by offering young women the opportunity to join our digital and financial literacy programmes. Our projects build the skills of women and girls so that they can find alternate economic livelihoods. This way, women who are unable to hold traditional jobs can pursue local and international business opportunities, e-commerce and creative entrepreneurial projects, including their own start-ups.

We are also sponsoring and preparing to build a STEM school in Afghanistan, which will train students in science and math fields. The Afghan girls robotics team, which recently took part in the First Global competition, is an example of initiatives we hope to promote for girls and women in Afghanistan and other conservative areas.

What are the arguments for providing educational opportunities and technological literacy programmes for women and youth in developing countries, and Afghanistan especially?

The most opportune time to connect to and empower women in Afghanistan is during their high school years, before marriage. Many families now allow their daughters to attend secondary school, but fewer accept university studies or employment outside of the home once girls graduate from high school.

Access to information is a transformational catalyst to positive change in closed societies. It also empowers women by breaking down physical and socio-cultural barriers and providing a safe space where they can voice their opinions, learn, and find support among the digital community.