

Spotlight on...

Laura Kakon

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Chief Growth & Strategy Officer



With over a decade of experience of global marketing for several L'Oréal brands and five years as Vice President of Marketing & Sales at Laureate International Universities (Laureate), Laura Kakon is now Global Chief Growth & Strategy Officer at pan-African private university group Honoris United Universities. We talked to her about her own experience of carving out a successful career and explored how female talent can be fostered in individual organisations and across Africa, where female participation in the workforce can range from as high as 86% to as low as 15% in Algeria, World Bank data shows.

What attracted you to marketing?

"It's a very multi-disciplinary and comprehensive function in an organisation. As part of the management team you have to understand how four key areas of the business intersect to create profitability: marketing, sales, product and finance. You're interacting with so many different stakeholders each day. I really enjoy the strategic and analytical element of the role and there's a huge amount of satisfaction in seeing a direct result of your work in building the brand equity and value. At Honoris, the creation of high quality programmes generates real value for students, parents and employers - education has the power to transform individuals, their families and the communities and the economy."

How did your time at L'Oréal and Laureate prepare you for your current role?

"One of the most important skills I learned while at L'Oréal was how to ensure excellence in execution. The company gave me a lot of responsibility at a young age and that has given me the discipline to challenge whether what I'm doing is the best that can be done. It also encouraged entrepreneurial spirit because I was responsible for a number of product developments and for launching products in markets such as Japan, Korea, France and the USA, where I had to take account of different cultures, ethnicities and expectations. My colleagues and I used to say that it was like being pushed into a swimming pool to see if you could swim – it was challenging, but very satisfying. It helped me to develop my learning agility very quickly, and my resilience.

"While at Laureate, we launched the first private university in Casablanca Morocco, so that was great experience for Honoris where we are building the first and largest pan-African private higher education network."

Where do you think the barriers lie for women in reaching top positions?

"I'm not convinced there are necessarily structural barriers – I think barriers often come from women themselves. Sometimes we need to make choices in life and accept that we can't manage everything perfectly. In many senses, the multi-tasking many women with children do means they can be highly adept at managing complexity – this needs to be turned into an advantage.

"Working remotely for part of the time can really help women continue to advance in their careers, so I do think that technology is a real enabler in that sense."

How do you see Honoris's role in developing and fostering female talent?

There is an old saying that "to educate a man is to educate an individual, to educate a woman is to educate a nation". Honoris is the first and largest pan-African private higher education platform, we have universities in 10 countries and 32 cities on the continent. From Casablanca to Cape Town, from Abuja to Tunis, we are helping to train a new generation of world-class African professionals, who can have a huge positive impact on their communities.

As educators, we believe that strengthening women's access to higher education, particularly to disciplines such as STEM, and encouraging women to continue with their studies will promote and increase female leadership on the continent. Offering flexible working arrangements such as distance and online education allows women, especially mothers, to be able to continue their studies while working. We are also launching specific training courses, such as the "Advanced Certificate Women Board Ready" recently launched in Tunisia, in partnership with the Essec Business School and Université Centrale, a member institution of the network. More women are needed in governance bodies to offer broader diversity of thought amongst those setting industry standards.

In addition, we're partners with the Women in Africa Initiative (WIA), an organisation that encourages female entrepreneurship and leadership across the continent. The pan-African initiative sits at the heart of Honoris' mission - Education For Impact. We have partnered with WIA for 3 years, supporting 54 women entrepreneurs each year (1 from each Africa country selected out of thousands) and facilitating an annual entrepreneur 'boot camp', alongside the WIA's other partners. Honoris also offers entrepreneurs free training, tailored to their specific needs and projects. Since the launch of the initiative, nearly 30 women entrepreneurs have benefited from our training, mostly distance or online MBAs.

Only a collective effort can increase female leadership on the continent and beyond, each of us has a responsibility.