

WOWe!

Networking for Success

On a continent where women are still routinely marginalised in corridors of political power and business, and where the fight for gender equilibrium is far from over, the inaugural Women of West Africa Entrepreneurship Conference (WOWe) aptly spotlighted young African women entrepreneurs. The NAW's **Belinda Otas** was in the Nigerian capital Lagos to attend.

WOWe's aim is to provide a high-level networking platform that brings together the most effective women entrepreneurs to exchange ideas and dialogue on issues related to entrepreneurship and leadership. Tori Abiola, managing director of Montgomery West Africa, who organized the conference, says of its outcome: "I was really inspired and thrilled by the response from women entrepreneurs, government officials, banks and financial services organisations that attended. Feedback has been great, we are now looking at developing and organising training programmes around Nigeria and West Africa for women, a WOWe Ghana is also on the cards. We will follow WOWe, Nigeria by taking it to South Africa in November. She tells NAW: "We are now working

on building a WOWe membership association of over 100,000 women entrepreneurs across Africa, and within the African Diaspora. The idea is to create a business membership organisation for women of African origin based in Africa and outside of Africa to connect, learn and do business. We will focus on access to finance, building capacity in entrepreneurship, with a core interest in diverse business sectors for women - Women in Fashion, Design, Women in Communications, Media and Broadcasting, Women in Entertainment and Creative Industries, Women in Agriculture, Women in Banking and Finance, as well as a WOWe masterclass focused on securing investment and access to finance. Here, three women who traveled to the conference, Ronke Ige, Hanneli Rupert and Ruth Obih share their WOWe experiences:



Ruth Obih

Founder and Chief Executive Officer of 3Invest Ltd (Nigeria) Real Estate

remains one of the most viable investment windows anywhere in the world and my choice to be in this field grew out of passion. Being able to carve out a niche market has been the result of focus and hard work. I never let being a woman become a hindrance. I think like a woman and act like a man. So overall, when you look at it, being a woman has added so much equity to my personal and business brand. Many appreciate our brand because they don't believe that a woman can succeed in mt business. The WOWe serves a purpose - it's a good start to encourage women entrepreneurship in Africa, and is a platform where women are encouraged to look beyond gender and focus on how to use their skills to solve continental problems. Secondly, WOWe is a symbolic business conference where women encourage women. It's more instructive because they face the same socio-cultural challenge. Therefore, for women to succeed further, we need many more platforms like WOWe. This is my understanding of WOWe and was the thrust of my discussion at the inaugural conference. But sometimes, women are their own enemies. We are concerned more about personality and not substance. WOWe helped paint a better picture.



Ronke Ige

founder Emi & Ben PR consultant, Bread + Butter Communications (UK)

Attending WOWe was an opportunity for me to learn as an entrepreneur. Women live diverse and busy lives – juggling family life, our careers and community activities, among other roles we take on. The purpose of a conference like WOWe cannot be underestimated, it gives us the opportunity to build networks, collaborate, provide advice, share experiences, learn from each other, gain information, increase our visibility within our field and establish personal connections which can potentially help our business to flourish on a global scale. It gives us a sense of empowerment and support, instilling a “can do” attitude, which at times can be lost when you are working from home. While entrepreneurship is still a new thing for women in Nigeria. At this conference, was able to see the breadth of women already running their businesses and those who aspire to do so. It was inspiring to see that there are lots of us striving hard to make it work and I sincerely hope this change continues to grow throughout Africa. Witnessing the fire, focus, determination and discipline from the women who attended the conference, I believe women will contribute greatly to the business landscape in Africa, and I’m excited.



Hanneli Rupert

Founder of Merchants on Long Concept Store and creative director of Okapi (South Africa)

When I take a wide view of the future of Africa, I feel that our biggest strength is our land. Women are more in touch with the earth and often more open to seeing things in the long term, which makes us less greedy and insistent on being immediately satisfied. I think our success as women lies in working together, to create small, slow, holistic businesses from the ground up, which in turn gives back to the land. This is why conferences like WOWe are very important because it’s a platform for young women entrepreneurs to network and keep abreast of everything happening in the world around them. Staying up to date and in the loop is essential for anyone growing a business. I believe women are the force who can keep Africa on track with where we need to be. When starting a business, I think it’s important to take the time to step back and look

at your world through a different lens. How would it be in your ideal version, why not create a little bit of that change to get us to where we want to be? Women see importance in things beyond purely making money and it’s this lack of single-mindedness which is both our strength and our weakness. If you can create a business that does not necessarily make the most money but really means something to you, it will be much more fulfilling and the likelihood of you straying from it or giving up is less.

My advice to young women when starting a business is that the most important thing to do is to write down your original mandate and go back to it as often as need be – checking that you are sticking to it. It’s crucial to remain focused on your original ethos and goals and stay true to them. At the same time, I believe it’s hugely important to read everything you come into contact with – learning about how the whole world, not just your industry, is moving forward; think big. This will keep you on the right path, seeing things from a global perspective. In my case, it’s the use of quality African materials, made locally. ■

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