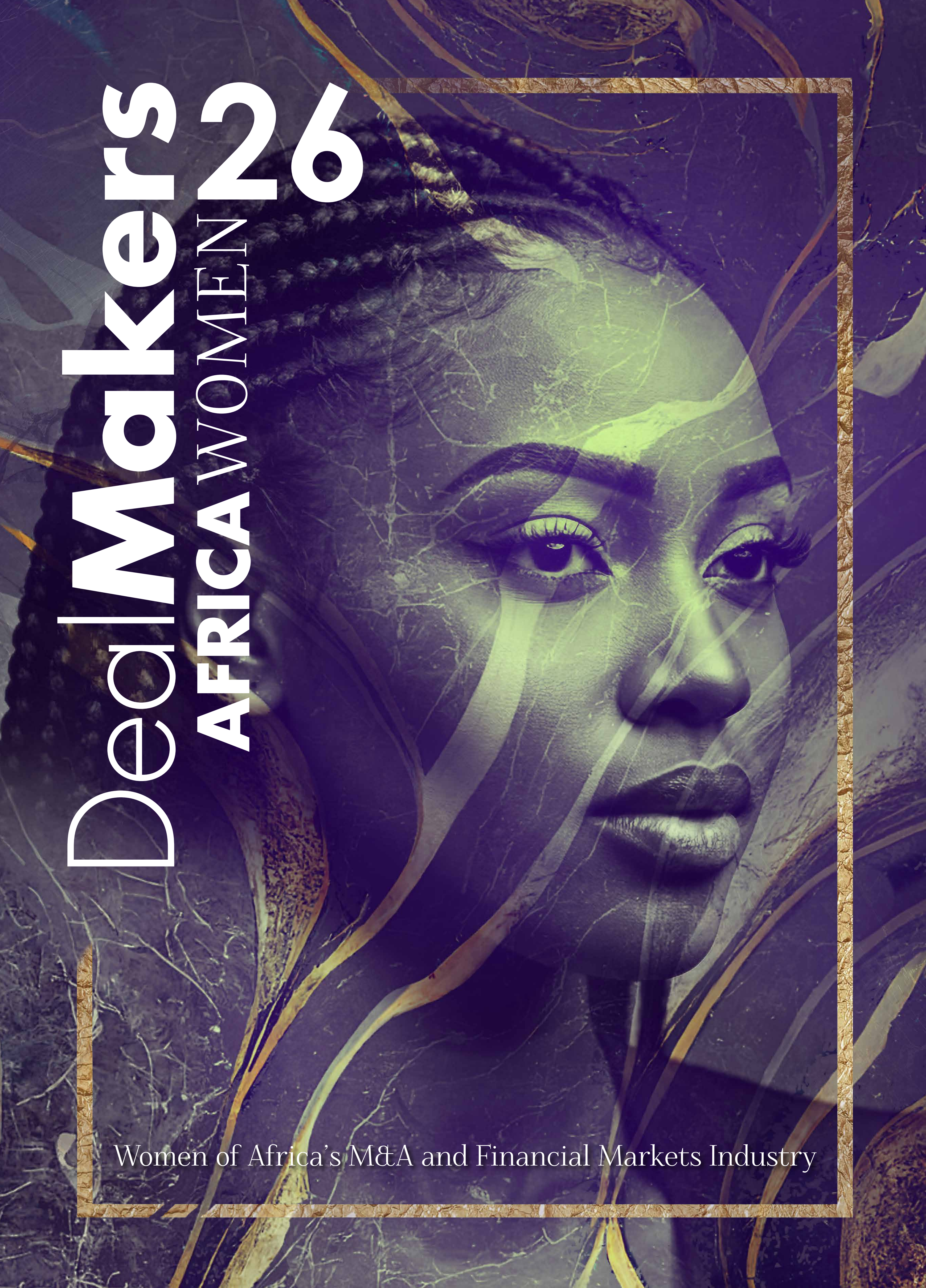
DealMakers
AFRICA WOMEN
26
Women of Africa's M&A and Financial Markets Industry


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FOREWORD

Marylou Greig
Editor

DealMakers AFRICA WOMEN 2026

Women of Africa's M&A and Financial Markets Industry

Africa is a continent of extraordinary diversity – in its people, cultures, economies, and the markets in which business is conducted. Yet across these differences are stories that resonate: stories of ambition, perseverance and resilience; of women who have entered industries where the path was not always clearly marked for them, and who have gone on to build careers, businesses and reputations of their own.

There is no single African experience. A woman working in Nairobi will encounter a very different professional and cultural environment from one working in Lagos, Accra, Cairo or Johannesburg. Yet across these varied landscapes, there are remarkable similarities in the experiences of women who have built careers in traditionally male-dominated fields like finance, law, investment and entrepreneurship.

The women profiled in this, the fifth edition of our Women's Feature, represent just a small part of the growing contribution women are making to Africa's business and capital markets. They come from different countries and professional backgrounds, and their journeys are uniquely their own. Yet common threads emerge: the challenges they have faced, the opportunities they have seized, the people who have supported them and, perhaps most importantly, their determination to create opportunities for those who follow.

For many years, the conversation around women in business centred on breaking the proverbial glass ceiling. That remains important, but perhaps the conversation has evolved. It is now also about what happens once that ceiling has been broken: who comes through the opening, who holds the door, and how we ensure that the next generation does not have to fight the same battles.

As Kenyan social, environmental and political activist and Nobel Laureate Wangari Maathai observed in her 2004 Nobel Prize acceptance speech: "Those of us who have been privileged to receive education, skills and experiences, and even power, must be role models for the next generation of leadership."

The women featured in these pages are not simply succeeding within Africa's dealmaking, investment and entrepreneurial landscape; they are helping to shape it. Through the transactions they lead, the businesses they build, the capital they deploy and the people they mentor, they are contributing to a more diverse, dynamic and inclusive African economy.

Their stories remind us that progress is rarely achieved by individuals alone. It is built collectively, woman by woman, opportunity by opportunity, and generation by generation.

As Africa's economies evolve, so too does the face of those shaping them. Increasingly, that face is female.

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The feature is available for download - **www.dealmakersafrica.com**

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Deal**Makers AFRICA** is published by the proprietor Gleason Publications (Pty) Ltd, reg no: 1996/010505/07 from its offices at 31 Tudor Park, 61 Hillcrest Avenue, Blairgowrie, Randburg 2194.

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Gleason Publications

As an adventurous introvert, I am curious about culture, travel and living well.

Bertha
Mwarija
Senior Associate, Tanzania

I am deeply passionate about living a balanced and meaningful life. I am a wife and mother of three beautiful children. My family is my greatest source of joy, purpose, and inspiration. Outside of the busy corporate life, I like spending quality time with family and friends.

Jacqueline
Tarimo
Senior Associate, Tanzania

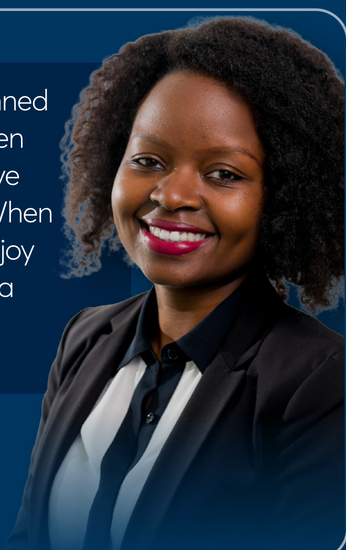
I love the way sharing a meal brings people together. There is something special about sitting around a table, catching up, celebrating the little wins, or simply enjoying each other's company. Creating those moments of connection genuinely makes me happy.

Kelly
Li
Senior Associate, Mauritius

I enjoy keeping life full – whether it is staying active, continually learning, serving in my local church or making the most of time with friends, family and my favourite person, my husband.

Lara
Himmel
Senior Associate, Namibia

My weekends are mostly planned by my two children, which often means attending an impressive number of birthday parties! When I get some time to myself, I enjoy catching up with friends over a glass of wine, baking, pop-up markets and … shopping.



Michelle
Kimonye
Senior Associate, Kenya

When I am off the clock, I am usually split between two extremes: training for a mountain trek or curled up at home with a page-turning novel or a knitting project.

Sylvia
Mukuna
Senior Associate, Kenya

Outside of work, you will find me on a golf course, planning my next family adventure, or bringing people together. I enjoy creating memorable experiences, whether organising a social event, discovering new destinations, or embracing a little friendly competition.

Yusra
Butt
Senior Associate, Kenya

BOWMANS
THE VALUE OF KNOWING

Q&A

Amina Abugdanpoka Kaguah

Executive | Head of ENS
ENS

Mentorship, sisterhood, and 'lifting as you rise'

There is a powerful African proverb: "If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together." How do you practically apply this to building support networks among female professionals across African finance?

In dealmaking, we constantly create synergies for clients, yet rarely apply the same principle to our own professional networks. Across telecoms, energy, financial services and FMCG, one lesson has remained constant: women succeed best when we invest deliberately in one another. I build support networks by making introductions across firms, sectors and jurisdictions, sharing opportunities rather than guarding them, and creating space for junior women to do meaningful work. Today's junior female lawyer may become tomorrow's co-counsel, client or counterparty, so I stay connected long after a transaction closes. Those relationships strengthen not only individual careers, but African finance as a whole.

In your journey, have you experienced the difference between a mentor (who gives advice) and a sponsor (who actively advocates for your promotion behind closed doors)? How are you playing the role of sponsor for others now?

I know the difference intimately. Mentors teach, challenge and help you grow. Sponsors use their influence to create opportunities you could not access alone.

After my husband's terminal illness and passing, I stepped away from practice – a widow, mother of three, and professionally adrift. My appointment as Director and Senior Counsel for Legal and Corporate Affairs in Cummins' Africa and Middle East office in Johannesburg came because someone mentioned my name in a room I was not in, vouched for my capability, and gave me an opportunity when I could not advocate for myself. That restored my career and my confidence.

That experience shaped how I lead. I do more than mentor talented women; I sponsor them – putting them forward for transactions, introducing them to clients, and ensuring decision-makers know their capabilities. Mentorship develops potential; sponsorship gives it a platform.

How can financial institutions in East and West Africa move past superficial 'diversity quotas' to build environments where young women are genuinely fast-tracked into front-office, revenue-generating deal roles?

Let me be blunt: quotas without architecture is theatre. Hiring more women means little if they are concentrated in support functions while the revenue-generating work remains unchanged.

Institutions serious about developing female dealmakers must change three things. First, intentional deal allocation: staff young women on complex, high-value transactions early, with real responsibility and client exposure – not as note-takers. You cannot become a dealmaker from the sidelines. Second, institutionalised sponsorship: promotion should not depend on a senior leader's discretion; structured programmes must hold leaders accountable for identifying and championing talent. Third, redesigned career paths: too many women leave the pipeline because institutions treat motherhood or caring responsibilities as interruptions, rather than life stages. Flexible staffing, transition support and re-entry pathways retain talent already invested in. The pipeline is not the problem; the systems are.

What is the most rewarding piece of tactical advice you've ever given to a junior female colleague that you watched her successfully put into practice?

I told a young associate before her first sole client meeting: "Go so prepared that your preparation becomes your confidence." She had been told the regulator's office would expect someone more senior, a male. I said: know the file better than anyone, anticipate every question, and speak with quiet authority. She did, and the regulator directed all follow-up queries to her personally. Preparation is the great equaliser. In markets where bias still operates – where people expect a large firm's leader to be a man – mastery of substance commands the space. I have watched that associate grow into a confident, client-winning lawyer, and I trace it to that meeting where she chose preparation over self-doubt.

Building a deal pipeline relies heavily on networks that are often built in informal spaces. How can young women build authentic, high-value networks on their own terms?

Let your preparation, integrity and quality of work be your introduction. Authentic relationships built on trust and competence will always outlast performative networking.

Who was the first person in the African financial sector to take a genuine gamble on your capabilities, and how did that shift your professional trajectory?

Kojo Bentsi-Enchill, during my formative years at Bentsi-Enchill, Letsa & Ankomah. He saw potential in me before I had credentials to prove it. From Zuarungu in Northern Ghana with no family connections in law, I had no obvious path into corporate practice. Yet he invested in developing me, entrusted me with meaningful work, and advocated for me in rooms I was not in – mentorship and sponsorship that fundamentally shaped my career.

Under his guidance, I gained early exposure to complex transactions, learning not only the craft of dealmaking but commercial judgement, integrity and leadership. That belief gave me confidence to pursue opportunities I might otherwise have thought beyond reach, and taught me a lasting lesson: talent is universal, but opportunity is not. That is why I now identify potential early, particularly in young women, and give them challenging work, visibility and opportunity before every credential is in place.

Q&A

Josephine Mensah-Kufuor
Associate
ENS

Personal reflections, ambiguity and leadership

The lifestyle of transactional finance is notoriously non-stop. What is a strict personal boundary, daily ritual or cultural practice you protect fiercely to maintain your mental wellbeing?

I have become quite protective of my small, daily ritual. In a demanding practice, it's easy to believe life will properly begin once the deal closes or the inbox finally quietens down. But there is always another transaction waiting, so I have learnt to weave moments of calm into my days instead.

Before work, it will be taking an extra minute to choose a fragrance or a piece of jewellery. It makes me happy. During the day, when everything feels all-consuming, I listen to music while working – not to escape the work, but to change how I experience it. A small sensory shift that calms my mind.

Before I sleep, I read three statements I keep in my Notes app: (i) I did my best with the day I had; (ii) everything is a win when the goal is to experience; and (iii) tomorrow will be a better day.

It allows me to leave the day where it belongs, quieten my mind and rest well.

How has your definition of a 'successful career' fundamentally shifted from when you were an ambitious graduate to the industry leader you are today?

Being the youngest of four daughters, success initially looked like external validation: bigger deals, quicker progression, and the visible markers that tell others you're doing well.

Today, perhaps because the world is far more unpredictable than I imagined, I define success through autonomy, competence and community.

Autonomy is having the freedom to shape a career that reflects my values and curiosities, rather than feeling confined to a predefined path or constantly measuring my success against other people's expectations. Competence is the quiet confidence that comes from mastering your craft. It is knowing that clients and colleagues trust you because you have consistently earned that trust through preparation and sound judgement. Community is perhaps the one I have come to appreciate most. The best careers are never built alone – they are shaped by mentors who invest in you, colleagues who challenge you, and the opportunity to do the same for others.

Recognition and bigger deals are gratifying, but those three are what make a career meaningful and successful to me.

Outside of the financial press, economic indices and market tickers, what African literature, philosophies or leaders shape how you view human behaviour and risk?

The Dining Table by Gbanabom Hallowell is the piece of African literature that has stayed with me longest; I read it in high school, but only truly appreciated it years later. The poem transforms an ordinary dining table (a place associated with family and nourishment) into a landscape of war, violence and disease – a reminder that the line between stability and instability is far thinner than we imagine – and it certainly shaped how I think about human behaviour and risk.

We often assess risk as though it exists only in probabilities, but people are not static. Circumstances, incentives and politics change people. Markets do not move independently of these forces; they move with them.

Working in M&A has reinforced that lesson. Every M&A transaction is built on assumptions about people, markets and institutions: that markets will remain open, regulators predictable, counterparties cooperative. *The Dining Table* reminds me never to assume permanence. The greatest risks are often the human realities we think will remain unchanged.

What is a personal passion or hobby you pursue, completely outside of finance, that keeps your mind sharp and your perspective grounded?

I discovered Sudoku this year, and it has become my favourite mental reset. What I enjoy is that it rewards patience over speed. Whenever I rush, I more often than not make mistakes. When I slow down, look for patterns and accept that not every answer reveals itself immediately, the puzzle begins to solve itself.

That lesson translates well to transactional practice. The first answer may not always be the right answer, and not every difficult issue requires immediate action. Sometimes the best legal judgement comes from recognising patterns that were invisible at first.

When your career in African capital markets is eventually complete, what is the legacy you hope to leave on the continent's financial ecosystem?

I hope my contribution to African capital markets goes beyond helping transactions close, to helping businesses grow.

Across the continent, many founder-led and family-owned businesses have built remarkable enterprises but struggle to access the capital, partnerships or structures needed to scale beyond their domestic markets. I would like to contribute to an ecosystem where mergers and acquisitions are viewed not simply as exit opportunities, but as tools for growth, regional expansion and long-term sustainability.

If I can help more African businesses scale through well-structured transactions and strategic partnerships, I would consider that a meaningful contribution to the continent's financial ecosystem.

Q&A

Lesley-Anne Owusu
Senior Associate
ENS

Tactical blueprint for the next generation

What is your message for a young woman at university, looking at the long hours and intense pressures of M&A and thinking, "I don't know if I belong there"?

There were moments early in my own career when I questioned whether I was capable enough, experienced enough or ready enough for the opportunities in front of me.

If you're drawn to complex deals, solving business problems and making an impact, don't allow your fears to make you think you don't belong. It is not an easy field, but it will help you grow and, one day, you will look back and see how far you've come.

One thing I've learned is that even the most senior professionals sometimes have imposter syndrome. But they don't allow it to hold them back, and they work hard so that their work speaks for itself. This is something I have internalised.

That being said, try and gain as much practical experience as you can. I had the opportunity to intern in a few law firms before commencing full time employment. Those experiences helped me understand what I was looking for in my career, as well as the environments and areas of practice that were not the right fit for me.

If you're drawn to complex deals, solving business problems and making an impact, don't allow your fears to make you think you don't belong.

Beyond mathematical brilliance and financial modelling, what is the single most underappreciated 'soft skill' required to survive and excel in capital markets?

I believe the most underappreciated soft skill is emotional intelligence, particularly the ability to listen with intention. By listening carefully and understanding your client, you uncover the commercial issues behind the legal questions, and that's where you can add real value. If you are able to anticipate the client's needs, you'll deliver solutions that go beyond just solving the question you were asked.

Ultimately, the more deeply you understand your client's objectives, challenges, and priorities, the better positioned you are to deliver practical and commercially relevant advice.

How should junior professionals build a visible, respected personal brand in a regional industry that often prioritises behind-the-scenes execution?

As a junior professional, I would say consistency is the strongest form of branding.

Deliver excellent work, even when no one is watching. Be someone colleagues can rely on, clients can trust, and senior leaders can confidently recommend. Over time, your work begins to speak for you. Share your insights, contribute to professional conversations, mentor others, and remain curious.

Beyond that, there are a number of ways to build your profile and increase your visibility. You can attend conferences, write articles, or even share interesting developments on social media.

I attended a workshop on personal branding recently and one of my key takeaways was, whatever you decide to do for your personal brand, be consistent with it. For example, if you choose to write articles, write them consistently and try to write on the same topic. Over time, this helps build credibility and a strong personal brand in the area where you would like to be recognised.

You should regularly assess whether your chosen approach is effective and re-evaluate where necessary.

Q&A

Marian Ohui Apronti
Senior Associate
ENS

Tactical blueprint for the next generation

What is your message for a young woman at university, looking at the long hours and intense pressures of M&A and thinking, "I don't know if I belong there"?

Don't let M&A's reputation make the decision for you before you've had the chance to experience it. Yes, it is demanding. The hours can be long and the pressure real, but it is also one of the most intellectually stimulating and rewarding areas of legal practice. Every transaction presents a different commercial puzzle, bringing together law, business strategy, finance and negotiation in a way that keeps you learning throughout your career. I still remember the first time I was handed a share purchase agreement and thought, "I have no idea what I'm doing." That feeling passes and, when it does, you realise you were more capable than you gave yourself credit for.

It is easy to look at accomplished lawyers and assume they have always been confident or naturally suited to this work. The reality is that most of us started with far more questions than answers (and a healthy dose of impostor syndrome). I certainly did. Confidence is not a prerequisite; it is something you build through preparation, experience and the willingness to ask questions, even the ones you think might sound silly.

Rather than worrying about whether you fit the mould, focus on building habits that will serve you in any area of law: think critically, communicate clearly, follow developments in the economy, and be genuinely curious about how your clients' businesses work. These skills will give you a strong foundation long before you work on your first transaction.

Most importantly, don't mistake self-doubt for a lack of ability. Growth often begins with discomfort. If M&A genuinely interests you, don't count yourself out before you've given yourself a chance. As M&A and capital markets continue to evolve in Ghana and across the African continent, we need more women helping to shape the transactions, governance and investment decisions that drive economic growth. The seat at the table is there – you just have to take it.

Beyond mathematical brilliance and financial modelling, what is the single most underappreciated 'soft skill' required to survive and excel in capital markets?

Commercial curiosity.

In a developing market like Ghana, transactions rarely fit neatly into a textbook. Regulatory frameworks continue to evolve, market practice is still developing in certain areas, and there is often no perfect precedent to follow. Technical legal knowledge is only part of the equation.

Commercial curiosity means taking the time to understand the business behind the transaction, not just the documents in front of you. It means asking why a deal is being structured in a particular way, understanding what success looks like for the client, and appreciating the commercial realities that influence their decisions. I've learnt to read annual reports, follow industry news, and ask clients about their operations. Not because it's required, but because it makes me a better adviser.

I have found that clients value advisers who understand their objectives, not simply the legal issues they face. When you appreciate the wider commercial context, your advice becomes practical, your risk assessment more balanced, and your recommendations genuinely useful to decision-makers. You become more than a technical adviser. You become a trusted partner.

When your strategic advice or valuation is met with heavy scepticism by a traditional, old-school corporate board, what is your personal strategy for reclaiming the floor and defending your thesis?

I remind myself that scepticism is not disagreement. It is often part of good governance. Directors carry significant responsibilities and should ask difficult questions before making important decisions. Rather than becoming defensive, I try to understand what is driving the concern. Is it the legal analysis, the commercial implications, or simply a preference for doing things the way they've always been done?

Once I understand the concern, I bring the discussion back to first principles. I explain the reasoning clearly, relate it to the client's commercial objectives, and support it with law, market practice and practical examples, where appropriate. I've found that people are much more receptive when they can see not only what I'm recommending, but why the recommendation makes commercial sense for them.

I've also learnt that credibility is built less by speaking the loudest and more by being well-prepared, staying composed under pressure, and engaging respectfully with difficult questions. People may not always agree immediately, but they are far more likely to trust advice that is thoughtful, measured, and grounded in both the law and commercial reality. And sometimes, the most powerful move is simply to listen before you respond.

Q&A

Patricia Jane Mumuni

Executive

ENS

Tactical blueprint for the next generation

What is your message for a young woman at university, looking at the long hours and intense pressures of M&A and thinking, "I don't know if I belong there"?

Do not decide from the outside that you don't belong on the inside. When I was starting out, the world of corporate transactions felt unfamiliar and intimidating (I had much preferred litigation), but I learnt that unfamiliarity is not a sign something is not for you; sometimes it is simply the beginning of something new.

Yes, M&A is demanding. There will be long nights, complex transactions, and deadlines that test you. But there will also be great learning, and the opportunity to help shape businesses and economies. Some transactions demand exceptional dedication, but those hard moments don't define the practice.

Don't let that reality discourage you before experiencing the fulfilment that M&A offers. Give yourself the opportunity to discover whether the work excites you. If, after experiencing it, you decide it is not the right path, that is a valid choice. But let your decision be informed by experience, not assumptions.

Beyond mathematical brilliance and financial modelling, what is the single most underappreciated 'soft skill' required to survive and excel in capital markets?

In my experience, it is commercial judgement. Capital markets demand technical excellence, but that alone does not make a great lawyer. The most pragmatic lawyers look beyond securities law and regulatory requirements to understand the commercial objective of a transaction, stakeholder priorities, and the risks that genuinely matter.

A prospectus or regulatory filing can be legally flawless, yet fail to serve the client if the lawyer lacks appreciation of the commercial realities driving the deal. Commercial judgment is knowing what is a fundamental risk versus a negotiating point, when to push, and when a practical solution is the better path.

Clients need lawyers who can see the destination, anticipate challenges, and help them get there efficiently. Technical skills earn you a seat at the table, but commercial judgement makes you a trusted dealmaker.

When negotiating your own compensation, performance bonuses, or equity partnership within an advisory firm or bank, what is your golden rule?

Know your value before you walk in, and be able to prove it. Early in my career, I assumed good work would speak for itself. It does not. In a busy practice, even well-intentioned partners cannot track every contribution unless you make it visible.

Build your case on evidence, not emotion. I track the transactions I have contributed to, the problems I have solved, and the value I have created for clients and the firm. The conversation should not be "I deserve more"; it should be, "here is the value I have delivered and continue to deliver."

Negotiation is something we do for clients every day. We should approach our own careers with the same discipline. I say this especially to women in professional services: advocating for your value is not arrogance; it is taking ownership of your career.

How should junior professionals build a visible, respected personal brand in a regional industry that often prioritises behind-the-scenes execution?

Focus less on being visible, and more on being valuable. Visibility follows value.

In a profession where much of the work happens behind the scenes, your reputation is built in the details people observe every day: the quality of your work, your reliability under pressure, your responsiveness, and how you treat everyone you work with. Build your brand by becoming known for excellence before you become known by name.

At the same time, do not assume good work will always speak for itself. Be intentional. Write articles, contribute to industry discussions, attend events, and ask thoughtful questions. Approach networking as building genuine relationships, not collecting contacts.

In a regional market, people remember those who are curious, prepared and engaged. Your personal brand is built through consistent delivery, professional relationships, and the trust you earn over time.

When your strategic advice or valuation is met with heavy scepticism by a traditional, old-school corporate board, what is your personal strategy for reclaiming the floor and defending your thesis?

I never fight scepticism with defensiveness; I fight it with preparation. When an experienced, traditional board challenges a recommendation, the resistance is rarely about the analysis alone. It is often about the assumptions behind it. My first instinct is to understand what is driving the scepticism.

Once I understand the concern, I bring the conversation back to evidence – comparable transactions, regulatory considerations and assessed transactional risks. I respect the experience in the room while remaining confident in my judgement.

Credibility is built through humility as much as conviction. If a concern has merit, I acknowledge it. The goal is not to win the argument; it is to help the board make a well-informed decision.

The most persuasive adviser is the person who has done the work, understands the commercial realities, and can explain not only the risks of acting, but also the risks of not acting.

INSIGHT

Njeri Wagacha
Partner | Corporate & Commercial
CDH Kenya

Why equity requires more than just access

It never crossed my mind that law school was not an option for me. Later, when speaking with my mum, I realised it had been a dream for her, and one that she sees reflected in me. Access matters, and according to the 'Women in justice in Africa' report, published by the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women in 2023, Africa has the world's largest number of women heading constitutional courts and acting as chief justices – a factor that is likely to influence the gender equity discussions in the legal profession. Progress is a good thing.

At the same time, it matters that women see each other in all areas of legal practice. There remains a huge gender parity gap in certain practice areas, including in the corporate and commercial space. As a female corporate and commercial law practitioner in Kenya, it is not unusual to be the only woman at the negotiation table, dealing with older lawyers who sometimes haven't yet caught up with the "new age thinking" that a woman can argue and disagree on a commercial point and have the right not to be condescended to. On too frequent occasions, clients and junior lawyers alike have noticed the tone with which I have been spoken to and, while it doesn't bother me, from a negotiation standpoint, it reminds me to be an example to the junior female lawyers – stand your ground, know the law and make your point.

> There is a need for mentorship to ensure that women take up more leadership roles, realise their full potential, and take up the spaces they equally deserve.

This reality strengthens the reasoning that beyond advocacy and sponsorship, there is a need for mentorship to ensure that women take up more leadership roles, realise their full potential, and take up the spaces they equally deserve. This must be done through institutional programmes and informal networks for greater impact, for various reasons:

i. Many institutional programmes focus on women who have overcome entry point barriers and are looking for progression to take up more responsibility and assume leadership positions. They are, therefore, looking for capacity building and upskilling through structured courses and leadership programmes;

ii. There are women downstream who need to be freed from cultural shackles and the belief that they should take a back seat in leadership and governance at whatever level. Informal networks can reach women with similar circumstances in order for them to see that it is possible to overcome perceived or real limitations.

This is a global issue. When I started my career in London, my first seat was in Real Estate, and it is not a coincidence that it was a majority women-led team who could leave earlier than the corporate lawyers and have some semblance of a family life; access but not equity, because the realities of the world still mean that mothers take on the lion's share of family responsibility.

It is there that I noticed that most African transactions were led from our office and not from Tanzania or Nigeria, where the subject matter or target business resided. The collaboration and working relationship with local counsel taught me so much: firstly, that African law firms must take the lead in transactions concerning them; and secondly, that while there is a lot of commercial and technical understanding that may be gained from cross-border interactions, the real learning is in understanding the cultural nuances that make us who we are. This is especially key for lawyers – people work with people they like. Mostly senior women taught me this.

It is often said that it takes a village to raise a child. By the same token, we owe it to each other to keep the door open for the next generation of women, whenever we find our pathways. This requires each of us in our various spaces to offer guidance and mentorship to those coming after us.

CDH

Q&A

Faith Chebet

Executive | Corporate Commercial and M&A
ENS

Regional dynamics, cross-border deals and the African landscape

Cross-border M&A within the continent is growing rapidly. What is the most challenging regional nuance, whether related to currency fluctuations, exchange controls, or local political landscapes, that you've had to navigate to close a deal?

Africa continues to provide extraordinary opportunities for growth, and it's been interesting to see the shift in how businesses think about expansion in the region, increasingly as a strategic priority rather than a stretch goal. But practical realities rarely mirror what any investor expects from the outset.

One of the most challenging nuances in cross-border M&A on the continent is coordinating multi-track regulatory approvals running simultaneously across jurisdictions with different timelines, thresholds, and frameworks.

None of these challenges are insurmountable, but essential to navigate them is having legal counsel with genuine African know-how: not just technical capability, but a deep understanding of local dynamics developed through years of working on the ground. We understand regulatory temperaments, and we can anticipate when a regulator will move quickly and when to expect delays because we've built relationships with the professionals on the other side of the table. That institutional knowledge can't be replicated.

The practical lesson? Engage local counsel and regulators early, build realistic buffer time into timetables, and keep the end goal in mind. All challenges in dealmaking are ultimately posed by people and resolved by people. Navigating that is where I spend much of my professional time: helping clients coordinate across regulatory tracks, and turn what looks like an obstacle course into a clear path to completion.

East Africa has established itself as a global hub for mobile money and fintech infrastructure. How is this digital maturity changing the way traditional corporate finance valuations are conducted in the region?

Having spent much of my career advising clients in East Africa's telecommunications and fintech space, I've had a front-row seat to how mobile money infrastructure is reshaping corporate finance. Transaction data that would once have been invisible, such as informal trade and remittances, are now captured digitally, giving businesses far richer datasets for valuations. Dealmakers now routinely factor in transaction volume growth and digital adoption rates alongside traditional metrics. The due diligence conversation has changed too: acquirers request access to payment data alongside audited financials, and legal teams must structure data protection and cross-border data transfer compliance into the transaction itself, whether through representations, indemnities or conditions to closing. For investors entering the region, this digital maturity is a genuine advantage, but only if the legal architecture keeps pace with the data.

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) aims to create a single market. Have you seen a tangible impact yet on how regional corporates approach pan-African expansion and capital allocation?

The tangible impact of AfCFTA is still uneven, but it is visible. Full implementation is not yet complete, but the agreement is in force, and commercially meaningful trade is already happening through pilot mechanisms. These have enabled Kenyan synthetic filaments, for example, to access regional markets under preferential terms.

Beyond the pilots, some regional corporates are increasingly structuring new investments through holding entities designed around intra-African trade preferences, rather than defaulting to offshore jurisdictions.

Implementation gaps remain, particularly around non-tariff barriers and customs administration. But businesses in manufacturing, agribusiness and logistics are already pre-positioning their legal and corporate structures to leverage preferential treatment, rather than waiting for perfect implementation before acting.

When dealing with international development finance institutions (DFIs) versus private global investors looking at East or West Africa, how do you adjust your pitch and capital raising strategy?

DFIs and private global investors operate with different priorities, and the legal work has to accommodate both. When advising clients engaging with DFIs, documentation requirements are distinctive. Impact metrics must be woven into the transaction structure: job creation covenants, environmental and social action plans, governance safeguards, all drafted with the same rigour as commercial terms. For DFIs, ESG goes to the heart of their mandate. They deploy capital to generate measurable positive outcomes alongside financial returns, answering to stakeholders who expect demonstrable impact. From a drafting perspective, sustainability indicators and supply chain due diligence obligations become core contractual terms, rather than policy annexes.

When advising private investors, the focus shifts to speed, exit optionality and downside protection; warranty and indemnity structuring, drag and tag rights, and clear governance provisions. Where both DFIs and private investors sit in the same capital stack, which is increasingly common on the continent, the task becomes structuring arrangements that satisfy DFI reporting obligations without diluting commercial protections. Getting that balance right early saves clients from costly renegotiation later, and it's one of the aspects of this work I find most interesting.

Q&A

Neha Shah

Poonam Vora

Co-Founders & Managing Directors
Maitri Capital

Regional dynamics, cross-border deals and the African landscape

Cross-border M&A within the continent is growing rapidly. What is the most challenging regional nuance, whether related to currency fluctuations, exchange controls or local political landscapes, that you've had to navigate to close a deal?

Neha: The cross-border deals that have given us the most trouble did not stall between buyer and seller; they stalled between the sellers.

Regional groups grow across borders faster than their corporate structures – an operating asset in one market, a trading entity in the next, a holding company in a third. Money moves between them for years: a shareholder covers a shortfall in one country, one entity settles another's supplier, a parent lends to a subsidiary without the documentation a transaction will later demand. Because those flows crossed currencies, agreeing the amount means agreeing a date and a rate before you can agree anything else.

If the whole group is sold, much of that history can often be dealt with through the net debt bridge and completion mechanics. The question becomes much more contentious when one shareholder is being bought out by the others, because the classification of that historic funding decides the split.

Recognised as shareholder debt, the money can be repayable to whomever advanced it before residual equity is divided. Treated as equity, the economics follow the shareholding instead. Same cash in, very different cash out. The shareholders' agreement and the underlying funding documents may settle the question – when they exist and are clear.

Consolidated accounts will not settle it either, because the intercompany balances are eliminated on consolidation. You have to go back to the underlying ledgers and shareholder records. On a recent mandate, we rebuilt the whole funding history from the bank statements.

Currency and approvals are risks you know to plan for. This one, you have to go looking for – and no discount rate covers it.

East Africa has established itself as a global hub for mobile money and fintech infrastructure. How is this digital maturity changing the way traditional corporate finance valuations are conducted in the region?

Poonam: It has changed what we are able to test.

I trained as an actuary, then spent years in equity research and corporate finance at Dyer & Blair, at a time which included the Safaricom and Kenya Re IPOs.

Safaricom itself illustrates the wider shift: what was once largely a telecoms investment case became a payments and digital-platform story.

The method has not changed. We discount the same cash flows and argue about the same multiples, built on the same core information set: management accounts, an audit several months old, and judgement about how much of the cash you can independently verify. What has changed is that, in many businesses, we can now triangulate reported revenue against transaction-level data and look closely at collection patterns and cash conversion, on top of that foundation. I would not claim this delivers a higher multiple – valuation is rarely that obliging – but it does narrow the information discount.

It reaches well past fintech. On one agri-processing mandate, digitised farmer payments let us test working capital assumptions that the management accounts could not.

When dealing with international development finance institutions (DFIs) versus private global investors looking at East or West Africa, how do you adjust your pitch and capital-raising strategy?

Neha: I have sat on the other side of this table. At Norfund and then Actis, I saw how differently a DFI and a private equity investor underwrite the same opportunity.

The split is less clean than the labels suggest. Some DFIs underwrite more aggressively than the private funds sitting alongside them, and plenty of private capital holds for a decade. What genuinely differs is what each investor has to prove to its own investment committee: additionality, governance and development outcomes in one memo; market position, downside protection and the exit mechanism in another.

That shapes the raise as much as the pitch. Who anchors the round, which risks a DFI is better placed to hold, where commercial capital comes in and on what terms — those are structuring decisions, not presentation ones.

We put together funding for a greenfield healthcare manufacturing plant that brought DFIs, foundations and commercial lenders into the same transaction: three investment committees, three different underwriting lenses on the same company. The business did not change. The work was translating one honest case into what each needed in order to underwrite it.

Local currency volatility against the US Dollar is a persistent hurdle in African capital markets. What innovative hedging or deal-structuring mechanisms are you utilising to protect valuations?

Poonam: FX is discussed as a macro risk but, in a transaction, it gets personal fast: who absorbs the movement between signing and completion, and who carries the exposure thereafter?

Africa is not one FX market. Some currencies have stabilised considerably, while others remain volatile. Pricing 2023 volatility into a 2026 term sheet can distort value just as much as ignoring FX risk altogether.

Valuation disagreements are often allocation problems wearing a disguise. The seller is protecting a dollar number; the buyer is underwriting local currency cash flows. Both are rational; they are simply solving for different things.

Long-dated hedging is available, including through specialist platforms such as TCX. But in the transactions we see, it's not always the practical answer: pricing, tenor and availability can make it uneconomic. So, the protection has to come from how the deal is structured, not from a hedge sitting alongside it. Matching local currency debt to local currency cash flows removes the mismatch at source, rather than trying to hedge it after the fact. Deferred consideration, denominated or indexed appropriately, can share part of the movement across the payment period, rather than concentrating it all on completion day. One modelling discipline: put the currency depreciation through the forecast explicitly, rather than burying it in a country-risk premium. A number that people can argue about beats a fudge factor nobody can.

None of this makes the risk disappear. What it changes is when the conversation happens. FX is too often argued at completion; we prefer to settle the allocation at term sheet.

MAITRI CAPITAL

Q&A

Wairimu Karungu
Vice President | M&A Advisory
Stanbic Bank Kenya

Personal reflections, ambiguity and leadership

The lifestyle of transactional finance is notoriously non-stop. What is a strict personal boundary, daily ritual or cultural practice you protect fiercely to maintain your mental wellbeing?

I am very intentional about protecting quality time with my family. As much as possible, I make sure I am home for my children's night-time routine. It gives me a chance to hear about their day, listen to their wonderfully silly – and sometimes surprisingly profound – stories, and say a prayer with them before they go to sleep. It's a simple routine, but one that keeps me grounded and reminds me of what matters beyond work.

I have also learnt the importance of making time for myself. And, if I'm being completely honest, I have probably accumulated enough spa receipts to prove just how seriously I take that!

How has your definition of a successful career fundamentally shifted from when you were an ambitious graduate to who you are today as an industry leader?

When I started my career, success was largely about experience and achievement. I wanted to work on the biggest and most complex transactions – the kind journalists would scramble to write about. I wanted to work across M&A, equity capital markets and debt capital markets; gain exposure to different sectors and jurisdictions; and engage with entrepreneurs across both developed and emerging markets. In short, I wanted it all!

I have been fortunate to achieve a good part of that ambition, but experience has also brought clarity about what I ultimately want my career to stand for.

Today, I think much more about impact and legacy: the institutions and cultures I help shape, the people I develop, and the next generation of leaders I can help create. I am particularly passionate about supporting women, who often encounter a different – and increasingly complex – set of challenges as they progress into senior leadership.

As organisations become flatter, and traditional reporting lines increasingly resemble a web rather than a straight line, leadership is also becoming less about formal authority and more about influence. I, therefore, spend much more time thinking about how I can shape culture, influence strategy, and create an environment in which others can thrive. That, increasingly, is how I define a successful career.

Outside of the financial press, economic indices and market tickers, what African literature, philosophies, or leaders shape how you view human behaviour and risk?

I have always been fascinated by human behaviour, and by what really drives the decisions people make. As a teenager, I read widely about psychology, although, at that stage, my interest was largely theoretical.

Early in my career at Citi, a conversation with a senior colleague about leadership and psychology introduced me to the work of Daniel Goleman. His writing on emotional intelligence opened an entirely new dimension for me. Psychology stopped being simply an intellectual interest and became a lens through which I began to understand myself, other people and leadership much more deeply.

Later, during my MBA at Warwick University, I took a course on negotiation, and read Chris Voss's Never Split the Difference. That was another important turning point because it translated many of these ideas into something highly practical. It sharpened the way I think about motivation, emotional cues, negotiation and the often-unspoken dynamics that shape decision-making. Over time, understanding human behaviour has become, for me, a core leadership competency, rather than simply an area of personal curiosity.

More recently, I have also become increasingly interested in how technology, and particularly AI, is changing the way younger generations think, learn and interact with the world. It has challenged me to reflect on how leadership itself needs to evolve, particularly in how we mentor, train and prepare younger colleagues for a world that will be markedly different from the one in which I began my own career.

Within an African context, one of the influences I have found particularly compelling is Matirî Ngemi, a podcast that explores the history, culture and social organisation of the Agĩkũyũ. What strikes me is the sophistication and intentionality of that society: clearly defined roles, systems of governance and accountability, and deeply embedded values around family, responsibility and collective wellbeing. It is a powerful reminder that human behaviour is rarely driven by economics or individual incentives alone. Culture, identity, social norms and institutions all shape how people make decisions, exercise authority and perceive risk.

That has been particularly relevant to the way I think about leadership and risk today. Data can tell you a great deal, but it rarely tells you the whole story. To understand why people, organisations or even markets behave as they do, you also have to understand the cultural and institutional systems in which those decisions are being made. Matirî Ngemi has reinforced for me the importance of looking beyond the numbers and appreciating the deeper structures that shape human behaviour.

SPOTLIGHT ON INVESTING

Unlocking Africa's Green Economy Through Gender-Smart Investing

ShEquity Partners is a gender-lens investment firm focused on accelerating Africa's green transition through gender-smart investing. The firm backs early-growth-stage businesses that sit at the intersection of commercial opportunity, climate action and gender inclusion, with a particular focus on ventures that meet the 2X Challenge criteria. For ShEquity, gender-smart investing encompasses businesses founded or co-founded by women, women-led companies, as well as ventures whose products or services disproportionately benefit women, recognising the critical role women can play in shaping Africa's next generation of sustainable businesses.

The firm invests in high-potential SMEs that combine strong commercial fundamentals with scalable climate solutions. To qualify, businesses must have been operating for at least three years, demonstrate strong leadership and have a credible path to profitability. ShEquity also looks for companies with the potential to pursue environmental certifications, including carbon credits, creating opportunities to unlock additional revenue streams while strengthening measurable environmental and social impact. This approach reflects a broader investment philosophy: that financial performance and positive impact can, and should, be mutually reinforcing.

At the heart of ShEquity's strategy is a vision of a gender-inclusive and climate-resilient Africa, where women-led and gender-smart businesses are catalysts for sustainable growth and innovation. Through a combination of financial capital and technical support, the firm seeks to help climate-focused enterprises scale, access new markets and develop additional sources of value through environmental certifications.

PORTFOLIO

"I founded ShEquity to unlock Africa's untapped potential: women-led, gender-smart, profitable and sustainable businesses. With smart capital, gender-inclusive, sustainable ventures can deliver strong financial returns while accelerating a gender-equal future and driving Africa's climate transition. Join us in creating lasting value for Profit, People, Planet, and Society."

Pauline Koelbl
Founder & Managing Partner |CEO ShEquity

Q&A

Anju Issur

Head | Global Markets | Mauritius
Absa Corporate and Investment Banking

What would you tell a young woman looking at the long hours and intense pressure of M&A and thinking, "I don't know if I can do this"?

The long hours are real, the pressure is real. The real question is not whether you can do it today, but whether you are willing to learn, adapt and grow through the experience. Most successful people in M&A weren't born thriving under pressure – they grew with it.

M&A is demanding, but it is also one of the fastest ways to develop commercial judgement, resilience, and problem-solving skills. Focus on building capability one deal at a time, rather than worrying about the entire journey ahead. Confidence is usually the result of competence, not the other way around. Most importantly, do not confuse challenge with inability.

Finally, ask yourself a different question. Instead of "Can I do this?", ask "Is this the kind of challenge that will help me become the person I want to be?". If the answer is yes, then give yourself the chance. You will surprise yourself.

What are the non-negotiable soft skills, beyond financial modelling and sharp excel skills, that a woman needs to cultivate to excel in capital markets?

Technical skills may get you into the room, but soft skills determine how far you progress.

The most important ones are:

Executive presence: Remain calm and composed under pressure, communicate with confidence, and speak with clarity.

Judgement: Judgement determines the right decision. Develop the ability to balance risk, opportunity and timing when information is incomplete.

Influence without authority, and relationship building: Capital markets is a team sport and a people business, which is built on trust. The ability to persuade, build consensus and align stakeholders is invaluable.

Communication: Develop the ability to explain complex concepts clearly and succinctly.

Commercial acumen: Understand what drives a client's business and strategic decisions. Go beyond your product. The best Capital Markets professionals connect macro trends with client needs.

Integrity: Your reputation is your most valuable asset. Never sacrifice credibility for a short-term win.

Finally, I would say, don't aspire to be the smartest person in the room. Aspire to be the person clients trust, colleagues seek out, and leaders rely on when the stakes are highest. Technical expertise may open the doors, but judgement, character and influence determine how far you will go.

How should young women handle microaggressions or being spoken over in a boardroom setting? What is your personal strategy for reclaiming the floor?

Lead with your conclusion. Boardrooms move quickly. Start with your recommendation before explaining the analysis.

Reclaim the floor respectfully, but directly, and if someone speaks over you repeatedly, I would tactically respond by saying, "I'd like to come back to the point I was making".

Use strategic silence and build allies.

Don't match interruption with emotion, match it with composure. The first instinct is often to either retreat or become defensive. Neither is usually effective. A calm, measured response often carries more authority. As an example, I would say, "If I could complete my thought, I think it addresses exactly what you've raised."

When negotiating your own compensation, promotions or seat at the partnership table, what is your golden rule?

My golden rule is: advocate for yourself with data, not emotion.

Know your value, understand the market, and clearly articulate your impact. Walk into the conversation with evidence of results, revenue generated, clients won, strategic contributions, and leadership demonstrated.

Do not assume that hard work will automatically be noticed. Visibility and advocacy are important parts of career progression. Negotiation should not be viewed as confrontation. It is a professional discussion about value creation and appropriate recognition.

How do you advise young professionals to build a visible personal brand in an industry that often prioritises behind-the-scenes execution?

Your personal brand isn't what you say about yourself. It's what people consistently say about you when you are not in the room. Start by being known for something specific, whether it is FX markets, Debt Capital markets or client strategy, develop a clear area of expertise that people associate with your name.

Speak up with insight, not frequency, in meetings; don't contribute just to be heard. Make your comments thoughtful, concise and evidence-based.

Find sponsors, not just mentors. Sponsors advocate for you when you're not in the room. Cultivate relationships with leaders who know your work and are willing to back your potential.

Consistency matters more than self-promotion. A strong reputation is built through repeated delivery of quality work.

The traditional 'rite of passage' was grinding through hours of manual financial modelling and data room sorting – tasks AI now handles in seconds. How must the training and expectations for young women entering corporate finance right now evolve in this new landscape?

Young women in corporate finance need to be both technically proficient and strategically minded. AI can generate a model, but it cannot replace human judgement, relationship management, negotiation, or the ability to understand behaviour and navigate complex transactions.

The individuals who thrive will be those who combine technological fluency with critical thinking, curiosity and commercial insight. Those skills will become the true differentiators in the next generation of capital markets professionals.

Q&A

Anne-Lise Betsey

Senior Associate
ENS

Mentorship, sisterhood and 'lifting as you rise'

There is a powerful African proverb: *"If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together."* How do you practically apply this to building support networks among female professionals across African finance?

One thing working on transactions teaches you very quickly is that nobody closes a deal alone. There is always someone who spots the issue you have overlooked after your fourth draft of the SPA, someone who introduces you to a client years before that relationship turns into a mandate, or someone who calmly says, "I have seen this before," just as you were about to panic.

I have stopped thinking of networking as networking. To me, it is more about building relationships before you need them.

Because African finance is interconnected, today's opposing counsel can become tomorrow's client, and today's junior associate could easily become tomorrow's Head of Legal. Reputations travel fast – fortunately, so does kindness.

I also think women put unnecessary pressure on themselves to have all the answers before asking for help. Some of my most valuable professional conversations have started with, "Have you dealt with this issue before?" or "Can I get your view on this?" I can confirm that there is no prize for struggling in silence.

In my opinion, the best support networks are not built at conferences or over carefully curated LinkedIn posts. They are built through trust, generosity and consistency. They are built by sharing knowledge, making introductions, and celebrating each other's successes without treating them as a limited resource. There is plenty of work and plenty of success to go around. That is how sisterhood becomes more than a hashtag.

In your journey, have you experienced the difference between a mentor (who gives advice) and a sponsor (who actively advocates for your promotion behind closed doors)? How are you playing the role of sponsor for others now?

Mentors are invaluable. They help you navigate difficult conversations, challenge your thinking, and remind you that everyone experiences imposter syndrome – even the people who look as though they have colour-coded spreadsheets for their lives.

But sponsors are different. Sponsors are the people who mention your name when you're not in the room. They recommend you for the transaction that's just beyond your comfort zone. They trust you with clients and opportunities before you think you are ready. In many ways, they lend you their credibility until you have had the chance to build your own.

I have been fortunate to benefit from both. My mentors helped me grow, but the most defining moments came because someone advocated for me behind closed doors. They saw potential before I fully saw it myself, and trusted me with responsibilities that stretched me. Looking back, those opportunities accelerated my career far more than any piece of advice could have.

I am still relatively early in my own career, so I do not pretend to have all the influence in the world. But I have realised that sponsorship is not reserved for partners or CEOs. It starts with small, intentional actions: making an introduction, recommending a colleague for an opportunity, making sure the person who did the work receives the recognition, or encouraging a junior colleague to contribute rather than simply observe. Those moments matter because someone once created them for me.

Too often, women feel they have to be 110% ready before stepping forward. In reality, very few people ever feel completely ready. Sometimes what they need is not another qualification or another training course, they just need someone to say, "She can do this."

How can financial institutions in East and West Africa move past superficial 'diversity quotas' to build environments where young women are genuinely fast-tracked into front-office, revenue-generating deal roles?

I have been in some deal rooms, and I note that diversity has improved over the years. That's encouraging. But now the real question is not whether women are present, but whether they are leading negotiations, managing client relationships and making commercial decisions.

Too often, organisations wait until someone looks "ready" before giving them those opportunities. The irony is that confidence usually comes after the experience, not before it.

If we want more women leading transactions across Africa, then we need to give them meaningful exposure early. Let them negotiate. Let them meet clients. Let them run workstreams. Let them make the occasional mistake while the stakes are manageable. Every experienced dealmaker has a story about the clause they almost missed or the negotiation that didn't quite go to plan. That's called experience, not failure.

We also need to stop measuring success by how many women sit in the office late into the evening. Deals are won through judgement, commercial thinking and relationships, not simply by who stayed online the longest.

The next generation of female dealmakers across Africa does not need lower standards or special treatment, they need access to the right opportunities, meaningful sponsorship, and leaders who are willing to bet on potential as much as proven experience.

Q&A

Anne-Sophie Lenette

Executive

ENS

Tactical blueprint for the next generation

What is your message for a young woman at university, looking at the long hours and intense pressures of M&A and thinking, "I don't know if I belong there"?

Here is what I will tell you honestly: it might not be for you, and that is okay. But you owe it to yourself to try before you make that decision. Give it everything you have, lean in fully, and then decide from a place of experience, not fear.

Yes, it is hard. The hours are long. The pressure is real. There will be moments when you ask yourself, "Why am I doing this?" But when the answer that comes back is passion, thrill, and a sense of purpose, then you'll know that it is for you. And let me tell you something else, there is good money to be made down the line too. This career rewards those who stick with it.

What I have learnt is that you do not have to choose between a fulfilling personal life and a successful career. Not if you genuinely love what you do. When the work excites you, balance is not something you sacrifice; it is something you design around your ambition. Work hard and play hard. They are not opposites. They feed each other.

But yes, free time, 'me' time or hobbies may be scarce. You will have to make it happen. Be intentional about it. And whatever you do, whether it is work or life outside of work, be and live intensely.

So try. Show up. Give it your all. You might just surprise yourself.

How should junior professionals build a visible, respected personal brand in a regional industry that often prioritises behind-the-scenes execution?

Start by being the person people can rely on, then become indispensable. Become the go-to person, the one we can always count on. Be the person everyone wants to work with. Stand out. People will notice.

But do not forget to put your boundaries in place. You can be dedicated without disappearing into the work entirely.

Put your hand up, volunteer, say yes to opportunities that scare you a little. Every time you step forward, you are telling the market you are here and you are serious. Those moments add up. They become your track record.

Be likeable. Be genuine. Be the good friend people want to have. Make it easy for people to approach you or talk to you, and stay down to earth. In an industry full of egos, approachability is a superpower. People remember how you made them feel long after they forget the details of a deal.

Your brand is not just what you post online. It's what people say about you when you are not in the room.

When your strategic advice or valuation is met with heavy scepticism by a traditional, old-school corporate board, what is your personal strategy for reclaiming the floor and defending your thesis?

First, I don't react. I think, I analyse, and I respond. For me, scepticism is not rejection; it is more an invitation to prove your point. It becomes a challenge, almost a competition, to be able to convince the person in front of you.

If I am prepared, convinced, and know my stuff, my aim is to build an argument and advance my points. But you have to be prepared – that is non-negotiable.

Explain why you are coming up with this advice. Walk them through your reasoning. Show them the path you took to get there. When people see your logic laid out clearly, they are far more likely to follow it.

Also, ask the question: "Help me understand what concerns you most about this approach." It disarms defensiveness and opens a real conversation. Suddenly you are not on opposite sides of the table, you are solving a problem together.

One must not take things personally. A pushback often has nothing to do with you or your work, if you come prepared. There may be other considerations at play that you can't see. And it's okay if they don't agree with you or your way. You have given the best advice you could at a specific time, being at a specific spot in your career. That is all anyone can ask of you. Stay steady, stay prepared, and trust yourself. The most important thing is to stay calm, clear and grounded.

Q&A

Ayesha Rambajun
Senior Associate
ENS

Career genesis and defying boardroom demographics

The upper echelons of corporate finance and investment banking in Africa have traditionally been male-dominated. What initially drew you to this intense field, and how did you secure your first seat at a major transaction table?

My path into M&A was not a conventional one. I spent over sixteen years in senior in-house legal and compliance roles before moving into a law firm. Sitting on the client side of the table gave me a perspective that has stayed with me throughout my career. I learned that transactions are never simply about the legal documents. They are about businesses generally pursuing growth, managing risk, creating opportunities and, ultimately, making decisions that will shape their future.

When I joined ENS, I found myself advising on increasingly complex cross-border transactions across Africa. The transition from being the client to becoming the adviser was both challenging and immensely rewarding. It required a different mindset: moving from solving legal issues within one organisation to anticipating commercial and legal challenges across multiple jurisdictions, stakeholders and regulatory environments.

Looking back, I did not seek out M&A because of its reputation or intensity. I was drawn to it because it combines strategic thinking, technical skills and commercial judgment in equal measure. Every transaction presents a new puzzle, and no two deals are ever quite the same.

Looking back at your career across the continent, what do you consider your 'defining deal', the transaction that tested your strategic capabilities the most?

It is difficult to identify a single defining transaction because every significant deal teaches something different. The matters that have challenged me the most have generally involved multiple African jurisdictions, each with its own legal framework, regulatory expectations and commercial realities.

Those transactions emphasised that successful deal execution does not only depend on legal analysis. It requires bringing together diverse teams, aligning advisers across jurisdictions, understanding the commercial priorities of each stakeholder, and finding practical solutions where the law is only part of the equation.

Working across Africa has also taught me that there is no single blueprint for doing business on the continent. While legal principles may be familiar, each jurisdiction has its own regulatory culture, market dynamics and decision-making processes. Appreciating those nuances is often just as important as understanding the legal framework itself.

Can you take us inside a high-stakes deal room in your region? How do you command authority and manage boardroom dynamics when you are the only woman or the youngest person at the table?

Early in my career, I was conscious of being one of the younger professionals in the room. Like many young graduates, I assumed credibility came from having all the answers. Experience has taught me something different.

Authority is built long before the meeting begins. It comes from preparation, understanding the transaction in depth, and appreciating not only the legal issues but also the client's commercial objectives. When you consistently provide practical, well-reasoned advice and remain composed under pressure, people begin to trust your judgment. Once that trust is established, factors such as age or gender become far less significant than the value you bring to the discussion.

I have also learnt that influence does not always belong to the loudest voice. Some of the most productive moments in negotiations come from listening carefully, asking thoughtful questions, and knowing when a measured intervention will move the discussion forward. In complex transactions, collaboration and credibility are far more persuasive than volume.

If you could go back to the very first week of your career as a young analyst, what is the single piece of advice you wish you could give yourself?

I would tell myself not to be in such a hurry to have everything figured out.

Early in my career, I thought success meant having every answer immediately. Over time, I realised that the best advisers are those who remain curious, continue learning, and are willing to ask questions. There is no weakness in admitting you do not yet know something; the real value lies in having the discipline to find the answer and the judgment to apply it effectively.

I would also remind myself that careers are rarely linear. Moving from industry into a law firm was not part of a carefully mapped plan, yet it has been one of the most rewarding decisions I have made. Each stage of my career has contributed something valuable to the next, and experiences that once seemed unrelated have become some of my greatest professional strengths.

Finally, I would say this: invest as much in your reputation as you do in your technical skills. Transactions eventually close, but your integrity, reliability and professionalism stay with you long after the deal is done. Those are the qualities that clients, colleagues and counterparties remember, and they are what ultimately define a career.

Q&A

Chavi Gonpot
Senior Associate
ENS

Innovation, technology and AI in African finance

Advanced AI can now scan data rooms, analyse financial statements and draft investment memos in minutes. How is this technological shift impacting the workload and expectations of your regional deal teams?

AI is reducing the time spent on tasks like reviewing data rooms, analysing information, conducting research and preparing investment or diligence memos. These are activities that traditionally occupied a large portion of a junior and mid-level professional's workload.

For our regional deal teams, this means the focus is shifting from gathering information to interpreting it. Rather than spending hours extracting data, professionals are increasingly expected to verify AI-generated outputs, identify issues that require deeper analysis, assess transaction risks, and develop practical solutions. In cross-border transactions, this also means applying local market knowledge and understanding jurisdiction-specific legal and regulatory considerations that AI may not fully capture.

Expectations have risen accordingly. Clients now expect faster turnaround times and more efficient work, particularly during diligence and the early stages of a transaction. However, they continue to rely on experienced professionals to exercise judgement, contextualise the findings, and advise on how identified risks can affect deal structure, negotiations and execution.

Because tech handles the tedious data sorting, the traditional entry-level 'rite of passage' for junior analysts is changing. How must training models adapt for young African women entering corporate finance today?

For young African women entering corporate finance, the focus should shift from performing tasks to developing judgement. Rather than spending time compiling reports, they can gain earlier exposure to broader regulatory and drafting work, and transaction structuring assessment. AI can provide information, but people still need to interpret it and make decisions.

Training should also go beyond traditional legal skills. Future lawyers will need a basic understanding of technology, including AI, data and cybersecurity, alongside legal analysis and drafting skills.

Mentorship will become even more important. While AI can make legal information more accessible, it cannot replace the guidance, experience and practical insights that come from senior lawyers. Strong mentors help young women build confidence, develop professional judgement, and navigate complex career decisions.

Critical thinking will also be essential. Young lawyers must learn to question and verify AI-generated outputs, rather than accepting them at face value. The most valuable lawyers will not be those who simply use AI tools, but those who can apply sound legal and commercial judgement to the information provided. Communication and adaptability will become key differentiators. As routine legal tasks become more automated, lawyers will stand out through their ability to explain complex issues clearly and build trusted client relationships.

In African private markets, proprietary deal sourcing and reading a founder's unwritten intentions are vital. Where do you draw the line between tech-driven data insights and indispensable human intuition?

Technology and human judgment are both important, but they do different jobs. Data helps us understand what is happening by identifying trends, screening opportunities, and highlighting potential risks. Human intuition helps us understand why it's happening and whether it feels right.

In African private markets, information is often limited, and many businesses are founder-led. Because of this, strong relationships and trusted networks remain essential for finding opportunities and assessing them properly. Important factors, such as a founder's credibility, willingness to work with investors or approach to succession are difficult to capture through data alone.

For me, technology should guide decisions on objective factors, such as financial performance, growth, market size and industry trends. Human judgment should lead when it comes to assessing people, relationships, and long-term partnership potential.

Given the sensitive nature of cross-border corporate finance data, what unique cybersecurity or data governance challenges do you worry about when implementing new financial technologies?

Cross-border corporate finance transactions involve large volumes of commercially sensitive and confidential information. As firms have started to adopt AI, ensuring the security and proper handling of that information may be a key concern.

One of the main challenges is ensuring that data is stored, processed and accessed in a way that complies with applicable data protection, confidentiality and regulatory requirements. In cross-border transactions, information often moves across multiple jurisdictions, each with its own legal and regulatory framework. Therefore, organisations need to ensure that the technology they are using complies with those requirements and provides appropriate safeguards, as applicable.

There is also the risk of 'over-reliance' on technology. While AI can significantly improve efficiency, firms must ensure that confidential transaction data, proprietary information and client communications are protected, and are not used in a manner that could compromise confidentiality obligations.

Q&A

Laksha Juddoo Prayag
Executive
ENS

Personal reflections, ambiguity and leadership

What has surprised you most about senior leadership? Is it the technical complexity of the role, or the psychological weight of managing people and expectations?

Honestly, what surprised me most about senior leadership was not the technical complexity of the role; it was the people side of it. I quickly realised that no amount of experience can fully prepare you for managing different personalities, supporting a team, meeting client expectations and finding time for business development, all at the same time. Every day feels like a balancing act, and there are rarely enough hours to do everything as well as you would like. Over time, I have learnt (and am still learning) that leadership is less about having all the answers and more about remaining open to learning, relying on the strength of the team around you, and growing through each new experience. There is no single blueprint for effective leadership. What has made the journey much easier is having the support of colleagues and mentors who are always willing to share their perspectives and guidance. There is no perfect formula for getting it right, which is both the challenge and the beauty of the role.

I have come to realise that success is not defined solely by titles, milestones or the transactions you close; it is also shaped by the people who support you, challenge you, open doors for you, and encourage you to achieve more than you thought possible.

The lifestyle of transactional finance and law is notoriously non-stop. What is a strict personal boundary, daily ritual or cultural practice you protect fiercely to maintain your mental wellbeing?

As transactional lawyers, drawing clear boundaries can sometimes feel like negotiating with the impossible. In a profession defined by tight deadlines, complex negotiations and unpredictable closings, maintaining perfect work-life balance can sometimes feel more aspirational than achievable. Over the years, I have learnt that, instead of chasing balance, it is more important to identify and fiercely protect a few personal 'non-negotiables'. For me, that means starting each day with my morning routine and making time to sit down with my husband for dinner (even if it is a quick one before heading back to work). These small rituals provide a sense of grounding and perspective amid the fast pace of transactional practice. They serve as a reminder that while deals may come and go, long-term success depends on taking care of yourself and making space for the people and moments that matter most.

How has your definition of a 'successful career' fundamentally shifted from when you were an ambitious graduate to who you are today as an industry leader?

The good old days. I still remember my younger self stepping into the profession with stars in my eyes, convinced that success was about working harder than everyone else, gaining experience, and saying 'yes' to every opportunity. While hard work remains a cornerstone of any successful career, my perspective has evolved over the years. I have come to realise that success is not defined solely by titles, milestones or the transactions you close; it is also shaped by the people who support you, challenge you, open doors for you, and encourage you to achieve more than you thought possible. I have been incredibly fortunate in this respect, and I hope to pay that forward by creating similar opportunities for those coming behind me. Today, my definition of a successful career is much simpler: waking up excited about the work you do, continuing to learn, remaining curious, and finding fulfilment not only in your own achievements, but also in helping others grow and succeed. After all, a truly successful career is not measured only by where you end up, but by the people you bring along with you and the impact you leave behind.

INSIGHT

Ilda Lomba
Director
Corporate & Commercial and Oil & Gas Sector
CDH Namibia

Gender mainstreaming

When people think about gender transformation in the workplace, they often imagine policies, quotas or corporate campaigns. But true gender mainstreaming is not simply a compliance exercise. It is the intentional integration of equality, inclusion and accountability into the way organisations think, lead, negotiate, recruit, govern and grow.

As a lawyer and director specialising in corporate and commercial law and the oil and gas sector, I have experienced firsthand both the progress made and the structural barriers that still exist for women in leadership and high-stakes industries. My career journey has shown me that gender mainstreaming is not only about creating opportunities for women; it is about building stronger, more sustainable, and higher-performing organisations for everyone.

The legal and energy sectors have historically been male-dominated spaces, particularly in areas involving complex transactions, negotiations, regulatory frameworks, and executive decision-making. Entering these environments as a young female professional required resilience, technical excellence, and the confidence to occupy rooms where women were often underrepresented. Early in my career, I learnt that competence alone is not always enough; visibility, credibility and strategic leadership also matter.

Working in corporate and commercial law taught me the importance of governance, risk management, and long-term strategic thinking. In oil and gas law, the stakes become even higher. Transactions involve multinational corporations, governments, regulators, environmental considerations, financing structures, and national economic interests. These are industries where decisions shape economies and communities for generations. Yet despite their significance, women continue to be underrepresented in leadership, negotiations, and technical advisory roles within the sector.

Over the years, I have advised on matters involving regulatory compliance, mergers and acquisitions, petroleum licensing, procurement, competition law, and complex commercial transactions. In many of these spaces, I found myself not only representing clients, but also quietly challenging assumptions about who belongs at the table. The experience reinforced an important truth: representation matters. When women participate meaningfully in decision-making, organisations benefit from broader perspectives, stronger governance, and more balanced leadership approaches.

However, gender mainstreaming cannot succeed through representation alone. It requires institutional commitment. Organisations must move beyond symbolic inclusion and focus on measurable impact. This includes transparent recruitment and promotion processes, equal access to leadership opportunities, mentorship programmes, equitable remuneration structures, and workplace cultures that support both accountability and professional growth.

One of the most important lessons from my journey has been the value of collaboration across genders. Sustainable transformation does not happen in opposition to men, but in partnership with them. Some of the strongest advocates for women's advancement are male leaders who understand that diversity strengthens decision-making and innovation. Inclusive leadership is ultimately about creating environments where talent, expertise and integrity are recognised irrespective of gender.

The corporate world is increasingly recognising that diversity and inclusion are directly linked to performance. Investors, regulators and stakeholders are placing greater emphasis on governance standards, ethical leadership, and environmental, social and governance (ESG) considerations. Gender equality is, therefore, no longer a peripheral issue – it is a strategic and business imperative. Organisations that fail to embrace inclusion risk losing talent, credibility and competitiveness in an evolving global economy.

For women entering corporate law, commercial practice or the energy sector, my advice is simple: own your expertise, continue building technical excellence, and do not minimise your ambition. There will be moments where you are underestimated, challenged, or expected to prove yourself repeatedly. Do not allow those moments to define your confidence. Instead, allow them to sharpen your discipline, resilience and leadership.

At the same time, organisations must recognise that individual resilience should not substitute systemic change. True gender mainstreaming requires structures that enable women not only to enter industries, but to thrive and lead within them. It requires intentional succession planning, investment in female leadership pipelines, and a culture where inclusion is embedded into strategy and operations, rather than treated as a standalone initiative.

Looking back on my career journey, I recognise that every boardroom discussion, negotiation, transaction and leadership opportunity contributed to a broader purpose beyond legal practice. It became part of a larger conversation about visibility, transformation, and the evolving role of women in shaping industries traditionally dominated by men.

Gender mainstreaming is ultimately about creating workplaces and industries where leadership is defined not by gender, but by capability, vision, integrity and impact. As more women continue to rise in corporate leadership and sectors such as oil and gas, we move closer to building organisations that are not only more inclusive, but also more innovative, accountable, and sustainable for the future.

Q&A

Nongee Kandjii
Associate
ENS

Mentorship, sisterhood and 'lifting as you rise'

In your journey, have you experienced the difference between a mentor (who gives advice) and a sponsor (who actively advocates for your promotion behind closed doors)? How are you playing the role of sponsor for others now?

As a young professional eager to climb the corporate ladder, I have been privileged to experience a handful of intentional mentors and sponsors on my journey. In practically differentiating between the two, mentors have provided guidance on how best to climb towards success. This looked like bringing several opportunities for professional development and exposure to my attention, supporting my applications towards upskilling platforms, and providing guidance, motivation and review of the strategies I have employed towards the climb. Sponsors, on the other hand, have played a more direct role in the advancement of my career by holding the ladder steady to ensure my successful ascent in Corporate. This looked like advocating for my participation in major instructions that would lead to better chances at promotion, making direct client referrals, and allowing me the room to fail forward without falling off of the ladder completely

> the spaces a young professional chooses to occupy must genuinely reflect her interests, values and long-term ambitions, rather than simply ticking a box of attendance.

In paying it forward, I now contribute to the next generation by pulling juniors into more mandates and ensuring that they are not just at the tables that matter, but are also capacitated to contribute meaningfully to those tables. The best mentors and sponsors have not just guided me along the correct paths, but have helped me prepare to succeed and lead on them, and that is the same ethos with which I hope to help light the paths of those coming behind me.

What is the most rewarding piece of tactical advice you've ever given to a junior female colleague that you watched her successfully put into practice?

I have continuously, and controversially, advised those coming behind me to unashamedly use every (ethical and legal) weapon in their arsenal to succeed. I believe we all have our unique set of skills, talents, strengths, and privileges that can make our paths slightly smoother if we employ them tactically. Beyond the obvious advice to work hard, be helpful, and take initiative, I have also advised others to invest in developing positive, authentic, (and HR-approved) workplace connections with the seniors to whom they can genuinely relate. Whether this is based on shared hobbies, mutual interests, or even a common love for whatever team Lewis Hamilton drives for this season, connecting with the real human being who exists outside of their professional capacity will make for more pleasant workplace relations, which ultimately leads to a greater flow of instructions from that senior. It is through these genuine relationships with supportive seniors that I have seen juniors steer their otherwise conventional careers into niche and specialised fields that are notoriously difficult to break into. The only caveat to this is that likeability can never replace competence.

Building a deal pipeline relies heavily on networks that are often built in informal spaces. How can young women build authentic, high-value networks on their own terms?

It is essential for young women to build authentic, high-value networks as it is widely understood that any career advancement in corporate, particularly in smaller jurisdictions, will be largely influenced by networks, reputation and informal referrals. In the practical pursuit of this, young women should prioritise joining professional societies, industry bodies and communities that will expose them to like-minded individuals on similar paths, whether those are sector-specific associations, women-in-business forums or cross-border deal networks. The key, however, is authenticity. The spaces a young professional chooses to occupy must genuinely reflect her interests, values and long-term ambitions rather than simply ticking a box of attendance. Networks built on a foundation of shared purpose tend to yield relationships of real substance; mentors who invest meaningfully, peers who refer opportunities with confidence, and sponsors who advocate in rooms where decisions are made. When a young woman selects her communities on her own terms, she is far more likely to contribute consistently, build a credible profile within those circles, and convert professional goodwill into a tangible deal pipeline over time.

PROFILE

Seyi Bella

Banwo & Ighodalo
JOINT INDIVIDUAL DEALMAKER OF THE YEAR - WEST AFRICA 2025

A Partner with over 20 years of experience, Seyi Bella is a member of the firm's Corporate, Securities and Finance teams. She is the lead partner in various practice areas, including Banking and Finance, Project Finance, Project Development and Infrastructure Financing, Private Equity, M&A and Fintech.

Seyi is known for her ability to take the most commercially driven approach in structuring and negotiating deals for setting innovative market precedents. She recently co-led the team that advised African Export-Import Bank in connection with an up to US$750 million facility advanced to Heirs Energies. She also co-led the team that advised Africa Finance Corporation in connection with the secured financing of up to $496,4 million for the purposes of financing Heirs' acquisition of a 50.07% equity stake in Maurel & Prom in Seplat Energy. Notably, Seyi led the team as Nigerian counsel to the IFC and Stanbic IBTC Bank in connection with the c.$80 million advanced to Greenlight Planet Sun King Nigeria. She also led the team that advised the Standard Bank of South Africa and Stanbic IBTC Bank in connection with an up to €70 million facility granted to Supertech Chemical Industry for the construction of a 100,000-ton methanol and 160,000-ton ammonium bicarbonate chemical processing plant.

Seyi led the team that advised on the DealMakers Deal of the Year 2024, advising Renaissance Africa on its acquisition of the Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria. During that year, she advised a syndicate of lenders with a €2 billion syndicated loan facility advanced to the Bank of Industry – a 'first of its kind' transaction (in terms of size and structure) by any financial institution in Nigeria. Seyi also led the team that advised a syndicate of banks in connection with bridge facilities ($450 million) to Chappal Investments, in relation to the acquisition of Equinor Nigeria Energy Company.

Beyond her transactional work, Seyi plays a pivotal role in the development and standardisation of the global financing market, with a reputation for capacity development of lawyers with interest, or in active practice across her core practice areas. She is currently the firm's designated representative and contact person in connection with its membership in the Loan Market Association (LMA). She has served as a repeat facilitator and speaker at the annual LMA Documentation Training Series in Nigeria. Seyi sits as a director on the boards of NOLT Finance, Ocean Hospitality, Fate Foundation (an NGO committed to the development of training entrepreneurs in Nigeria), and Grayson's Trust Management Services.

Her legal expertise and leadership qualities have been widely recognised by numerous legal directories, such as IFLR 1000, Legal 500 and Lexology Index.

Seyi holds an LL.B from the University of Lagos, a B.L from the Nigerian Law School, and an LL.M from Harvard Law School. She is a member of the Nigerian and New York Bar Associations.

Q&A

Onyebuchim Obiyemi
Director & Head | Investment Banking
CardinalStone Partners Limited

Mentorship, sisterhood, and 'lifting as you rise'

There is a powerful African proverb: *"If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together."* How do you practically apply this to building support networks among female professionals across African finance?

Having spent over 16 years in investment banking and grown through the ranks, I have learnt that no meaningful career or institution is built alone. You may move quickly on your own, but sustainable success requires people who support, challenge and create opportunities for one another.

I have always been passionate about giving younger professionals a chance. Sometimes, what someone needs is not another course or another piece of advice, but a senior person saying, "I trust you with this. Go and do it." That opportunity can be transformative.

For me, building support networks means sharing knowledge, making introductions, recommending talented women and, importantly, giving them exposure to situations where they can demonstrate what they are capable of. I benefited enormously from experienced professionals who taught and challenged me, and I see it as my responsibility to create that same environment for the next generation.

In your journey, have you experienced the difference between a mentor (who gives advice) and a sponsor (who actively advocates for your promotion behind closed doors)? How are you playing the role of sponsor for others now?

I have experienced both, and both are important. A mentor gives you perspective; a sponsor creates opportunity. A mentor may advise you on navigating a difficult client or career decision, while a sponsor puts your name forward when an important opportunity arises and is willing to put their credibility behind you.

Because I have grown through the ranks, I understand the importance of someone giving someone that first opportunity to demonstrate that they're ready for more responsibility.

Today, I try to create those opportunities for younger professionals, particularly by giving them real responsibility, rather than artificial exposure. Put them on the transaction. Let them work with the client. Give them ownership of part of a pitch. Let them observe how experienced bankers think through a commercial problem.

How can financial institutions in East and West Africa move past superficial 'diversity quotas' to build environments where young women are genuinely fast-tracked into front-office, revenue-generating deal roles?

We need to move beyond headcount and focus on access to meaningful work and commercial responsibility.

In investment banking, you can quickly tell whether an institution is genuinely developing its young professionals. Who is working on transactions? Who is sitting with clients? Who is involved in structuring and presenting? Who is learning to develop relationships and originate business?

You cannot build a strong investment banker through classroom training alone. Some of the most valuable learning comes from executing transactions alongside experienced professionals who are willing to teach.

Young women need access to live transactions, clients, senior bankers, and progressively greater responsibility. I strongly believe in institutions where people learn by doing, and by working alongside experienced investment banking professionals. If we want more women in senior front-office roles, we must give them the opportunity to develop the skills those roles require.

What is the most rewarding piece of tactical advice you've ever given to a junior female colleague that you watched her successfully put into practice?

One of the most important pieces of advice I give younger bankers is to develop commercial awareness early.

Early in a career, it's natural to focus on technical execution – getting the model right, producing a good presentation, or understanding valuation. Those fundamentals matter, but as you progress, the question becomes: "Do you understand what the analysis means?"

I encourage younger colleagues to understand the client, industry, competitive landscape and, most importantly, the commercial reason behind the transaction.

I have seen people take this advice and move from simply completing tasks to anticipating what the client or senior banker needs next. That is when technical competence starts becoming genuine investment banking judgement.

Building a deal pipeline relies heavily on networks that are often built in informal spaces. How can young women build authentic, high-value networks on their own terms?

I encourage young women to focus less on 'networking' and more on building a reputation that people want to associate with.

Be curious. Know your market. Understand your clients' businesses. Have an informed perspective. Be dependable, and follow through. You don't need to attend every social gathering or become someone you are not.

Some of the strongest professional relationships I have built have come from working together on difficult transactions, solving problems under pressure, and seeing how people perform when things don't go according to plan.

Build relationships across levels and institutions, and bring value before you ask for value. Share an insight, make an introduction, or help solve a problem. Over time, those relationships become far more valuable than a collection of business cards or LinkedIn connections.

After more than 16 years in this industry, one of the things I value most is seeing younger professionals grow, take on responsibility, and eventually become the people creating opportunities for others. That is how we build stronger individuals, stronger institutions and, ultimately, a stronger African financial services industry.

CARDINALSTONE

Q&A

Rashidat Agboke-Abe

Corporate Finance Transactor
Rand Merchant Bank

Mentorship, sisterhood, and 'lifting as you rise'

There is a powerful African proverb: *"If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together."* How do you practically apply this to building support networks among female professionals across African finance?

I first heard the adage, "If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together" from my mother, several years before I entered the finance world. She often impressed upon my sisters and me the importance of sisterhood and a strong support system. I watched her and her friends support one another as they built successful businesses. Their example taught me, early on, that progress is rarely achieved alone – it is sustained through relationships built on trust and shared purpose.

When I began my career in investment banking, I was deliberate about building a network of female professionals. I started through a graduate trainee programme, which placed me within a cohort of ambitious young people and gave me an early opportunity to form meaningful professional relationships. Over time, many of those relationships became sources of honest feedback, encouragement, knowledge, opportunities and perspective. This experience reinforced my belief that one of our most valuable professional assets is the community we build around us.

I apply this adage by cultivating relationships at every level:

- With mentors who have walked the path before me, and can share their experience and help me navigate unfamiliar situations;
- With peers with whom I can exchange ideas, opportunities and support; and
- With the younger generation of women, whom I can guide and advocate for.

In practice, this means investing in relationships consistently, sharing opportunities, making introductions, and supporting women even when there is no immediate benefit to oneself.

In your journey, have you experienced the difference between a mentor (who gives advice) and a sponsor (who actively advocates for your promotion behind closed doors)? How are you playing the role of sponsor for others now?

Mentors are invaluable advisors, but sponsors can alter the trajectory of a career. A mentor helps prepare one for opportunities; a sponsor helps ensure that one is even considered for them. I experienced this distinction in my first investment banking role, where I met a senior professional who became a genuine sponsor. He saw my potential, advocated for me, and helped pave the way for my next two career moves. Eight years later, he remains actively invested in my development and career progression. This showed me how transformative it can be when someone is willing to attach their reputation to your potential.

I now try to extend the same support to younger women. Beyond offering advice, I review their work, provide candid feedback, make introductions and share opportunities. For me, lifting as I rise means helping younger women build the competence and confidence to succeed, and then leveraging my access and network to help open doors for them. In African finance, where access, visibility and relationships often influence opportunity, supporting another woman requires more than advice. It requires active sponsorship and advocacy.

What is the most rewarding piece of tactical advice you've ever given to a junior female colleague that you watched her successfully put into practice?

At one of the investment banks where I worked, a junior colleague was anxious about her performance. Her fear of mistakes caused her to second-guess her abilities, hold back from challenges, and shrink herself. I encouraged her to 'do it scared'. I reminded her that every unfamiliar task becomes experience once completed. She did not need to wait for confidence before acting; confidence would come with experience as she took on unfamiliar work, asked questions, and learnt.

Over time, I watched her stop shrinking herself, contribute openly, and approach assignments with greater confidence and trust in her ability to learn. Her improvement was evident not only in the quality of her work, but also in how she carried herself. She earned a promotion within the year. Watching her turn that advice into growth and tangible career progress was deeply rewarding.

Building a deal pipeline relies heavily on networks that are often built in informal spaces. How can young women build authentic, high-value networks on their own terms?

Personally, I have realised that many of the relationships I built informally and organically have created opportunities for me, broadened my perspective, and expanded my knowledge.

I believe authentic networks are built intentionally. For me, this means being intentional about fostering relationships and being present for people, not only when I need something. I accept invitations, attend events, meet people, and follow up afterwards. An introduction may create a connection, but consistency and reliability are what build trust. Over time, these small interactions can develop into genuine and valuable relationships.

For young women, it's important to nurture relationships. Start with people whose work you respect: be curious, show up, stay in touch, honour commitments, share information, and join professional associations. Also, look beyond your immediate market. Some of the most valuable opportunities emerge through regional networks that span different jurisdictions.

As more women intentionally support, sponsor and advocate for one another, I believe we will not only increase female representation in African finance, but also influence how institutions are built across the continent.

RMB

Q&A

Omoefe Agbontaen
Corporate Finance Transactor
Rand Merchant Bank

Tactical blueprint for the next generation

What is your advice for a young woman at university, looking at the long hours and intense pressures of M&A and thinking, "I don't know if I belong there"?

I have often found myself in rooms where I felt I had to prove that I belonged. What I learnt is that you belong in any room you have earned the right to be in through preparation and hard work. The pressure is real, but it is not a measure of your worth or potential. It is simply part of the job, and preparation is one of the few things entirely within your control. Be audacious enough to back yourself before anyone else does. Invest relentlessly in your technical craft, but be just as deliberate about cultivating soft skills and authentic relationships. Competence gets you through the door; confidence, character and connection are what help you build a lasting career once you're there.

Beyond mathematical brilliance and financial modelling, what is the single most underappreciated 'soft skill' required to survive and excel in capital markets?

If there's one thing I've learnt in Investment Banking, it's that communication and relationship-building are every bit as important as technical ability. This industry runs on relationships as much as it runs on numbers, so you need the ability to articulate complex ideas, paired with a strong professional network built on trust. Models don't win mandates; people do, so a brilliant analysis you can't clearly explain, or a client who doesn't trust you, is worth very little. Technical skills qualify you to play, but your network opens doors and seals deals. Building it isn't an option; it is core execution.

This industry runs on relationships as much as it runs on numbers, so you need the ability to articulate complex ideas, paired with a strong professional network built on trust.

When negotiating your own compensation, performance bonuses, or equity partnership within an advisory firm or bank, what is your golden rule?

Know your market value and be prepared to advocate for it. Compensation discussions should be grounded in evidence, not emotion. Keep a record of the impact you deliver, whether through revenue generation, execution excellence, client relationships, or team leadership. Understand how the market values your skills and be prepared to articulate your contribution clearly; nobody will advocate for your career more consistently than you will.

How should junior professionals build a visible, respected personal brand in a regional industry that often prioritises behind-the-scenes execution?

Early in my career, I learned that a strong reputation is not built by being the loudest person in the room. It is earned through ownership, consistency and trust. In an industry defined by execution, reliability is your brand and relationships are your currency. Be the person a senior banker can delegate a workstream to and never worry about because they know it will get done. At the same time, invest in relationships with clients, advisers and colleagues. Investment banking is a surprisingly small world. Consistent execution, professionalism and integrity compound over time, and your reputation will often reach a room before you do.

When your strategic advice or valuation is met with heavy scepticism by a traditional, old-school corporate board, what is your personal strategy for reclaiming the floor and defending your thesis?

Preparation earns you a seat at the table, but communication wins the room. Growing up in Nigeria teaches you that respect is not a formality; it's a language. When engaging traditional and senior stakeholders, understanding how to speak that language often matters as much as the message itself.

Before defending a thesis, understand who is sitting across from you. Different audiences are persuaded differently. Some respond to detailed analysis; others focus on commercial outcomes and practical implications. Acknowledge their experience, address their concerns directly, and frame your argument in a language they trust. The objective is not to win an argument, but to build conviction.

RMB

SPOTLIGHT ON INVESTING

Women Backing Women: Aruwa Capital's Bold Bet On Africa's Growth

Aruwa Capital Management is a Lagos-based, female-founded and female-led growth equity and impact investment firm focused on companies serving Africa's rapidly expanding 'female economy.' The firm invests in high-growth businesses that provide essential goods and services to women, as well as companies founded or co-founded by women or with gender-diverse leadership teams.

Founded on the belief that the gender imbalance among capital allocators represents an investment opportunity in itself, Aruwa seeks to identify segments of the economy that have historically been overlooked because women have been underrepresented in investment decision-making. Its approach positions gender diversity not simply as an impact objective, but as a source of investment insight and competitive advantage.

Aruwa is also notable for its position within Africa's private capital industry: fewer than 40 private equity funds across the continent are owned or led by women, according to the firm's description. Against this backdrop, Aruwa represents a growing movement of women taking on the role of capital allocators and using that perspective to identify underserved markets, businesses and consumers.

The team based in Lagos is led by the Founder, **Adesuwa Okunbo Rhodes** and combines international best practice skill sets from global institutions with deep local networks, operational know how and on the ground presence, to unlock untapped investment opportunities. The team is made up of investment professionals with investing experience and operators that understand how to run and improve businesses.

INVESTMENT CRITERIA

Aruwa focuses on investing in established, rapidly growing companies in the small to lower mid-market that operate in high-growth industries. These companies are too big for traditional venture capital but are too small for larger private equity funds. The firm invests in companies that have strong management teams and meet the following criteria:

- Provides essential goods and services that cater to women
- Founded or co-founded by a woman, has women within its workforce, senior management team or value chain
- A positive attitude towards and active support of a diverse team
- An annual turnover of at least $500k
- Proven management team with a history of delivering the underlying business plan

"I believe the way to effectively provide women with more seats at the table is for us to create our own tables. More women succeeding as capital allocators means more women getting funded, more mentors, more torch-bearers, and more examples to follow. Investing in or with funds like Aruwa Capital Management is a practical way to narrow the gender funding gap and making money while you do"

Adesuwa Okunbo Rhodes
Founder & Managing Partner

www.aruwacapital.com/investments/

ARUWA
CAPITAL MANAGEMENT

Q&A

Alphonsine Ineza
Associate
ENS

Mentorship, sisterhood and 'lifting as you rise'

In your journey, have you experienced the difference between a mentor (who gives advice) and a sponsor (who actively advocates for your promotion behind closed doors)? How are you playing the role of sponsor for others now?

I have experienced the difference between a mentor and a sponsor, although in my own journey, some people have played both roles. A mentor offers guidance, shares lessons from experience, and helps you think through important career decisions. A sponsor goes a step further by actively advocating for you, recommending you for opportunities, and speaking for your potential in rooms where you may not be present.

From the start of my career, I have had a colleague who not only advised me, but also genuinely wanted to see me succeed. That person has consistently encouraged my growth and advocated for me, even when I was not in the room. This has shown me that sponsorship can be powerful because it creates access, visibility and confidence.

I try to play that role for others by recognising good work, recommending skilled people when opportunities arise, and creating visibility for colleagues whose abilities I know and trust. In that way, I see sponsorship as a practical way of lifting others as you rise.

The most rewarding piece of tactical advice I have given to a junior female colleague is to never be ashamed of not knowing something.

What is the most rewarding piece of tactical advice you've ever given to a junior female colleague that you watched her successfully put into practice?

The most rewarding piece of tactical advice I have given to a junior female colleague is to never be ashamed of not knowing something. It is often from asking questions, even the simple ones, that we learn, build confidence and gain experience.

Seeing junior colleagues speak up, ask questions and seek clarification reminds me that this is where growth begins. A question may seem small in the moment, but it can open the door to deeper understanding and better judgment over time.

There is a Rwandan saying, "Nta mwana uvuka ngo yuzure ingobyi," which means that no child is born big enough to fill the baby carrier. To me, this is a powerful reminder that everyone starts small, and with the right support, courage and experience, they eventually grow into their potential.

Building a deal pipeline relies heavily on networks that are often built in informal spaces. How can young women build authentic, high-value networks on their own terms?

Young women can build authentic, high-value networks on their own terms by being confident in who they are, speaking clearly about their ideas and ambitions, and choosing professional spaces that respect their boundaries. In practice, this means being intentional about the rooms they enter, the conversations they participate in, and the relationships they choose to nurture. Strong networks should be built on mutual respect, shared values, and a genuine professional purpose, rather than on pressure to fit into informal spaces that may not feel comfortable or appropriate.

From my experience, building such networks is not always easy, particularly where some interactions become uncomfortable or move outside the professional context. For that reason, it is important for young women to speak up when a networking relationship becomes inappropriate, to set clear boundaries, and to focus their energy on relationships that support their growth, credibility and long-term career development.

Who was the first person in the African financial sector to take a genuine gamble on your capabilities, and how did that shift your professional trajectory?

The first person in the African financial sector to take a genuine chance on my capabilities was my Managing Director at ENS in Rwanda. Starting my career at a prestigious law firm as a fresh graduate with limited practical experience, required someone to see my potential before I had fully proven myself.

That trust strengthened my confidence and taught me that when someone believes in your ability, you have a responsibility to honour that trust through hard work, discipline, and a willingness to learn. It also shifted my professional trajectory, helping me move from the idea of becoming an in-house counsel to embracing the path of a legal practitioner, which I have enjoyed so far.

Q&A

Lydwin Herminie
Head | Global Markets | Seychelles
Absa Corporate and Investment Banking

Personal reflections and integration

The phrase, 'work-life balance' can feel mythical in transactional finance. How do you personally define and manage the integration of a demanding career with your personal life?

I believe that in today's highly competitive world – where many of us aspire to excel professionally and provide a comfortable life for ourselves and our families – some degree of personal sacrifice is inevitable. For me, work-life balance is therefore less about achieving a perfect 50/50 split and more about consciously managing the integration of both aspects of my life.

I strive to be intentional and consistent in how I allocate my time and energy, prioritising what matters most in each moment. During the workday, for example, I focus on delivering high-quality outcomes, ensuring that critical tasks receive my full attention and are completed to the best of my ability.

At the same time, I recognise that work-life balance is rarely perfectly balanced every day. There will be periods when professional demands require more attention, just as there are times when personal commitments must take priority. For me, the key is maintaining my overall well-being and ensuring that my personal life supports my ability to perform at work, while my professional success enables me to enjoy and invest in the things that matter outside of work. It is this ongoing balance and flexibility, rather than a fixed formula, that allows me to sustain both a demanding career and a fulfilling personal life.

When the deal closes and the adrenaline drops, how do you intentionally disconnect, recharge, and protect your mental wellbeing?

When a deal closes, there is always a great sense of accomplishment and gratitude. I make it a point to celebrate the achievement by personally thanking everyone who contributed to the successful outcome. Recognising the effort, commitment and collaboration of colleagues and stakeholders is important to me, as appreciation helps strengthen relationships and acknowledges the collective work behind every success.

To recharge and maintain my mental wellbeing, I take time to reflect on the journey and the lessons learnt. I am also a deeply spiritual person, and my faith plays a central role in my life. I always take a moment to thank God for the wisdom, guidance and strength that have helped me navigate the challenges along the way. This sense of gratitude, combined with taking time to reset and appreciate the people around me, helps me disconnect, recharge, and prepare for the next opportunity with a clear and positive mindset.

How has your definition of success changed from when you were an ambitious graduate to who you are today?

My definition of success has evolved significantly from when I was an ambitious graduate. Early in my career, success was often measured by qualifications and titles. Today, I see success through a much broader and more meaningful lens.

Success is about the positive impact I make throughout my journey, both personally and professionally. As a leader, I measure success by the growth, achievements and wellbeing of my team. Their accomplishments, both collective and individual, reflect the environment and opportunities we create together.

I also define success by how effectively I use the opportunities that come my way and, more importantly, by how those opportunities allow me to create value for others. Being able to positively influence, support and contribute to the development of people around me is one of the most rewarding measures of success.

Today, success is less about personal recognition and more about meaningful impact, shared achievements, and leaving things better than I found them.

What is a daily ritual, habit or boundary you protect fiercely that keeps you grounded amidst the chaos of deal flows?

One habit I protect fiercely is spending time each day reading the Bible, even if it's just one or two chapters. I find it both uplifting and grounding. It strengthens my faith, shapes my values, and influences how I interact with others – both in my community and in my professional life.

Prayer is another daily practice that I value deeply. It provides me with peace, perspective and guidance.

I also make time for regular exercise. Beyond the physical benefits, it helps me clear my mind, refocus my thoughts, and maintain balance. Together, these spiritual and physical disciplines keep me grounded, centered, and better equipped to navigate the demands of daily life.

When your career in this industry is eventually complete, what is the lasting legacy you want to leave behind in the Seychelles financial sector?

When my career in this industry is complete, I hope to be remembered as someone who helped shape the growth and evolution of the Seychelles financial sector through bold thinking and a genuine commitment to clients. I would like to have played a part in introducing solutions that met clients' needs and strengthened Absa's position as a trusted partner.

On a personal level, my greatest legacy would be the people I have influenced along the way, or colleagues whom I mentored and developed. If I can leave the industry knowing I helped others grow and inspired them to continue building on that foundation, I would consider that a meaningful success.

Q&A

Catherine Kijjaggulwe

Head of Markets | Uganda
Absa Corporate and Investment Banking

Mentorship, sponsorship, and 'lifting as you rise'

Who was the first person in the industry to take a genuine bet on you, and how did that sponsorship change the trajectory of your career?

The first person to take a bet on me was my first boss in the Financial Markets at Barclays Bank, Emma Mugisha (Head of Retail and Digital Banking, Africa Subsidiaries at Access Bank). I had just started my banking career in the Operations department with Barclays Bank Uganda, and after six months, I had an interview for a role in Treasury. At the time, I had no prior experience or exposure, but she took the initiative to ensure that I got the prerequisite and ongoing training, exposure through interaction with dealers in the Uganda market and other markets, and continued coaching. To date, she continues to look out for me. Learning from and looking up to her has enabled me to grow through the ranks of Financial Markets, and has also greatly shaped my leadership attributes and other aspects of my life.

There is a difference between a mentor (who gives advice) and a sponsor (who advocates for you behind closed doors). Have you had a sponsor, and how did that dynamic work?

Sponsors in one's career can come in all forms. They are usually people of influence that you work or have worked with closely, someone you've interacted with in professional circles, or someone who has observed your technical or leadership ability and work ethic, and who will recommend you in rooms in which you are not present. Some will, from time to time, be open and advise you on areas that you need to polish and enhance in order to progress in your career.

The key is for you to always put your best foot forward, regardless of the task or audience you are interacting with, because among the audience there may be some people who will advocate for you behind closed doors.

As a successful leader now, what standard do you set for yourself when it comes to mentoring the next generation of female analysts and associates?

While mentoring women, I usually strive to ensure that, while focus may be on career growth and enhancement, all aspects of one's life are equally catered for. As one advances in their career, it is important to remain curious, willing to collaborate with others, and open to learning. I usually encourage young women that while they prioritise their careers, they should also leave room for other aspects of their lives. While there is no perfect formula, academic growth, family, friendships and hobbies are important for work/ life harmony. Seeing my mentees juggle life's ups and downs while managing to succeed and advance in their careers is always rewarding. A measure of effective mentorship is seeing the women I am able to inspire succeed, and majority usually reach out and give feedback on how they've benefited.

What is the most rewarding piece of advice you've ever given to a younger colleague that you watched them successfully put into practice?

There have been quite a number of colleagues that I have given advice to, but one thing I usually emphasize is that they should always grow their knowledge base through continued learning, reading, and interacting with peers in the industry. By remaining focused on achieving excellence, you ensure that you stay ahead of the ever-evolving industry dynamics. Some of the women I have mentored have taken this approach and continued to take on various career challenges. One such person is Gladys Kavuma, who now sits on the Board of NCBA Bank I am very proud of her because, from time to time, she challenges and advises me – we mutually benefit from each other's counsel.

Peer-to-peer support is vital. How do you build a strong network of allies among other women working in law, audit and banking to support your transaction pipelines?

It starts within the organisation, by identifying women in various departments in Absa Uganda and other Absa jurisdictions that I can reach out to when I need guidance on various aspects of work. And it cuts across levels of management; sometimes I may seek out my seniors, while at other times, my juniors have the information or guidance I require. Equally, I could be their point of contact when they need guidance. The next level of peer support would be from individuals who are external to the organisation: fellow Heads of Market, or dealers and people working with other key stakeholders and customers that we engage with. Over the years, I have realised that peer-to-peer support has to come from both men and women for one to have a balanced view/outcome. Male colleagues will most likely challenge you with bold ideas, which will give you a sense of fulfilment when you achieve your goals and aspirations or get a transaction done.

How can corporate finance institutions move beyond 'diversity checkboxes' to create environments where young women actually want to stay long-term?

Moving beyond diversity checkboxes requires institutions to become more deliberate about training and growing young women, while also ensuring that in boardrooms and the rooms that matter, women are well represented. It is also important to provide environments where young mothers can advance in their careers, but also still thrive as wives and mothers through flexi working hours, lactating rooms or creches. The introduction of mentoring and training programmes will enable women to grow their leadership and communication skills, and also gain exposure and continued career enhancement.

As women, we need to be confident in own our career journeys, and accept that we have so many virtues as nurturers that make us good leaders. Women are also usually good at multi-tasking. We need to remain curious, and open to learning and feedback.

We must learn to spot opportunities, and be bold to take the challenge as we continue to aspire for excellence in our careers. And by taking future leaders under our wings, we will make the world a better place.

Q&A

Natasha Lwiindi
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Tactical blueprint for the next generation

What would you say to a young woman at university looking at the long hours and intense pressures of M&A and thinking, "I don't know if I belong there"?

Yes, you are absolutely right – the pressures of M&A are intense, and the hours are often long; however, the payoff is unmatched.

M&A is demanding and will challenge you at every turn, but that is precisely what makes it so thrilling. The professional and personal growth you gain from one deal to the next will sharpen your skills – from business acumen, financial analysis, risk evaluation, identification of core value drivers (and the list goes on) – faster than almost any other career path. The opportunities to learn and evolve as a professional are truly continuous.

Succeeding in M&A requires managing your own expectations. Establishing a realistic baseline for what the role actually demands sets a good foundation to kick-start your career. As you navigate the industry, this insight becomes the self-awareness that enables you to set your own internal boundaries and manage your bandwidth, to allow you to strategically manage your career for the long haul.

Cultivate an unshakeable self-belief. When the high-stakes pressure inevitably builds up and the learning curve feels steeper than ever, that core confidence becomes your anchor – giving you the space to reset, adapt and trust in your ability to navigate through every challenge a deal throws your way.

The classic cliché still holds true: you have to love what you do and decide early on what you are willing to commit to, in order to thrive at it. Passion alone may not be enough to navigate a career in M&A, but it shifts your mindset. Passion reframes the long hours from a personal sacrifice to a deliberate investment in your career development.

We all need the reminder that belonging is built, not given – you decide where you belong. If M&A is the path you choose, and if ever the doubt creeps in, remind yourself that 'you are right where you belong'.

Beyond mathematical brilliance and financial modelling, what is the single most underappreciated 'soft skill' required to survive and excel in capital markets?

Relational agility is easily one of the most underappreciated soft skills in M&A. At its core, dealmaking is ultimately a people business, and building genuine rapport goes far beyond basic small talk. It is about connecting with diverse clients across regions, corporate hierarchies and cultures – on their terms. Relational agility forms the foundational cornerstone of trust, and trust is a necessity when navigating high-stakes dealmaking. In moments of friction or deal roadblocks, that trust is what keeps the buy-side and sell-side aligned, and may very well be the difference between closing a deal or a missed opportunity.

When your strategic advice or valuation is met with heavy scepticism by a traditional, old-school corporate board, what is your personal strategy for reclaiming the floor and defending your thesis?

When a Board or client representative meets strategic advice with heavy scepticism, my approach is not to defend a due diligence report, but to lead the conversation with emotional detachment, grounded logic and real-time adaptability.

Firstly, I take the emotion out of the room – starting with myself. Reminding myself that the Board's scepticism is not a personal attack on my intellect or hard work allows me to remain objective and refrain from stepping into a defensive posture.

Once the emotion is removed, actively listening to identify what is truly driving the Board's scepticism becomes my primary focus. Decision-makers simply want to be heard, and de-escalating the room's temperature often begins with a simple acknowledgement of the client's point of view. I make it a priority to explicitly vocalise that I have heard their concerns and understand their perspective.

Logical reasoning rarely fails. While providing strategic advice requires a level of professional judgement, every piece of advice must rest on a solid, logical foundation. Pointing directly to the facts, laying down the technical foundations step-by-step, and bridging them to the deal thesis often helps to naturally dissolve scepticism.

As someone who thrives on being prepared, I have had to learn that while preparation is essential, clinging to a script is rarely practical. The agility to pivot in real-time (abandoning the deck altogether, if necessary), is fundamental for addressing the precise conversation the room needs to have.

WHAT CHANGES IS
THE WORLD.

WHAT REMAINS IS
HER STRENGTH.

For generations, women have adapted, led, supported and persevered.

This Women's Month, we recognise the enduring strength that continues to drive progress across every sphere of life.

ORIGINAL THINKING