Q&A

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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.