



INSIGHT

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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.

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.

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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. 🙌

