



# MAKING LEADERS

Heather Richardson meets Elizabeth Tolu Ojo, the woman empowering Africa's future female conservation leaders

As Director of Operations for the pioneering School of Wildlife Conservation (SOWC), Elizabeth Tolu Ojo is proof of what women can achieve in the male-dominated conservation sector – despite the challenges they often face. During my call with her, a cry suddenly rings out in the background: her 15-month-old daughter has just slammed the door on her fingers. Ojo dashes off to check she's okay. Motherhood, from pregnancy to child care, is a potential obstacle for career-minded women, alongside general gender bias. But Ojo is determined to help women in conservation overcome these hurdles, starting with a new all-female scholarship programme.

The scheme, which launched in March 2019, is designed to encourage women to apply for an MBA in conservation leadership at the Kigali-based SOWC, which opened in 2017 and also offers a conservation-focused Bachelor's in Global Challenges. It is attached to the African Leadership University (ALU) – a pan-African institution with ethical entrepreneurialism at its heart and campuses in Mauritius, Kigali and

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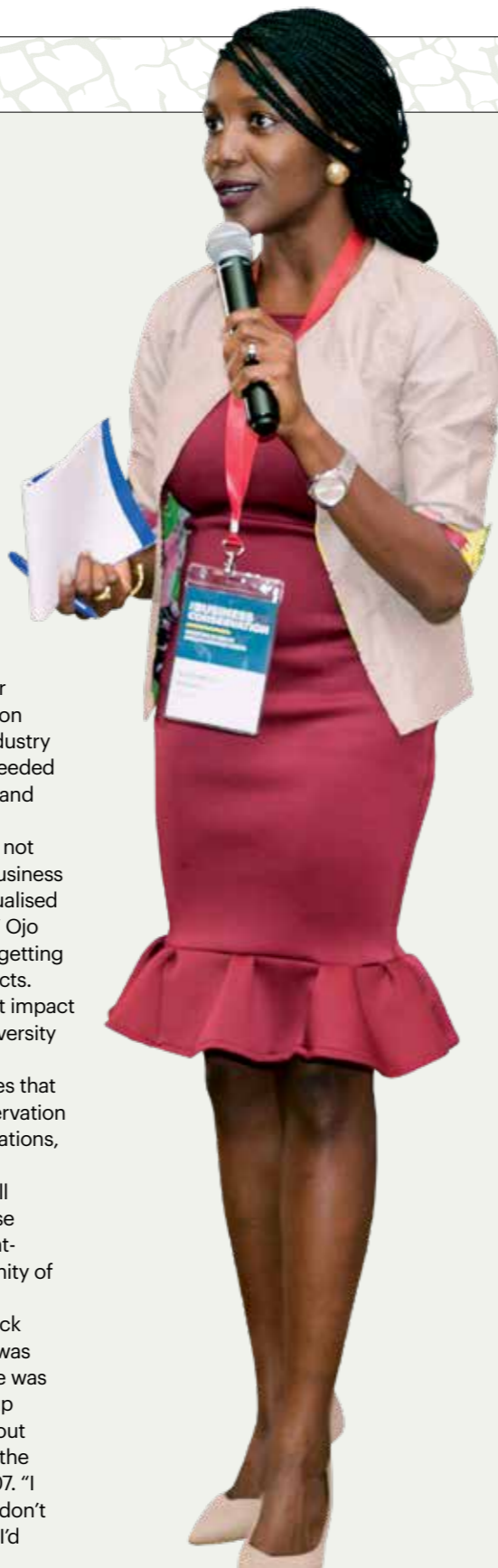
Nairobi. (Johannesburg, Cape Town, Casablanca and Lagos will follow within the next couple of years.)

ALU founder Fred Swaniker – a Ghanaian serial-entrepreneur – founded the SOWC after identifying the conservation sector as a key African industry and realising it urgently needed strong, educated, ethical and well-connected leaders.

The conservation MBA not only offers "world-class business education that is contextualised for the African continent," Ojo explains, "but you're also getting this rich network of contacts. Many of the decisions that impact our landscapes and biodiversity are made by people in boardrooms for companies that are not your typical conservation organisations: communications, mining, agriculture."

The idea is that ALU will educate leaders in all these fields, creating a continent-wide, connected community of influential people.

Ojo had just moved back to her native Nigeria and was looking for a job when she was hired by Swaniker to set up the SOWC. She'd started out studying microbiology at the University of Lagos in 2007. "I wanted to be a doctor – I don't know why," she tells me. "I'd



always been passionate about the environment and for a city girl that basically means managing trash better. I'd get into fights on public transportation when people would throw rubbish out the window," she laughs.

"I stumbled into environmental microbiology and I started to dig into the sector," she continues. "I found out about this huge world of environmentalists." She was inspired to embark on a Master's in environmental management at Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies in the US, before taking a job at the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF), based in Nairobi.

"I went to Ethiopia, to the heart of the Congo, to Tanzania, across Kenya. I got to see all the amazing projects the organisation was running at the time," Ojo says. She was specifically involved in AWF's school-building programme and developing environmental education models.

It was during this time that she experienced some of the issues specific to women in conservation. "I realised [the problem] wasn't necessarily because men were holding women back – yes, that does happen, but it was also because the realities are just different for a woman," she explains.

She tells me about a friend who had fallen pregnant. She'd already lost one pregnancy and couldn't travel on bumpy roads, ruling her out of field trips. "Ideally there should have been an opportunity for her to travel later on, maybe when she's back or in a better position health-wise. Men in organisations might not even think about making those kinds of concessions."

Considering these factors, Ojo is now using her platform to



smooth the road for other women in conservation. In the SOWC MBA, there are currently just two females. "It's embarrassing," she admits. When she spoke to Swaniker about it, he set her a lofty target: for half the next intake to be women.

Ojo started talking to women in her field. She identified that they are often put off applying for leadership courses because they felt they just wouldn't get in against male competition. "There are so many men out there who have richer careers. They can go on more trips, because they're not pregnant (in conservation specifically). They're not facing the same biases in the office as

women are," Ojo says.

This year, things will be different. The SOWC will award eight scholarships to women with at least five years' experience in conservation. They have asked employers across Africa to nominate their best female employees – and they're making them do it publicly, so they have to allow successful applicants to attend the MBA should they be successful.

Conservation needs women. They have a high success rate in leadership positions, says Ojo: "It takes a lot to rise in your field when you have so many things on your plate."

When the MBA course kicks off in October, it should be a class of at least 50 per cent women. Take a note of their names. Like Ojo, these women will be shaking up the African conservation sector as part of a new, empowered generation of leaders guiding this crucial industry forward.

**Class act:** The African Leadership University has been named #1 most innovative company in Africa by Fast Company magazine

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