



## Female talent development and African business schools

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### ABSTRACT

This study extends the talent development literature by investigating the level of institutionalization of female talent development (FTD) practices in African B-schools, comparing this with the international best practice. It emerged that African B-schools, like their international counterparts, have not widely adopted FTD practices, and that their female–male ratio averaged less than a third of graduate management programs. They also seem to have adopted or adapted emerging international practices, with little observed evidence of unique African approaches. The paper further examines the role of indigenous and multinational enterprises in supporting FTD and discusses some implications for other key stakeholder groups.

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### 1. Introduction

Among the great paradoxes of Africa's persisting development crisis are the continuing under-engagement of millions of potentially transformational female talent in managerial roles, and the systematic relegation of their educational and capacity development needs based on misguided traditional values and gender-based prejudice (Strom, 2008; Teferra & Aitbach, 2004). Fewer African girls than boys are reportedly entering secondary schools (Adomako Ampofo, Beoku-Betts, Njambi, & Osirim, 2004) and even fewer are enrolling in graduate programs (Tetty, 2008), thus shrinking the potential pool of women for professional and management careers (Prah, 2002). This is particularly worrying given Africa's desperate need for managerial talent (Nanda, McKinley-Floyd, & Mtigwe, 2008), and the reported rising levels of female entrepreneurship and managerial cadre in other parts of the world (Adler, 1994; Delaney, 2002).

The aim of the present study is to investigate the relative focus of African B-schools on developing female managerial talent. This approach is informed by the widely perceived link between appropriate management education and career advancement (Grayson, 2005; Pritch, 2005). Although the evidence is not always consistent (Mintzberg, 2004; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002), having an MBA is variously considered a passport to a *fast track* career and senior managerial roles (Baruch & Peiperl, 1999). It is an effective means of acquiring managerial competencies and enhancing career

prospects (Finney, 1996; Simpson, 2000), and also a powerful tool against gender discrimination (Leeming & Baruch, 1998). A study showed that 42 per cent of Fortune 500 CEOs and 45 per cent of Fortune 500 female CEOs have MBAs. The report also showed that a combined 79 per cent of the CEOs of UK's top 100 companies have a background in the business professions (LCCI, 2006). The U.S. and UK origin of these examples is particularly relevant as both economies have significant cultural sway across Africa owing to historical and contemporary ties. Our specific research objectives, therefore, are to examine female uptake of academic programs in African B-schools and assess the extent to which these B-schools promote female studentships, talent development and career prospects; to understand the processes that might be at work in the institutionalization of female talent development (FTD) in African B-schools; to evaluate these B-schools' FTD practices in the light of experiences from other parts of the world; and to establish whether and to what extent, uniquely African FTD approaches are emerging.

This focus on female talent development in Africa is important on several additional grounds. First, it responds to previous calls in the literature for more research on human resource management in Africa (Kamoche, 2002; Kamoche, Muuka, Hortitz, & Debrah, 2004). Second, it reflects the increasingly highlighted need for better gender balance in top managerial roles. This is important particularly given recent evidence that companies with women in top management positions tend to excel in financial (Jones, 2003; Smith, Smith, & Verner, 2008) and governance terms (Maitland, 2006; Rosener, 1997). Third, improving the supply of female managerial talent from Africa would respond to the heightened need among MNCs for relevantly qualified local talents in emerging business environments (Groenewald & Schurink, 2003; Nanda et al., 2008). This may result in such strategic

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benefits as cost savings on long term expatriate assignments and more diverse managerial talent pool, including those with cross-cultural competencies and context-relevant knowledge (Collings, Scullion, & Dowling, 2009; Scullion & Collings, 2006). Fourth, theory-wise, the present study provides a useful platform for developing and operationalizing an important new organizational construct, female talent development orientation (FTDO). Finally, we envisage that our findings would be helpful to governments and policy makers seeking to promote overall capacity development in Africa.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the extant literature on talent development and applicable B-school activities and develops an appropriate conceptual framework. Pertinent research questions are also presented. The third section outlines the study's approach, including data collection and analysis protocols. The penultimate section analyses the generated data and presents and discusses results. The concluding section summarises key findings and highlights appropriate implications and limitations.

## 2. Literature review and conceptual framework

The present study draws on and extends the talent development literature by introducing a new organizational construct, the female talent development orientation. Talent development involves developing leaders via processes such as coaching, feedback, training, mentoring and challenging employees (Evans, Pucik, & Barsoux, 2002). It is an integral part of talent management, which is a planned and coordinated process for identifying, attracting, recruiting, hiring, managing, developing and retaining employees in an organization (Dessler, 2009). These two concepts are also often linked to, and sometimes used interchangeably with, career development (Collings et al., 2009), which involves a lifelong series of training and related activities that contribute to a person's career success and fulfilment (Dessler, 2009).

A number of recent major trends in the career management field would seem to have placed B-schools at the center of the talent development process. These include the rising prevalence of individual centered career planning, with emphasis on individually set career goals and career choices (Mathis & Jackson, 2004); and the increasing pursuit of boundaryless careers, which entail working as self-directed free agents across employers and developing human capital skills and networks as required (Snell & Bohlander, 2007). Both trends represent a shift from the traditional organization-centered career development systems (Inkson & Arthur, 2002) toward more boundless and increasingly flexible talent development structures (Carr, Inkson, & Thorn, 2005) typically offered by B-schools. The increasing importance of this latter approach is suggested by the rising number of organizations that collaborate with B-schools or other external agencies for talent development purposes, either as a complement or substitute to their internal career development systems (Barnes & Phillips, 2000; El-Tannir, 2002).

Given the focus of the present study on understanding how B-schools undertake the above role specifically for African women, a female talent development orientation (FTDO) construct is

introduced to facilitate further theorization. This construct builds on the talent development literature (Evans et al., 2002) and recent relevant research (Ibeh, Carter, Poff, & Hamill, 2008). It describes the level of organizational commitment to developing female talent and career prospects via processes, such as dedicated training and coaching (specialist centers, degree/certificate programs, and executive education courses), targeted incentives (fellowships, bursaries or scholarships), and providing access to networking, skill-enhancing and mentoring opportunities. This construct is used in the present study to explore the extent to which African B-schools are developing female talent and institutionalizing FTD practices, including how this might affect female studentship levels in their academic programs. The argument is that B-schools with stronger FTD orientation are more likely to attract higher female enrolment in their management education programs and, as earlier reviewed literature suggests (LCCI, 2006; Plitch, 2005), this may lead to greater female access to managerial roles – see Fig. 1.

### 2.1. Dedicated coaching and training

Leading B-schools around the world are increasingly providing women-focused centers, programs and executive courses, including flexible programs for women seeking to re-enter the workforce after a career break (Maitland, 2005). A recent study of the world's leading B-schools suggests that 10 per cent have such specialist centers with a third offering dedicated certificate/degree programs or executive education courses (Ibeh et al., 2008). African B-schools, however, appear not to have caught up with this trend (Tamale & Oloka-Onyango, 1997). This reinforces the perception that management educators are not sufficiently responsive to the needs of the continent (Debrah & Budhwar, 2004). It would be interesting to examine the extent to which the foregoing picture of African B-schools reflects current realities.

### 2.2. Targeted incentives

Evidence suggests that an increasing proportion of world's leading B-schools – 42 per cent – now offer *female-only fellowships and scholarships* to attract more women into MBA programs (Ibeh et al., 2008). These incentives are often provided in partnership with major corporate sponsors and are aimed at lowering financial and related barriers. These encourage women to realize their career potential (Maitland, 2005, 2006). One example that applies to the African context is the \$100 million Goldman Sachs 10,000 women program. This is aimed at providing business and management education scholarships to women, including African women (Goldman Sachs, 2008). Little is known, however, about the relative availability of similar incentives to foster female talent development in African B-schools.

### 2.3. Networking and mentoring opportunities

Leading international B-schools are also increasingly affiliating with *external networking organizations* that offer women-focused skill-enhancement events, career development opportunities, peer

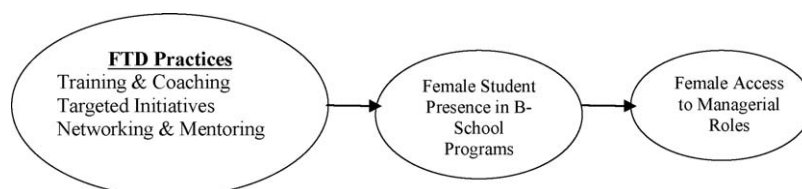


Fig. 1. Indicators and outcomes of female talent development orientation.

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