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Case study

Diversity dividend: Female fund managers in Africa

Eloho Oname: FirstCheck Africa, TLcom Capital

Case study:

Eloho Omame

There is a direct link between gender diversity in venture capital teams and increased profitability.ⁱ Yet, the VC industry is notoriously lacking when it comes to gender diversity. In the US, some of the earliest research (2018) found that only nine per cent of VC decision makers were women.ⁱⁱ

In Africa, new data by Disrupt Africaⁱⁱⁱ shows more promising trends - 39.6 per cent of VCs actively investing on the continent in 2022 had a female partner or founder; while 47.6 per cent of Africa-based VCs active in this period had women in leadership roles.

Eloho Omame is one woman forging the way for female investors in Africa. A partner at TLCom Capital, and co-founder of FirstCheck Africa, Eloho has a passion for supporting high-growth companies, and has built a career backing early-stage female-led startups in Africa.

ⁱ [McKinsey & Company](#)

ⁱⁱ [Axios](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ [Disrupt Africa](#)



Eloho Omame

Partner, TLCom Capital; Co-founder, FirstCheck Africa.

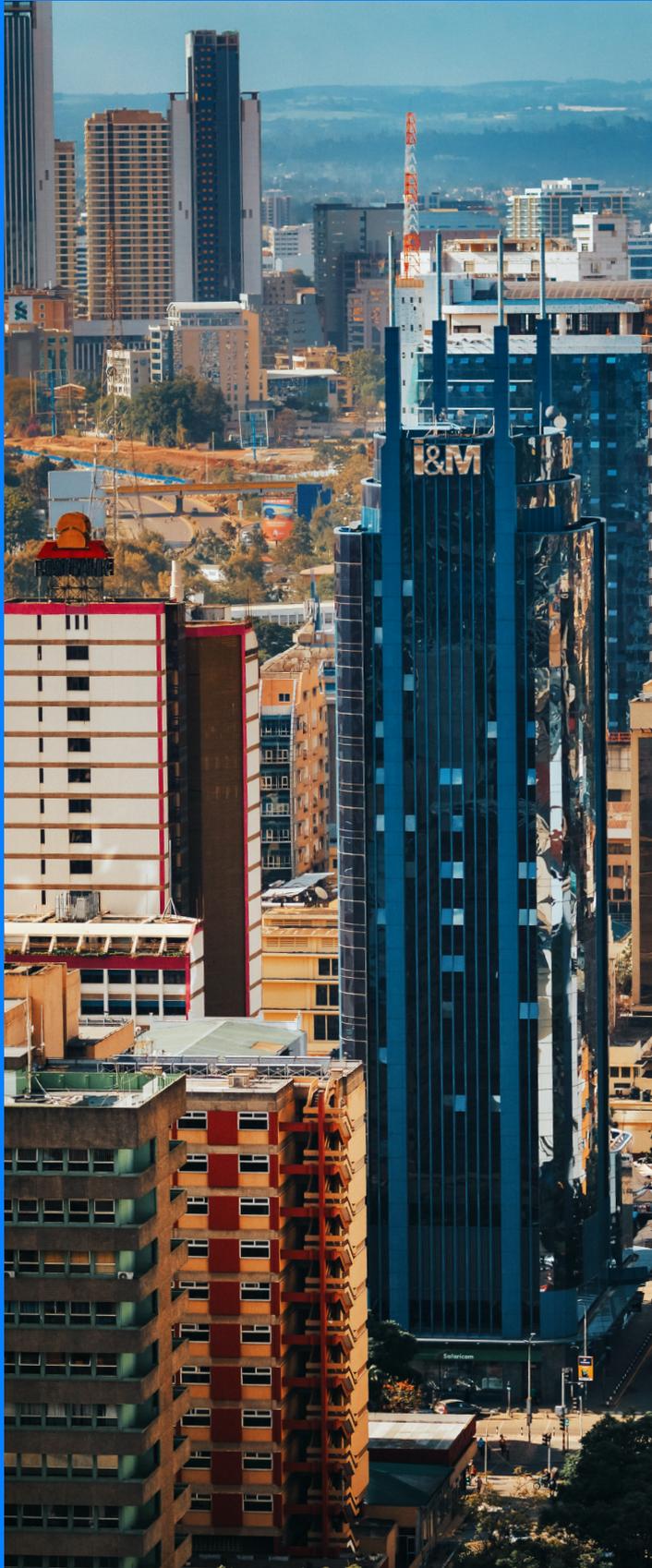
Born Kaduna, Nigeria

Based Lagos, Nigeria

Education BSc Economics - The London School of Economics and Political Science; MBA - London Business School.

Career Analyst - ING Barings, Credit Suisse; Manager, Head of Corporate Development - First Bank of Nigeria; Vice President - General Atlantic; Managing Director and CEO Nigeria - Endeavour; Co-founder and GP - FirstCheck Africa; Partner - TLCom Capital.

Hobbies "I watch an unconscionable amount of horror, sci-fi and supernatural content, from zombies and vampires to superheroes and everything in between!"



DID YOU KNOW?

African tech startup funding has been increasing dramatically over the last few years. From just US\$129 million in 2016, total investment secured per year passed the **US\$3 billion mark in 2022.**

The number of startups securing investment each year has also been on the rise. In 2015, only 125 startups secured investment, but by 2022 this figure had increased to 633.

A key feature of the African startup landscape over the last few years has been growth in the number of active investors on the continent. Disrupt Africa tracked just 155 investors in 2018, which increased to 261 in 2019, 370 in 2020, and 771 in 2021. In 2022, we saw 987 different investors back African tech startups. With a large range of institutional investors, VC firms, family offices and angels active in Africa, there is clearly an increasing confidence and interest in backing startups on the continent across all stages of the startup lifecycle.



The path to VC

Eloho started her career in investment banking in the UK, focusing primarily on large scale consumer companies in Europe. She says these early experiences of big companies and their trajectories are what initially sparked a broader interest in building companies. She also began comparing the characteristics of European big businesses with the more SME dominated markets typical of Africa.

"I think [it] sort of triggered an exploration of what it takes to grow large companies over many years. I was focused on consumer companies in Europe and outside of the UK [...] and you typically see these types of companies survive multiple years, attracting capital from private equity and passing ownership hands between several generations of company. So I became curious about what it took for a company to go down a path that looked like that, versus what we see more commonly in Africa which is a proliferation of small and medium sized businesses, many of which don't survive over multiple generations and they're much more vulnerable."

With a developing interest in investing as a career, Eloho first began investing in Africa from her base in the UK, but

ultimately went on to co-found Lagos-based FirstCheck Africa, backing early-stage female-led businesses building tech driven companies across Africa.

She says she enjoys interacting and working with entrepreneurs, and finds company building exciting; but also on a personal note finds the work valuable and intellectually stimulating.

"I chose this professional path for myself for a couple of reasons, I think number one, I like companies, I like the founder journey, I'm a big respecter of founders, and of the things people who build large scale companies are able to achieve. In terms of their personal milestones and achievements and role model potential, but also in terms of the customer, the value and jobs they are able to create," she says.

"On a personal level, I feel quite challenged by the job that I have. I find the work quite rewarding, I feel there's a lot of value to what we're trying to do - to support the emergence of large scale companies in Africa through venture capital. It's something that I find quite exciting."

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Unfortunately women forging a career in the VC space face numerous, pervasive, and often “invisible” obstacles, Eloho says. These challenges can be amplified for those women specifically focused on supporting female entrepreneurs.

“There are always obstacles that one faces as a woman in a male dominated industry. Very often they’re obstacles that are pervasive, and they’re also somewhat invisible. I have no doubt that I’ve faced some of those obstacles. Some of the obvious ones are underestimation; visibility - being looked over or passed over for things that you’re as eligible for as the next person; and especially an assumption, particularly if you’re a female like me who is focused on female ventures in part of my portfolio, there’s an assumption you’re not as objective or competent as perhaps your male colleagues might be, and that your focus is not being driven by the same things that may be motivating them.”

On the other hand, Eloho also believes there are distinct positives to being a woman leading a female-focused VC fund. Women investors have the advantage of being able to intuitively perceive the value of certain female-focused - but economically very attractive - solutions presented to them. She also believes female representation on the investor side of the table plays a role in attracting strong female entrepreneurs.

“I think the other thing that’s interesting about being a woman at a female-led fund is that my entire pipeline is female-led, right, so when people talk about pipeline issues, I don’t have those. I see several hundred companies a year, they all meet my criteria - well, 99 per cent of them do, there’s always someone who tries to access our capital but doesn’t meet the criteria - and we generally think that our pipeline is pretty healthy. So maybe the positioning of the firm, not necessarily my perspective, is one that attracts the dealflow that is relevant to us.”

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A day in the life

A typical day as a fund manager at FirstCheck Africa is spent across various dimensions, and things can get very busy, Eloho says. There's always an element of the day spent between pipeline and dealflow - reviewing the company's pipeline, screening through new opportunities, and discussing with the team about most promising new opportunities.

Decisions at FirstCheck are made by consensus, meaning the opinions of both Eloho and her co-founder Odunayo Eweniyi carry equal weight when considering new opportunities.

They also take time to consider their own businesses - how to attract capital, and manage relationships with capital providers; what their own strategy should look like; how to improve their own communications and marketing, and the like.

If a new deal is currently "live", Eloho says a portion of her day might be spent on actually executing the deal, like performing due diligence tasks, reviewing terms, and communicating with founders around the transaction.

And lastly, there is the portfolio support side of the day. FirstCheck Africa meets each of its portfolio founders once a month, which accumulates into significant time spent as the portfolio grows.

"We really try to be a support for our founders, we tell them that the time we spend with them on a monthly basis, a portion of that is about getting an update on how the business is trading and how things are going, but the other portion of that is really about what do you need, and what support do you want. So we always encourage our founders to come to those meetings with clarity around the support that is critical to them at that particular time. And sometimes that cuts across everything from fundraising support, support in accessing networks for partnerships or commercial agreements, it's about helping them think through talent, and all structures. Remember we deal with companies that are pretty early, we're investing in pre-seed to seed. So I think some of the issues that we roll up our sleeves on are pretty critical to our founders."

Company name	FirstCheck Africa
Founded	2021
HQ	Lagos
Other locations	Remote team
Partners	Eloho Omame, Odunayo Eweniyi
Focus areas	Female-led tech startups
Number of portfolio companies	10+

Company name	TLcom Capital
Founded	1999
HQ	London
Other locations	Nairobi and Lagos
Partners	Maurizio Caio Dr Omobola Johnson Ido Sum Andreata Muforo Eloho Omame
Focus areas	Early to growth stage tech-enabled businesses in Africa
Number of portfolio companies	11 in TIDE Africa Fund
Assets under management	US\$250 million
LPs	IFC, and the EU and EIB through Boost Africa

Young Women in Investing

There not enough female fund managers active in Africa, Eloho says, and she encourages any young women interested in the space to follow their passion into what she sees to be a very stimulating and rewarding career path.

“In general there are many reasons to pursue a career in this industry, even if it’s not easy. Some of it’s personal, in terms of personal fulfillment. Some of it’s in terms of the intellectual, and some of it is ultimately in terms of the meaningful work you could do as an investor supporting African companies to scale.”

She says from the organisational side, VC funds in Africa need to do more to create pathways that encourage and enable women to enter the workforce, and should look at

hiring and recruiting more women into junior roles. Similarly, organisations need to create an environment where female investors can progress in their careers and ascend to management roles.

Eloho believes the onus is also on female investors and their colleagues to be open about the value that women have in the investing space - the perspectives and diversity they bring to the table.

“I think articulating the perspective and the value that women fund managers bring to the space should help to move the needle,” she says.

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For any young women listening who would like to pursue a similar career path I would say do it! This is a very intellectually challenging space, it’s a very exciting one because you’re helping to support the companies that will ultimately help to create the future of the continent that we’re all interested in and excited about.



Boost Africa Technical Assistance Facility (BATAF) provides bespoke support to strengthen the core professional and operational skills of partner fund managers and their investees to realize growth potential among innovative tech start-ups and high growth SMEs in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). BATAF is funded by the European Commission and the Organisation of African Caribbean and Pacific States, through the 11th European Development fund. The funding is managed by the European Investment Bank and implemented by Adam Smith Europe, part of the Adam Smith International Group.

Women's empowerment is at the core of BATAF's mission, recognizing that women's inclusion is both the right and the smart thing to do. This case study is part of a series highlighting leading female fund managers in SSA. By showcasing the successes and challenges women face in the investment fund world these women's stories shed light on the alternative investment lens that women's inclusion in top management positions brings as well as the business and social transformation it can drive. The series is financed by the European Union under EDF Thematic Blending and Cotonou Investment Facility.



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