

South Africa Women's March | 9 August 1956

70 YEARS

— 1956 - 2026 —

Everyone has something to give.

Time or talent, big or small. Find your give this Women's Month.

#ElevatingExcellence –
When we give, we all gain

Give

to

Gain

IBDO



70
WOMEN
70
YEARS



Women's Month is a consistent call to action. Seventy years after the women of 1956 marched, BDO's global #GiveToGain theme challenges each of us to use our influence, sponsorship and opportunities to lift others. In South Africa, that is how we build resilient economies for all: by removing barriers and ensuring women are not only present in the economy, but have the power to lead, decide and shape its future.

— Bonga Mokoena, CEO, BDO South Africa

INTRODUCTION

When we give intentionally, we don't just strengthen our people; we strengthen our entire organisation.

— Pat Kramer, Global CEO, BDO

This year, BDO South Africa's Women's Month campaign is built around BDO Global's own theme: #GiveToGain. On 8 March 2026, BDO published the seventh edition of its global International Women's Day report, exploring the idea that a culture of intentional giving – through mentoring, sponsorship, active listening and engaged leadership – strengthens not only individuals, but entire organisations.

That idea resonates strongly with South Africa's own Women's Month, observed every August since more

than 20,000 women marched to the Union Buildings on 9 August 1956 to protest the extension of the pass laws. This year's national theme, "Building Resilient Economies for All," calls for advancing women's participation, representation and leadership in the economy, while dismantling the systemic barriers that continue to hold women back.

Source: The Presidency, Women's Month 2026, www.gov.za/WomensMonth2026

For BDO South Africa, #GivetoGain is the umbrella and Building Resilient

Economies for All is where we put it into practice: giving generously so that others can rise, and closing the very local, very urgent South African gaps that still keep women out of boardrooms, executive suites and equal pay. The numbers below – drawn from Just Share's independent research on the JSE Top 40, the World Economic Forum, and BDO's own global data – set out why that task remains unfinished, and why 2026 is a pivotal year to accelerate it.





The numbers behind the theme

South African women make up 46% of the country's economically active population, yet remain persistently under-represented in leadership and under-paid relative to their male peers.

Why 2026 matters

South Africa's employment equity framework is entering a new, more assertive phase. From 1 September 2025, designated employers have been required to adopt five-year Employment Equity Plans incorporating sector-specific numerical targets for women across four upper occupational levels, under powers introduced by the Employment Equity Amendment Act of 2022.

Source: Just Share, Women in Leadership: JSE Top 40, Nov 2025 (sectoral targets gazetted 15 April 2025)

Parliament is now also considering the Employment Equity Amendment Bill, 2026, which would go further: requiring employers to determine and disclose remuneration ranges during job classification and recruitment, and prohibiting the use of salary history in setting pay – a practice that disproportionately entrenches historical wage discrimination against women. Just Share has formally supported the Bill, describing it as aligning South Africa with the EU's Pay Transparency Directive and closing a long-standing

gap in the current, largely retrospective, EEA4 reporting system.

Source: Just Share, Comments in support of the Employment Equity Amendment Bill, 2026, 27 May 2026

Set against this backdrop, "Building Resilient Economies for All" is not an abstract slogan. It names a specific, measurable task: closing the board-to-executive gap, making pay transparent, and giving women the sponsorship – not just mentorship – that turns representation into real decision-making power.

Where BDO stands

BDO's global data, published in the #GiveToGain report, shows a firm that is ahead of the JSE Top 40 average on gender representation, with room still to grow at partner level:



BDO South Africa's 23% female partner representation currently sits just below BDO's own 25% global average, and below the JSE Top 40's 27.4% average female executive representation. Beyond partner level, women are well represented among BDO South Africa's directors, the tier that feeds directly into partnership, which points to real momentum in the pipeline and makes closing the gap at the top an achievable, near-term goal rather than a distant one. Globally, BDO firms have taken

varied but concrete steps to close the gap further: BDO Poland has grown female partner representation from 20% to 41% over six years, partly by promoting from a business services division where women are the majority; BDO Malaysia promoted seven female directors to partner in a single year; and BDO UK, BDO Netherlands, BDO Australia and others run structured sponsorship, allyship and parental-transition programmes rather than mentoring alone. The common thread, in the words of BDO Netherlands

CEO Kirsten Konst, is moving from mentoring to sponsorship: "Don't just be a mentor or coach, be a sponsor. Make potential visible, advocate for them, and help open doors."

- Sources
- Just Share, Women in Leadership: Assessing gender equality in JSE Top 40 boards and C-suites, November 2025
 - Just Share, Gender pay gap disclosure: JSE Top 40, June 2025
 - Just Share, Wholesale & retail sector briefing: pay gaps and leadership diversity, September 2024
 - Just Share, Comments in support of the Employment Equity Amendment Bill, 2026, 27 May 2026
 - World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2025
 - BDO Global, International Women's Day 2026 report (#GiveToGain), March 2026
 - The Presidency, Republic of South Africa, Women's Month 2026, www.gov.za/WomensMonth2026

Women in JSE leadership

- ▶ Women hold 38% of board seats and 27.4% of executive roles across the JSE Top 40 in 2025 – up 3 and 3.4 percentage points respectively from 2024. This continues a slow upward trend from 35% board / 25% executive in 2023. (Just Share, Women in Leadership: JSE Top 40, Nov 2025)
- ▶ Nine JSE Top 40 companies have now reached or exceeded gender parity on their boards, including Bidvest (64%), British American Tobacco (56%) and Impala Platinum (54%). Far fewer have reached parity in the executive suite – notable exceptions are Bidvest (58%) and BHP (50%). (Just Share, JSE Top 40, Nov 2025)
- ▶ Only three of the JSE Top 40 have a female CEO (Bidvest, Clicks and FirstRand), and only six have a female board chair. (Just Share, JSE Top 40, Nov 2025)
- ▶ Among G20 stock exchanges, the JSE ranks 8th, and is the only exchange from a developing economy to outperform the G20 average: women hold 33% of board seats and 11% of executive positions among its top 100 issuers, against G20 averages of 23% and 5% respectively. (UN Sustainable Stock Exchanges initiative, cited in Just Share, Nov 2025)

- ▶ Globally, the gap between education and opportunity persists: women now outperform men in tertiary education, yet only 29.5% of tertiary-educated senior managers are women, and the global share of women in top management rose from just 25.7% in 2015 to 28.1% in 2024 – with progress slowing since 2022. (World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2025)



Raise your hand more often



Fayaz Mohamed:
Head of IOC

Leadership shaped by difficult days, not easy ones

My leadership style is best described as ambitious, authentic and deeply people-centred. I care about results because our clients, teams and businesses depend on them, but I care just as much about the people who deliver those results. Leadership is not about having all the answers. It's about creating an environment where people feel confident enough to ask questions, challenge ideas, take accountability and grow. Some of the greatest lessons I've learned came from difficult situations rather than easy ones: demanding deadlines, high-pressure environments, moments where things didn't go according to plan. Those experiences taught me resilience and perspective.

One belief that has become increasingly important to me is that when women move up the corporate ladder, they have a responsibility to bring another woman up with them. One of my favourite quotes of late is, "You are the good that happens to others." That captures the kind of leader I strive to be. Success becomes far more meaningful when it creates opportunities for someone else. I've also learned not to view mistakes as failures. Mistakes are feedback, and they are how we learn, evolve and improve. The leaders who shaped me most weren't necessarily those who always got things right; they were the ones who helped others grow through challenges.

Ensuring I am not the last

Many times throughout my career I have found myself being the only woman at the table. Early on, that could feel intimidating. Over time, I realised that my value was never determined by how many people in the room looked like me, but rather the different and unique perspective I bring. Being the only woman in the room required confidence, but it also required preparation. I learned to trust my expertise, back my views with substance, and not wait for permission to contribute.

One of the biggest lessons I learned was not to assume the answer is no. Ask for the opportunity. Ask the question. Raise your hand. Too many talented women spend energy convincing themselves why something won't happen instead of simply asking. Today, I see being the only woman in the room differently. Rather than focusing on being different, I focus on ensuring I am not the last. Every woman who earns a seat at the table should be creating space for others to join her there.

Struggle never disappears, and that is fine

The reality is that balance is rarely a perfect state that you achieve and then keep forever. Different priorities dominate at different stages of life. What has helped me most is letting go of the idea that I need to be perfect in every role at every moment, and learning to focus on progress rather than perfection.

My perspective has also changed over the years. Today, I see my career as a privilege. The long hours, the complex challenges, the demanding deadlines, these are things I once dreamed of having the opportunity to do. On difficult days, I remind myself that I am fortunate to have a career that energises and fulfils me. I've also learned that struggles never disappear. Every new role or achievement comes with a different set of challenges, and the quicker you accept that struggle is part of growth, the quicker you bounce back.

People, without question

Without question, the biggest difference has been people: colleagues, friends and family members who believed in me, challenged me and supported me when I needed it most. Support doesn't always look like grand gestures. Sometimes it's flexibility during a difficult season, a colleague who checks in, or a team that pulls together when deadlines are tight. Those everyday acts of generosity build careers and cultures. I'm grateful to my circle; I am who I am because of them.

My honest advice to a young woman joining the profession today: raise your hand more often. Don't assume the answer is no before you've even asked the question. Confidence is often built after you take the leap, not before. And when you get to the next level, don't climb alone. Reach back and help someone else up. In many ways, that's what #GiveToGain means to me: creating opportunities for others, because the strongest teams are built not by what they achieve alone, but by how many people they help succeed along the way.

A ROAD OUT OF LESOTHO



Thuto Masasa: National Head: Advisory

A road out of Lesotho

I was fifteen when my mother put me on a road out of Lesotho. The destination was a boarding school in Cape Town. It was not simply a move to a bigger city. It was a different world, with different rules, and I had to adapt quickly. My English was not strong. I was frightened.

At the time, I did not understand my mother's decision as generosity. I only understood later what she had given up, and what she had made possible for me. That decision changed the course of my life. Someone made a difficult choice so that I could gain an opportunity, and that idea has stayed with me throughout my career, shaping how I lead, how I develop people and how I think about success. For me, #GivetoGain is not a slogan. It is a responsibility. None of us gets anywhere entirely alone. Someone opens a door, offers advice, takes a risk or sees something in us before we can see it ourselves.

If the page is blank, you are not developing

My career has been shaped less by titles than by people, choices and lessons that challenged me to grow. One of the most valuable pieces of advice I received came from Roger Reeves, the late CFO of Murray & Roberts. He encouraged me to keep a journal and write down something new I

had learned every month. If the page was blank, I was not developing. It sounds simple, but it forces honesty: are you growing, or only getting busier?

That is also the advice I give younger professionals: do not make every career decision based on the immediate reward. The role that pays the most today may not be the role that develops you most. Focus on mastering your craft. Choose opportunities that stretch you. Stay curious, and listen to people willing to tell you the truth, even when it is uncomfortable. When you become genuinely good at what you do, recognition tends to follow. That is part of giving to gain: you give time to learning, you give up the comfort of always knowing the answer. What you gain is depth.

Trust before the evidence

I would describe my leadership style as people-centred, demanding and grounded in trust. I care deeply about people, but care does not mean lowering expectations. Sometimes the most valuable thing a leader can do is ask someone to attempt the thing they are convinced they cannot do. In the moment, that may feel uncomfortable. But six months later, you watch that same person stand confidently in front of a client, or lead a conversation they once would have avoided.

To lead in that way, you have to give people more than instructions. You give them context, honest feedback, and room to think and make decisions. Most importantly, you give them trust before they have gathered enough evidence to trust themselves. The return is capability: people who take ownership, teams that think independently, and future leaders who understand that confidence is built through doing.

Mentorship is guidance. Sponsorship is risk.

There is a difference between mentorship and sponsorship. Mentorship is sharing advice, helping someone think through a challenge. Sponsorship requires more. It means putting your name behind someone when they are not in the room, recommending them for an opportunity, being prepared to say, "I believe this person is ready," even while they are still growing into the role. It matters so much because it involves risk. Many talented people do not lack ability. They lack access. They need someone to mention their name in the right room.

Ensuring you are not the last

Women are often encouraged to give in ways that leave them depleted, expected to be available, accommodating and endlessly supportive. That is not the kind of giving I mean. Giving to gain does not mean making yourself smaller,

refusing recognition or apologising for wanting to succeed. Women should ask for opportunities, negotiate, and occupy influential spaces without feeling guilty. The responsibility lies in how we use that influence once we have gained it.

There is power in being the first woman in a room. There is even greater power in ensuring you are not the last. My message to younger women is simple: do not wait until you feel completely ready. Readiness is built through action. Then, as you grow, look behind you. Who needs an introduction? Speak their names in rooms they have not yet entered.

The debt is paid forwards

Nobody arrives anywhere alone. Anyone who suggests otherwise is editing the story. A mother makes a difficult decision. A leader gives a young professional a chance. A sponsor speaks a name in a room where a decision is being made. These acts may seem small, but they accumulate. The debt does not need to be repaid upwards. Often, it cannot be. It is paid forwards, to the next person who cannot yet see what they are capable of. Give trust, and you create ownership. Give guidance, and you build confidence. Give opportunity, and you make room for new leaders. Give it away. That is how you keep it.



Capitalising on our strengths:

embracing diversity in business



Catherine Tillard: Audit Partner

Why gender-balanced teams perform better

It is widely acknowledged that women possess personality traits and abilities that set them apart from men, and vice versa. Men often display dominance, assertiveness and emotional stability, while women are frequently characterised by sensitivity, empathy, warmth, caution and strong communication skills. These distinctions show up across many areas of life, including the workplace and leadership. Just as a balanced family and society benefit from a mix of both genders, so too do successful, well-rounded business teams.

Companies and teams need to recognise the importance of gender balance in recruiting, promoting and managing projects. This is not simply about bringing together a diverse range of personalities, but about ensuring fair representation of both men and women. Women bring a distinct perspective to the table, with an innate ability to read the subtleties, needs and preferences of the people around them, whether colleagues or clients.

Flexibility as a strength, not a compromise

In the post-Covid world, we find ourselves in a more flexible environment that plays to the strengths of working women, particularly those in leadership. Hybrid working allows women to put their organisational abilities to good use in managing both family commitments and professional roles. By cutting down on commuting and logistical planning, women can use their days and weeks more efficiently, allowing them to meet their responsibilities more effectively and with less strain.

Achieving balance is key. Just as a balanced diet is essential for physical wellbeing, a balanced work life is essential for both emotional wellbeing and performance at work. Educated women in business are well placed to strike this balance, given that society still expects us to manage both domestic and professional responsibilities effectively, often at the same time. Thankfully, women today have more opportunities than ever before. We have received a quality education, and it is now up to us to embrace our roles and demonstrate that our particular character traits bring real, measurable value to business and leadership decisions, not despite our differences from men, but because of them.

The business case for diversity

Research has consistently shown that diverse teams, including a balance of genders, deliver real benefits. By drawing on a wider range of viewpoints, businesses make more informed decisions, solve complex problems more effectively and foster innovation. Women's ability to read the nuances of situations and people allows them to bring fresh insight, helping organisations adapt and thrive in changing markets.

Studies have also shown that companies with balanced gender representation tend to have higher employee satisfaction, lower staff turnover and stronger profitability. Embracing diversity and gender balance builds a more inclusive, equitable working environment, which in turn lifts employee engagement, morale and productivity across a business, not only among women.

Turning strengths into policy

To make the most of the strengths women bring to leadership, organisations need to invest in policies and practices that support gender diversity and inclusion. It is essential to build a culture that values and respects the contributions of both genders, with equal opportunities for career development, mentorship and advancement, and to keep that commitment visible, not just written into policy.

Leadership training and development should be designed with the specific challenges and opportunities women face in the workplace in mind. Equipping women with the right skills and tools allows organisations to unlock their full potential, and in turn, improve business outcomes for the whole team. It is equally important for organisations to offer flexible working arrangements that reflect the diverse needs and responsibilities of their people, creating an environment where women can thrive professionally while maintaining a healthy work-life balance, rather than having to choose between the two.

Capitalising on the strengths of women in business is not only beneficial, it is necessary for sustainable success. By recognising and embracing the distinct qualities women bring to the table, organisations can unlock untapped potential, foster innovation and build genuinely inclusive workplaces. Achieving gender balance is not a checkbox exercise; it is a strategic imperative that drives positive outcomes for business and for society as a whole. As women continue to step into their roles in business and leadership, we help pave the way to a more diverse, equal and prosperous future for everyone who comes after us.



Elzanne Lombaard, Head of Finance

Leading with heart: the door BDO opened for me

Leading by being human first

The #GiveToGain theme is close to my heart, for two reasons.

The first is how I lead. As Head of Finance, managing more than 50 staff members, each with their own life journeys, ups and downs, I have learned that I get more honest feedback and a deeper understanding of my team when I share my own journey with them. Showing my team that I am human, that I have my own challenges and successes, means they see me as a person rather than just a boss, and feel more comfortable sharing their own experiences in return. This lets me manage the team as individuals, not numbers on an org chart, and I believe it shows other women that leading from the heart can be done. Earning a team's trust and showing them respect directly shapes the effort they bring to their work.

Destigmatising mental health at work

The second reason is more personal. I have been open, including on social media, about my mother's depression,

which ended in her taking her own life. Because of the hereditary nature of the illness, I have also been diagnosed with depression myself, and I have made it my mission to destigmatise conversations about mental health. When I reach out to team members, I encourage them to be honest with themselves about their mental health. Just because you cannot see it does not mean it is not there. We all go through difficult times, and sometimes we need professional help; it should be no more of a "scandal" to see a psychiatrist than it is to get a cast for a broken leg. I try to keep my door open to staff who are struggling, to listen without judgement, because I know how much strength it takes to hold things together when you really need help. When staff feel able to seek professional support, they come back stronger, and better equipped to help the next person too. It all starts with recognising the signs, reaching out, and giving your time and experience to help someone find the support they need.

The bursary that started it all

I was a third-year BCom student when my parents could

no longer afford my studies. I went to the university's administration office to ask about bursaries, and a lady there pointed me to a notice about BDO. I took down the details, applied, and BDO sponsored my third and honours years. Without a decision made by BDO partners in a boardroom back in 2008, I would not be where I am today. I started as a trainee in 2010, learning every day from mentors such as Daniel Botha, Anri Brits and Colleen van den Heever, who helped me progress from audit senior to qualified CA to junior audit manager.

Then life happened: the major personal loss of my mother. It made me reconsider my entire career path, and a position opened up in the finance team, which I applied for and got. The change gave me room to rebuild while learning new processes, and the CFO at the time, Samantha Dansie, treated me with real grace and understanding, giving me a safe space to find my feet again. When Daniel Botha later took over as CFO, he steered the firm through lockdown, making sure salaries were paid in full throughout, while I

learned as much as I could from him. In 2022, when the Head of Finance role became vacant, Daniel encouraged me to apply, seeing potential and strength in me that I struggled to see in myself. That, to me, is the real point: BDO believed in my potential, whoever I was, and grew me into the Head of Finance I am today.

Dragonflies, lions, and finding our own flavour

This brings me to my closing thought: it is not women against men. Both genders bring their own strengths to the firm, and we are stronger collaborating than competing. Nature offers a good analogy: the dragonfly, barely noticeable for its size and silent movement, has a hunting success rate of around 95%, compared with the lion's 15–30%. Ladies, never assume that quiet means weak, or loud means strong. We each have a particular contribution to make, and women should not try to become more like men. We must find our own balance and give our best in our own "flavour", supporting each other, together, so that BDO gains the competitive edge.

From single mum to senior tax manager: redefining success



Leah Nieman, Senior Tax Manager

The directors who backed me

I firmly believe that my two directors, Seelan and Cliff, have always been with me on this journey, stepping up for me in discussions with other leaders in the business. They bring not only the work and professional element to the business, but also the family element, understanding the struggles we all face on a personal and professional level. Having that kind of backing, people who advocate for you in rooms you are not in, has made a real difference to how far I have been able to go in my career, and it is not something I take for granted.

Building the Women in Tax network

I initiated the Women in Tax events, building an internal network of women across the tax team and bringing ladies together from all provinces to collaborate and network. Tax can be an isolating environment, particularly for women working in smaller regional offices, so creating a space where they can connect, share experiences and support one another has been important to me. I also coach trainees on their career development, offering

guidance and motivational support along the way, because I remember what it felt like to be starting out without that kind of encouragement.

From a shy beginning to leading with purpose

From a very introverted, shy and withdrawn individual early in my career, my journey as a single mother changed my perspective and my will to succeed. That personal growth was shaped further by working under leaders in previous environments who did not understand family life or work-life balance, and the struggles it involves, which pushed me toward the strong leader I am today. My career spans more than two decades, from teacher to article clerk, senior auditor and now senior tax manager. For some, that path may not look like a straight line to success, but for me, every step led to where I am now. Setting an example for my boys matters deeply to me: success is earned through hard work, not entitlement. You do not get success; you earn it and prove your self-worth and dedication. There are many obstacles along the way, but in the end, the effort is worth it.



Redefining what success looks like

Success used to be measured by a stable, long-term career, home ownership, financial wealth, professional titles and promotions, and social status and recognition. If you achieved these milestones, you were considered successful. Today, I believe success is having work-life balance, mental health, personal happiness, meaningful relationships, flexibility and the freedom that comes with it, remote working, personal growth and lifelong learning. It is about making a change in society and in your team at work, giving back, and financial security. That shift in definition did not happen overnight; it came from years of chasing the first list and realising it was not, on its own, enough to sustain me.

Making it work as a single mom

Being a single mom, it is a tough one to crack, without the added support of a spouse or partner when there are long hours or meetings. Going into Covid, having to work and homeschool my two boys at the same time forced me into new habits, and my time management skills improved as a result over the years, giving me the balance I needed between work, my boys, school and personal life.

Protecting downtime with my boys

When it is downtime, it is downtime: my time with my boys, whether we are cooking, studying for an exam, or off to cricket practice or piano lessons. I wish I had installed this habit earlier in my career: switching off from work, putting the laptop away when I get home, not checking emails on my phone, and focusing fully on what matters, my time with my boys.

Directors who understood

The support from my directors, and their understanding of the challenges of work and being a single mom, has made all the difference. They have never made me feel that being a single parent was a limitation on my career, and that trust has given me the confidence to keep growing, rather than feeling I had to choose between being present for my boys and being present at work.

#GivetoGain, in one sentence

"#GivetoGain" is a mindset that means helping others succeed first, knowing that positive outcomes will often come back to you, your team, or the organisation over time.

BALANCE, BOUNDARIES

and the realities of a career



**Genea Tehini: Associate Director:
Executive Projects**

Nine years of protecting the school run

Balancing career progression with caregiving is a challenge many women face. In South Africa, women remain the primary caregivers in most households, so the working day often begins long before we reach the office, and continues long after we leave it. Even at work, part of my mind is always managing family life: whether the children are dressed for the weather, have eaten, or need clean uniforms for the next day.

Before having children, I had hoped to work half-days, as my mother had done. After my first child, I took seven months' maternity leave, including three months unpaid, because returning after four months felt too soon; recovery, physical and hormonal, takes far longer than is commonly acknowledged. When I returned, I moved to a half-day arrangement so I could spend afternoons with my child.

The firm supported it, though my salary was reduced while the workload largely stayed the same. After a year, my female manager encouraged me to return full-time and be paid properly for the work I was already doing. My condition was that I would continue collecting my children from school and be home to make dinner, a boundary I have protected for nine years.

I block an hour in my diary for school collection and make my team aware of it, and I rely on support: my mother-in-law helps once a week, and my son uses a lift club on another day. Unless there is an urgent deadline, I leave by 4:30 or 5:00pm to make dinner, help with homework, and get the children ready for bed, reopening my laptop later if needed. A supportive employer matters enormously; my managers have never questioned school runs or parent-teacher meetings, because they trust the work will get done. What has made it work is a combination of clear boundaries, practical support at home, and trust at work: know your worth, deliver consistently, and act with integrity.



Learning to say no without guilt

The boundary I wish I had set earlier was learning to say no, not to my responsibilities, but to work that was not mine to carry. Earlier in my career, low self-worth and a fear of rejection made me worry that pushing back would make me look like a bad employee, or put my job at risk. After more than 20 years of working, I have learned that strong, accomplished leaders set boundaries because they understand their value, strengths and priorities. A helpful way to say no is to explain how accepting a request could affect the outcome, rather than simply refusing. A thoughtful no is not a refusal to contribute; it is an honest assessment of where you can genuinely add value.

Generosity beyond the policy document

A generous culture recognises people as whole human beings, not only as employees. It does not simply speak about care; it translates that care into practical support beyond the bottom line. For me, that means being understood as a woman navigating hormonal and physical changes, a mother who may need to attend a sports day or care for a sick child, and a wife who may need to work from home when family circumstances require it. I have experienced this understanding in pockets, partly because I have been at the firm for 12 years and have built trust over time. But it should not depend only on tenure or on individual managers; it should be embedded in culture and supported by policy, through measures such as leave for children's milestones, flexibility during school holidays, and longer paid maternity leave.

The power of a peer community

The most valuable formal support I received was through the FASSET/Duke programme, where I was surrounded by women from different organisations, roles and levels, facing many of the same challenges: self-doubt, exhaustion from caregiving, and the pressure to remain ambitious. Over the course of a year we shared experiences and offered each other practical advice, and that community helped me recognise my own capability and worth. Coaching has also made a significant difference, helping me strengthen my boundaries, while mentors outside the firm have given me an objective perspective. For me, the combination of peer support, coaching, mentorship and self-reflection has been transformative.

THE POINT IS THE DOOR:

sponsorship, sight and slowing down



Shehnaaz Suleman, Partner, Financial Services Technical Centre (FSTC)

I picked three questions from the seven categories in the brief. Not because they were the easiest, but because once I read the list, these three would not let me go. The answers below are personal; they are not polished corporate lines, and they are not tidy, but they are true.

Sponsors I only recognised in hindsight

The honest answer is that I did not always know who my sponsors were; some of the most important ones I only recognised in the rear-view mirror. Sponsorship, done well, is quiet. There is no announcement, no one telling you, "I put your name forward." You find out because a door you did not expect opens, and by the time you walk through it, the person who opened it has already moved on to open the next one. One of those quiet doors, in my case, was opened by a fellow partner at BDO who has never once told me he vouched for me. I only know because someone else did, and that has stayed with me. Mentors give you advice; sponsors give you access. When I look back at the moments that actually shifted what was possible for me, it was almost always someone using their own capital in a room I was not in, often with no formal reason to do it. If #GivetoGain means anything to me, it is trying to do the same quiet work for the women coming up behind me, without needing them to know I did it. The point is not the credit. The point is the door.

What losing my sight taught me about attention

Transparent. Deeply honest. Direct. Warm. That is how I would describe my leadership style now, though it is not



what I would have said five years ago. A specific event sharpened this: I was diagnosed with cataracts in early 2023, had surgery in December 2025, and have been through a course of laser treatment since. Before all of that, I would probably have described my style using words that sound good on a slide: collaborative, decisive, high-performance. Since then, I have used one word: attentive. I try to see people better than I did before, to notice when someone is quietly struggling, because I know what it costs to lose a degree of independence and have nobody quite understand it. I also try to see myself more clearly: when I am saying yes when I should say no, when I am choosing what is expedient rather than what is right, and when I need rest before somebody else has to tell me so. Leadership, I have come to think, is a form of caretaking: of the work, the people around you, the opportunities entrusted to you, and yourself too. The leaders I admire most are not the loudest. They are the ones paying attention.

Slowing down as a competitive advantage

The answer that has surprised me most, the longer I sit with this question, is that building resilient economies in 2026 is anchored in two values: deliberately slowing down, and being a stranger who cares. Slowing down is a strange thing to say out loud in a profession that runs on billable hours and quarter-end pressure, but look at what the fast version of resilience has produced: burnt-out teams, missed findings, and decisions made too quickly to be defensible. In my part of the profession, IFRS technical work for financial services, slowing down means sitting with a judgement long enough to actually reach a view, rather than defaulting to what was written in last year's file. It means asking the client a question a second time when the first answer does not quite hold together. Done properly, it produces the opposite of what you would expect: more productivity, not less; fewer errors that have to be reworked later; fewer arguments about last-minute reversals.

There is a second piece to this, and it is harder to charge for: sparing a thought for people you will never meet, the retiree whose fund is under-disclosed, the audit senior working nights on a file someone else will sign. Real resilience gets built when enough of us think one link further along the chain than we are strictly required to. There is an old saying that has stayed with me: plant a tree in whose shade you will never sit. That is precisely why it belongs at the centre of a resilience conversation. It is the version of resilience I believe will still be standing when the fast one has run out of breath.

MENTORSHIP

in the property sector



Lee-Ann Bac: Advisory Partner

A sector that still has work to do

Having worked in and around the property sector for many years, I am well aware of the challenges women face in this space: from being expected to pour the tea because you are the only woman in the room, to not having access to decent toilets on site, to having to “man up” in what can be a harsh environment. Times are changing, but in reality, it remains a difficult sector for women to work in. That means we, as female leaders, need to do more to pave the path for the women who follow us, and to make our sector an attractive one for women to enter in the first place. Why can't our sector have equal representation of women and men at every level?

That question sits behind a discussion I once led on how we, as women in the property sector, ensure that the next generation of women leaders are supported, mentored and set up for success, under the banner of “a seat at the table”. It is a question I keep coming back to, because representation on its own does not fix a sector; it has to be backed by the everyday work of bringing other women along with us. I want to share some of my thinking and experience around

mentorship, because it is one of the most practical levers we have.

What one failed mentorship taught me

Many years ago, a wonderful woman I met through the Women's Property Network asked me to be her mentor, and I agreed. We met a few times and got on well as friends, but we could never quite get the mentor/mentee relationship right. I have often wondered what I did wrong, and whether it was me. After a lot of reflection, and re-reading Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*, I realised that we had both got it wrong from the start, and that there were real lessons in that for how mentorship should work.

Are mentors important? Absolutely. Can mentorship relationships be forced? No way. Relationships develop and evolve over time. For me, the most successful mentorships are the ones that are never formally disclosed; they simply happen. It comes down to attitude and respect, not process, and I think that is where a lot of formal mentorship programmes go wrong: they try to engineer a connection that, to work well, really needs to grow on its own.

My MENTOR framework

I have come to sum up what I mean using the word MENTOR:

- ▶ Men as mentors and mentees. Being female does not mean you can only have female mentors. We need men to step out of their comfort zone and mentor women too, otherwise we will never break the boys' club cycle. I have been fortunate to have some outstanding male mentors and sponsors in my career, though not exclusively.
- ▶ Excel, and you will get a mentor, not the other way around. Add to that an earned connection, one that is real and not forced, and a relationship that is allowed to evolve at its own pace over time.
- ▶ Not a therapy session. Mentorship is not about validating your feelings or having somewhere to complain. It has a purpose, and that purpose is growth.
- ▶ Time is precious. Respect each other's time. Mentors do not have time for excessive hand-holding, and mentees should come prepared to make the most of the time they

are given.

- ▶ Open to asking for advice, and genuinely open to hearing it, even when it is not what you expected.

Reciprocal. The relationship should be mutually beneficial, giving the mentor useful information, a sense of commitment, and fulfilment and pride from the relationship too, not just a one-way transfer of wisdom.

Peers can be mentors too

Finally, it is worth remembering that mentors and mentees do not need to be senior and junior; they can just as easily be peers. What matters most is forging a relationship with someone who is there to offer advice and guidance, built on trust, and ideally, one that works both ways. If there is one thing I would want younger women in this sector to take from my own, slightly bumpy experience, it is not to give up on mentorship because one relationship did not work out. Find the people who genuinely want to see you succeed, let the relationship take its own shape, and be as generous with your own time as others have been with theirs.





Don't include me in a statistic

Mandi Turner: Audit Partner

Why I don't want to be a statistic

Over the past 26 years as a director in audit, I have seen the business domain transform into a true melting pot of cultural traits, heritages, genders and personalities. In that time, I've watched countless statistics come and go, all measuring how women are doing in the workplace compared to men. They rarely tell the full story. Many organisations publish figures on the number of women they employ, or the number in leadership positions, and I find that quite frustrating. No one wants to be a statistic. I believe true equality doesn't come from constantly highlighting and differentiating based on gender; it comes from quietly and confidently changing the narrative through what we actually do, day to day, in how we work and lead. Twenty-six years in, I have come to trust that approach far more than any headline number.

Earning it, not being handed it

Based on the broad spectrum of women I come across, what they really want is merit-based promotion, recognition for individual achievement and hard work. Being given a position simply because you are a woman feels like a handout, and it doesn't actually level the playing field, however well intentioned it might be. My view is straightforward: if women want a seat at the table, they should take it. If your organisation doesn't give you the opportunity to fly, then look at your choices and act on them. No excuses, no special treatment, and most definitely no statistics. That may sound blunt, but I have found it to be the more respectful position, both to myself and to the women I work alongside.

I can honestly say that I have never experienced bias in the workplace because I am a woman. That is a testament to my fellow male and female directors, who collaborate with each other unequivocally, on equal footing, without gender ever entering the conversation.

The pay conversation, on my terms

Pay imbalances between men and women are often documented in the public domain, and I know they are real in many environments. If that is a problem where you work, my advice is to frame the conversation with your employer around the value you bring to the organisation, and to keep that conversation objective and unemotional rather than personal. Bring the evidence of what you have delivered, not a grievance. If it cannot be easily resolved, then make the situation work for you instead, in whatever way that looks like for you. And do not feel guilty if you take your child out for a milkshake in the middle of a working day. That, too, is allowed, and no one else needs to sign off on it.

Being real with the next generation

I have always tried to be honest with the younger women at work. I am not superwoman, and I refuse to be a statistic just so an organisation can tick a social responsibility box. What I am is a person, with my own daily struggles to create boundaries between work and home life. It is a constant work in progress, and there is no statistic that reflects that ongoing journey, only the honest, sometimes messy reality of living it. I believe true transparency demystifies the path to success for the women coming up behind us; pretending it is easier than it actually is helps no one, and it certainly does not prepare the next generation for the real thing. I would rather a younger colleague hear the truth from me than discover it the hard way on her own.

What my children see at home

At home, I show my children the value of being financially independent and ambitious, while still making genuine time to enjoy the time we have together. That, to me, is also part of the measure of success, and it is not something you will ever find reflected in a statistic. It is lived, not counted.

At BDO, I believe we have moved beyond the gender matrix, and I am genuinely proud to be included here on that basis, not on any other. My message to other women is simple: do not buy into the statistics. Go and create your own measure of success instead.

Confidence is built after the leap, not before



Taraneh Rahiman, Audit Partner

Do not wait until you feel ready

The real advice is this: do not wait until you feel completely ready. Many talented women spend too much time questioning whether they have enough experience, enough knowledge or enough confidence, before putting themselves forward for an opportunity. The truth is that growth rarely happens when we feel comfortable. It comes from stepping into situations where we are still learning, stretching ourselves beyond what feels familiar, and trusting that we will figure things out along the way. Growth is about becoming comfortable with being uncomfortable.

Looking back on my own career, some of the most rewarding opportunities came when I took on something that felt slightly beyond my reach. I certainly did not have all the answers at the time, but I was willing to learn. What I have come to realise is that confidence is often built after we take the leap, not before. Do not let self-doubt convince you that you are less capable than you are.

Be curious, ask questions, and build relationships. Seek out mentors who will guide you, but also seek out sponsors, people who will champion for you when you are not in the room. As someone who is probably a textbook Capricorn,

I am incredibly driven by growth. Every year I challenge myself to learn something new, and I often ask: how have I challenged myself this year, what have I learned, how have I grown? Your career is a marathon, not a sprint. And when you reach a position where you can open a door for someone else, do it. Lift others as you climb. That is how we truly live the spirit of #GiveToGain.

Trusting my own voice in the room

Throughout my career, there have been many occasions where I was one of very few women, and sometimes the only woman, in the room. Early on, I believed that if I worked hard enough and became technically strong enough, confidence would naturally follow. What I learned over time is that confidence and self-belief are equally important as competence.

One of the challenges I have seen many women face is imposter syndrome, the tendency to question our achievements despite clear evidence of our capability. Through research I conducted on women in leadership, I explored how societal expectations, gender stereotypes and the historical perception of leadership as a predominantly male domain can contribute to accomplished women

doubting whether they truly belong in leadership positions.

What being the only woman in the room required of me was learning to trust my own voice. It meant recognising that confidence is not the absence of self-doubt, it is being willing to contribute despite it. Over time, I learned to focus less on proving myself and more on adding value through my experience, perspective and expertise. The more visible women become in leadership, the more we break the cycle for those coming behind us.

Investing in people without expecting anything back

For me, #GiveToGain means investing in people and creating opportunities for others, without expecting anything in return. Throughout my career, and in my role as an Audit Partner, I have learned that while technical expertise and client service are critical, the most meaningful and lasting impact we have is through the people we develop along the way.

One of the aspects of my role that I value most is mentoring and coaching young professionals as they navigate the challenges of our profession. I have always believed that leadership is about seeing potential in people before they

see it in themselves, and helping them build the confidence to pursue opportunities that may feel beyond their reach.

What started as investing in individual people created a ripple effect that extended far beyond what I could have imagined. Some went on to build careers within our firm, while others took their skills into different organisations and industries. Seeing them grow into confident professionals, leaders and mentors in their own right has been incredibly rewarding, and it reinforced my belief that investing in people has an impact that reaches far beyond any one team, role or organisation. The greatest return on investment is not a financial one; it is seeing someone you have believed in go on to achieve more than they thought they could.

Leading as myself, not someone else's mould



Kathryn Luck: Audit Partner

Investing in people without keeping score

For me, #GiveToGain is about investing in people without keeping score. Some of the most rewarding moments in my career have come from taking the time to mentor, coach or simply encourage someone who was still finding their confidence. One example that stands out is seeing trainees and junior team members whom I worked closely with early in their careers grow into trusted managers and leaders. When I receive a thank-you email from a trainee going out into the world, acknowledging the guidance and time I gave them, it makes it all worth it.

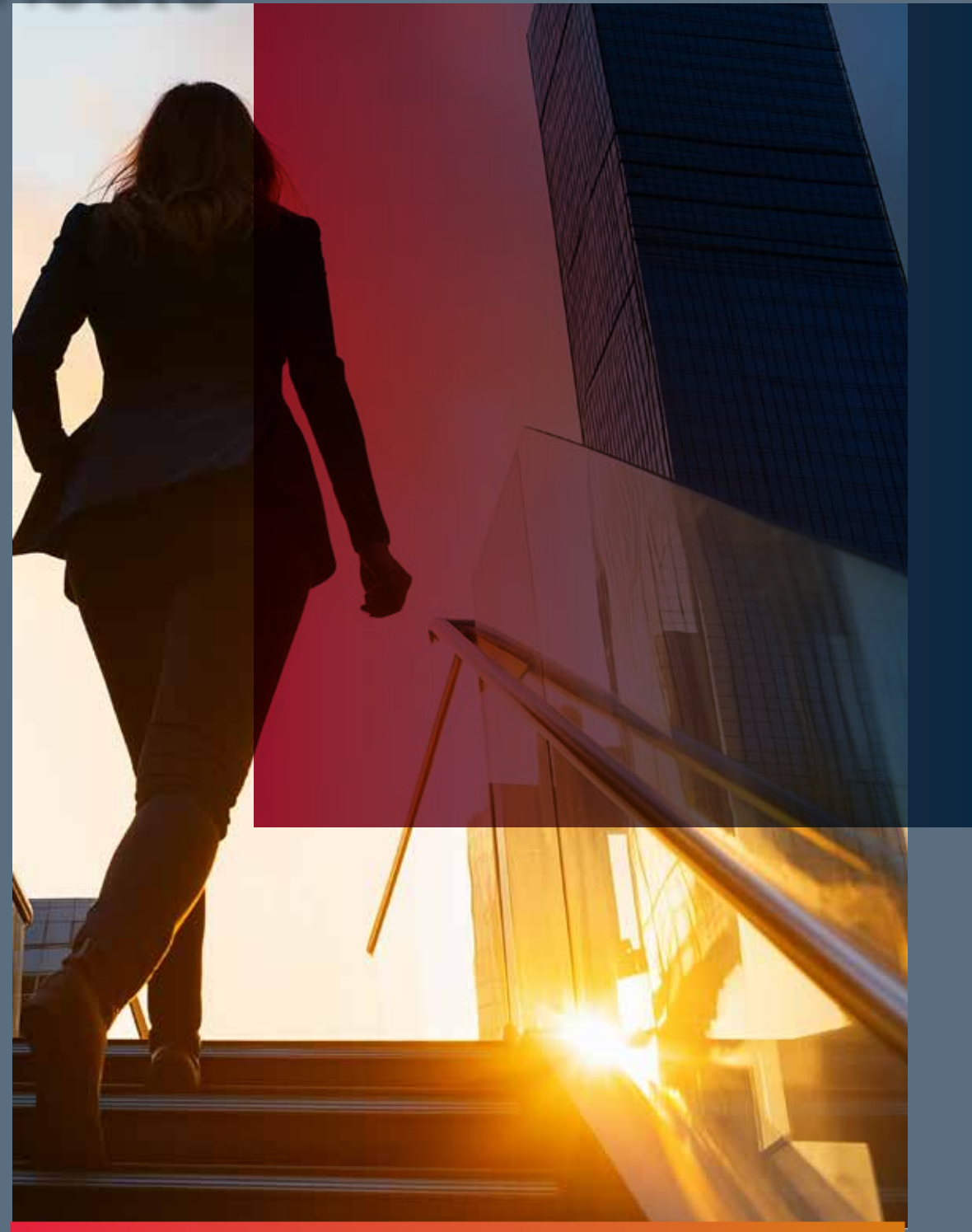
A firm that practises generosity, rather than just talking about it, doesn't view people development as a programme, it views it as a responsibility. You see it in everyday actions: leaders making time to coach despite busy schedules, colleagues sharing knowledge freely, and teams celebrating one another's successes rather than competing against each other. In professional services especially, our greatest asset is our people, and a culture of

generosity creates trust, collaboration and a sense of belonging.

Sponsors who believed before I did

I have been fortunate to have leaders throughout my career who saw potential in me and were willing to advocate for me before I was fully aware of my own capabilities. They didn't just give advice, they trusted me with opportunities that stretched me, backed me in important conversations, and recommended me for roles that helped shape my career. Some of the most pivotal moments came from leaders who believed I was ready before I felt ready myself, and their confidence gave me the courage to step outside my comfort zone.

Today, sponsorship is about opening doors and creating opportunities for others. I actively look for ways to give talented individuals exposure to clients, involve them in strategic discussions, and encourage them to take on responsibilities that will help them grow. I am currently coaching a very talented senior manager who just needs to believe in herself and build on



her assertiveness to unlock her potential, and in the process I am learning to be more assertive myself.

Credibility before the first meeting

Yes, there have been many occasions throughout my career where I was one of very few women, or sometimes the only woman, presenting to an all-male panel. What I learned is that credibility doesn't come from being the loudest voice in the room. It comes from being well prepared, understanding the issues, and contributing thoughtfully. Over time, I became more comfortable bringing my own perspective rather than trying to fit into someone else's idea of what a leader should look like.

I believe credibility starts long before the first meeting. Taking the time to understand a client's business, industry, challenges and objectives allows for more meaningful conversations from the outset. Clients appreciate technical expertise, but they also want to know you are genuinely interested in their business. Technical competence gets you a seat at the table, but trust is what builds long-term relationships. The moment I stopped trying to lead like someone else, and started leading as myself, was the moment I became a more effective leader.

There is no such thing as perfect balance

Like many women, there have been times when I've felt pulled in multiple directions, trying to give my best both professionally and personally. One of the biggest lessons I've learned is that there is no such thing as perfect balance. What has genuinely helped is having a strong support network and letting go of the belief that I have to do everything myself. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness, it's a sign of strength.

I wish I had learned earlier that I didn't need to prove myself by saying yes to everything. Protecting your time and energy isn't selfish, it's necessary, and it's okay to pause before saying yes and recognise that not every opportunity needs to be mine, including the opportunity to fetch my children from school without feeling guilty about it. Behind every achievement are people who have invested their time, support and belief in you. Sustainable success is built on knowing when to ask for help, having the courage to set boundaries, and surrounding yourself with people who believe in you, sometimes more than you believe in yourself.

WE RISE BY LIFTING OTHERS



Kagiso Nonyane: Senior Manager: Tax

Success means rising with others

Before I entered corporate, I viewed success as reaching the next milestone or title. Success for me today, however, means rising with others. Knowing that I have helped pave the way for others, and seeing them thrive, is one of the biggest forms of success for me. I live by the motto: we rise by lifting others.

I am where I am today because there were people who believed in me and invested their time in training and mentoring me, and I therefore also have the duty to pay the same generosity forward. Success is not only about what I achieve personally, but also about the people I am able to support, encourage and help along the way.

Motherhood has not diminished my ambition

One assumption I have had to push back against is that because I am a mother, I cannot perform and show the same level of commitment as my male counterparts. This is because I have never believed that women need to compete with men to prove their worth.

Our value as women is not measured by comparison, but by

the excellence, perspective and resilience we bring to the table. We need equal opportunity to contribute, lead and be recognised for the value we already bring. Motherhood has not diminished my ambition or ability; if anything, it has strengthened my resilience, focus and sense of purpose.

Advice to a young woman: consistency before titles

I would advise young women joining the profession to stay curious, and to take pride in their work even when the task seems small. Every task is an opportunity to learn, show your capabilities and build trust.

Respect each task given to you, and apply yourself fully. People notice consistency, reliability and attitude long before they notice titles. You may not always understand where a particular assignment fits into the bigger picture at first, but if you approach it with care and a willingness to learn, it will build your foundation.

A letter to my younger self

That I am proud of her. I never imagined that a young girl from a small township in Limpopo would be navigating such a challenging and demanding profession, holding her own in rooms she once only dreamed of entering.

I would tell her that the journey will not always be easy, but that she belongs in every room she works hard to enter. I would also remind her to stay open to learning and to ask for help, to accept opportunities even when she feels afraid, and to remain generous as she grows. Building a career is not only about personal achievement; it is also about making the path easier for those who come after you.

A successful career is rarely a straight line



Prelini Baronian: Financial Services Partner

Say yes to what challenges you

My honest advice to a young woman joining BDO today is to be intentional about the opportunities that come your way, and to recognise that a successful career is rarely a straight line. Some of the most valuable experiences are not always part of a carefully planned path. The opportunities that challenge you the most are often the ones that ultimately shape you. They may push you outside your comfort zone, test your resilience and even make you question your capabilities at times, but they are often the experiences that broaden your horizons, deepen your expertise and accelerate your growth.

Early in your career, it can be tempting to focus only on the next promotion, qualification or milestone. While ambition is important, it is equally important to remain open to unexpected opportunities. Taking on a project outside your usual area of expertise, volunteering for a challenging assignment or stepping into a new environment can provide lessons that are impossible to gain through technical training alone. Growth often happens when you are willing to embrace uncertainty and trust yourself to learn along the way. It is

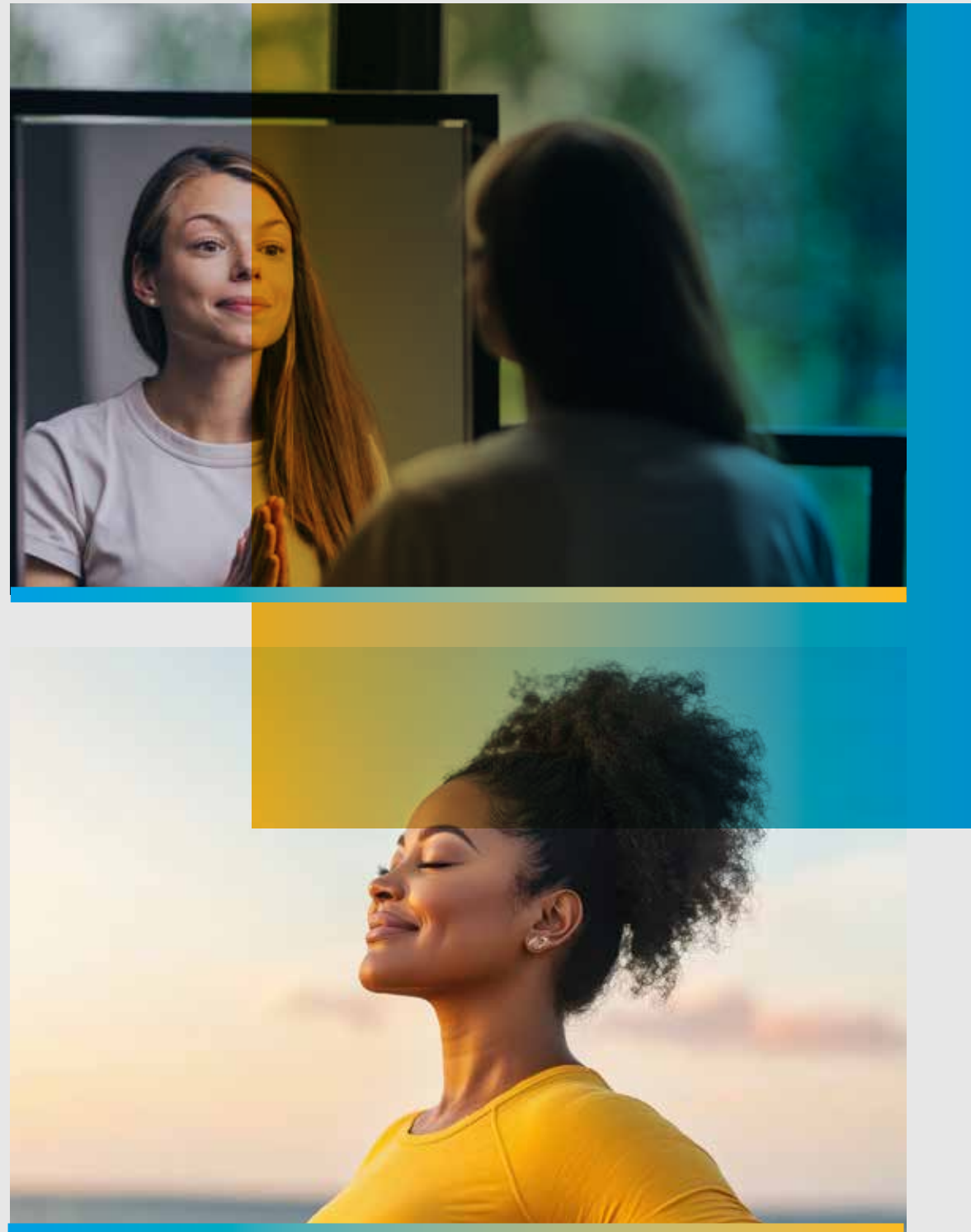
rarely comfortable in the moment, but looking back, those are usually the experiences people describe as turning points in their career.

Seek experiences that expand your perspective

Where possible, seek experiences that expand your perspective. International exposure, working with diverse teams and engaging with people from different backgrounds can challenge your assumptions and help you grow both professionally and personally. These experiences teach you how to adapt, communicate effectively and appreciate different viewpoints. In an increasingly interconnected business environment, the ability to understand and collaborate with people from different cultures and experiences is an advantage.

Build your network before you need it

At the same time, invest intentionally in building your professional network. The relationships you develop throughout your career will become one of your greatest assets. A strong network provides support during difficult periods, offers guidance when



important decisions need to be made, and often creates opportunities that may never be formally advertised. Do not be afraid to reach out, ask questions and seek advice from those who have walked the path before you. Most people are far more willing to share their knowledge and experiences than you may realise, and those conversations can have a lasting impact on your development.

It is also important to find mentors and sponsors who will support your growth. Mentors can provide valuable guidance and perspective, while sponsors actively advocate for you and create opportunities when you are not in the room. Equally important is being guided by your own trusted support networks, as they are often your strongest advocates and can provide encouragement and insight when you need them most. The two roles are different, and a career benefits from having both: someone to talk things through with, and someone willing to put your name forward when it counts.

Stay true to yourself, not the expected path

Most importantly, put your hand up for opportunities that genuinely resonate with you. Stay true to yourself and your values rather than pursuing a path simply because it is expected of you or because others believe it is the right choice. Your career is uniquely your own, and there is no single definition of success. Take ownership of your decisions, trust your instincts, and have the courage to make choices that align with your aspirations and purpose.

You are ultimately in charge of your own career journey and transitions. While BDO offers exceptional support, mentorship and guidance along the way, no one is better placed than you to shape the direction of your career. Be curious, remain adaptable, continue learning, and do not underestimate your potential. The opportunities that feel daunting today may very well become the experiences that define your future. Be courageous enough to embrace them, and confident enough to believe that you belong in every room you enter. Nobody arrives at that belief overnight; it is built one opportunity at a time, and it is worth starting now rather than waiting for a moment when you feel completely ready.

The three hidden gaps behind the gender pay gap



Alethia Chetty: Partner: Financial Services

In 2026, South African women make up almost half of the country's economically active population, yet continue to earn, on average, around 30% less than men and remain under-represented in executive leadership. Only three of the JSE Top 40 have a female CEO, and board seats are occupied by just 38% women. The gender pay gap is one of the most discussed issues in business today, and these conversations about pay transparency, legislation and targets are important. But I have come to believe the gender pay gap is not where the problem begins. It is where the problem becomes visible.

Throughout my career, I have often found myself the only woman in the room, leading discussions on banking, regulation, governance and financial services, environments where credibility is earned through knowledge, judgement and preparation, and where there is little room for error. Those experiences taught me to prepare relentlessly and to build influence through competence rather than title. But over time I learnt a less obvious, more uncomfortable lesson: performing exceptional work is only part of building a successful career. Your contribution must be recognised. You must be empowered to lead. And your contribution must, ultimately, be rewarded. When those three things become disconnected, organisations unintentionally create what I believe are three hidden gaps behind the gender pay gap.

The Recognition Gap

Recognition is about more than praise. It is about being trusted with the opportunities that shape careers, build credibility and create visibility. While researching for this article, I reviewed the latest published annual financial statements of South Africa's top six banking groups. Across those audits, there are 12 designated engagement partners signing the audit opinions. Not one is a woman. I don't cite this to criticise any individual firm or partner. It illustrates something deeper: by the time we debate the gender pay gap, the representation gap has already taken hold.

In every organisation, careers are shaped by stories: who built the client relationship, who solved the complex problem, who led the engagement. Too often, women are focused on delivering outcomes while someone else becomes associated with the success, sometimes intentionally, more often simply because they are not in the room when the story is told. Recognition shapes reputation. Reputation creates opportunity. Opportunity drives progression. Progression ultimately influences remuneration. The gender pay gap often begins long before salaries are reviewed: it begins with who is recognised for creating value.

The Authority Gap

Recognition alone is not enough. Leadership also requires authority. Sometimes women are appointed into leadership roles with impressive titles but without the authority that should accompany them, becoming accountable for outcomes while meaningful decision-making remains elsewhere. Limited authority constrains impact. Constrained impact can create perceptions of underperformance. Those perceptions influence future opportunities, recognition and, ultimately, reward. Leadership is not defined by title alone; it is defined by trust, and trust is demonstrated by giving people both accountability and authority.

The Reward Gap

Recognition and authority ultimately shape reward. Remuneration decisions reflect years of accumulated perceptions about contribution and influence. If recognition has been inconsistent, or authority constrained, reward is unlikely to reflect the true value an individual has created. Pay equity cannot be achieved through remuneration reviews alone; it begins much earlier, by ensuring contribution is recognised accurately and leadership is genuinely empowered.

These are not simply diversity questions, they are governance questions. This is where sponsorship becomes transformational: sponsors ensure that contribution is visible, advocate for others when they are not in the room, and open doors that talent alone cannot. Perhaps the most useful question any leadership team can ask is not "do we have a gender pay gap?" but: if we mapped every significant client win and leadership achievement over the past five years, would the recognition, authority and reward tell the same story as the evidence? If the answer is no, the issue is no longer remuneration alone. It is governance.

The true spirit of #GiveToGain

At BDO, our purpose is to elevate people, business and society, and that purpose is demonstrated through the decisions we make every day. We elevate people when we recognise contribution accurately and ensure reward reflects merit. We elevate business when leadership decisions are grounded in evidence and diverse perspectives are genuinely valued. And we elevate society when organisations demonstrate that opportunity, recognition, authority and reward are aligned, not by assumption, but by evidence. To me, that is the true spirit of #GiveToGain. Because when recognition reflects reality, authority enables contribution, and reward reflects merit, we don't just close the gender pay gap. We build stronger leaders, stronger organisations and a stronger society.

BALANCE

does not mean
equal time
every day



Bianca Neethling: Associate Director: Financial Services

A sector that still has work to do

My career path has been built progressively rather than following a perfectly mapped-out plan. I started working directly after high school and worked throughout my studies, gaining practical experience while building my academic and professional qualifications. Over almost two decades, I have progressed from operational and compliance roles within regulated financial institutions to specialist and leadership positions, alongside completing a Bachelor of Business Administration and a number of professional designations, including Certified Anti-Money Laundering Specialist and Compliance Practitioner (CPrac SA).

My experience has included regulated compliance and anti-money-laundering roles, engaging with regulators, supporting regulatory inspections and remediation, and developing compliance and financial-crime frameworks. Moving into advisory let me use that experience across a broader range of clients and industries. Today, as an Associate Director in BDO's Financial Services Advisory practice, I lead complex regulatory compliance and AML engagements and help clients translate regulatory obligations into practical ways of working. The detours and challenges were as important as

the promotions. A career does not have to move in a straight line to move forward. Sometimes progress means taking on an unfamiliar role, studying after a long working day, or accepting that growth may happen more slowly during certain seasons of life. What matters is continuing to build capability and remaining open to the next opportunity.

Balance does not mean equal time every day

I have never experienced career, study and family life as separate, neatly balanced areas. For much of my career they have existed alongside one another, and each has required time, energy and commitment. I studied throughout my career while working full-time and building a family, with many evenings and early mornings devoted to assignments, examinations, client deadlines and family responsibilities.

What helped most was having a clear sense of purpose: understanding that every qualification and difficult assignment was contributing to a longer-term goal, even when the immediate progress was not visible. I also learned to be disciplined about priorities and to accept that balance does not mean giving equal time to everything every day.

At different times, work, study or family may require more attention, and that is not a failure of balance, it is simply how balance actually works over the course of a career. Supportive family members, colleagues and leaders made a meaningful difference too. Practical flexibility and trust can determine whether talented women merely remain in the workplace or are able to progress into leadership. The experience has made me a more empathetic leader; a team member's potential should not be assessed only by how visible or constantly available they are.

Making room for other people to grow

To me, #GiveToGain means using your experience, influence and access to create opportunities for others. Giving is not limited to formal mentoring. It can mean sharing knowledge freely, involving a junior colleague in an important client discussion, providing honest feedback, or mentioning someone's name when an opportunity arises. I try not only to assign work, but also to explain why it matters and what a strong outcome should look like. When people understand the purpose behind their work, they become more confident and contribute at a higher level. For me, generosity in leadership is ultimately about making room for other people

to grow, and recognising that another person's success does not diminish your own.

Readiness is built by doing the work

Do not wait until you feel completely ready before putting yourself forward. Readiness is often built by accepting the opportunity and learning through the experience. Raise your hand for challenging assignments, ask questions, and become comfortable saying, "I do not know yet, but I will find out." Build credibility through consistency: qualifications can open doors, but how you apply your knowledge and respond under pressure will shape your reputation.

I would also encourage young women not to compare their progress too closely with someone else's timeline. A slower season does not mean ambition has disappeared. Finally, look for both mentors and sponsors. A mentor can provide advice, but a sponsor uses their influence to make your contribution visible and advocates for you when decisions are being discussed. As your own career develops, remember to do the same for others. That is how individual progress becomes lasting, collective progress.





Give them wings to fly



Bernice Pillay: BSO Director

Give them wings to fly

My passion is education, and I believe that an academic qualification for a woman is one of the greatest weapons one can possess to defend oneself against all odds. It is something that no one can take away from you. I am proud to say that I have encouraged, mentored and guided female members of staff to achieve academic and professional qualifications.

A particular female staff member who joined our firm in 2020 was very experienced but did not possess an academic qualification. As part of her performance reviews, I encouraged her to study and equip herself for the future. At over 40 years old she started her undergraduate studies, persevered, graduated, wrote the SAIPA qualifying exam and was competent on her first attempt. She is now a PA(SA), and although she resigned this year, I strongly believe that when staff leave for growth, it is a measure of the success of the manager they reported to, not a loss. By mentoring fellow female colleagues, we need to give them wings to fly, but always remain accessible if their wings become injured, to nurse them back to health.

Moulded by prayer and a difficult first review

I have a coaching and empathetic leadership style. One of the values instilled in me by my parents is that you are never too old to learn, and to never have the arrogance to believe you know it all. I start each day with prayer, asking for guidance, strength and resilience in navigating the day's obstacles, and to give off the best of myself to my reporting manager and my staff.

I started my traineeship in 2001 at a mid-tier firm, and my first audit file was a property-owning company. I completed the file and was proud of my effort, until my reporting partner reviewed it, gave it 2 out of 10, and wrote on the file: "failed abortion." I was naturally gutted, but it motivated me to prove to him that I would do better. Within 18 months of my traineeship I was made a Team Leader, and my boss told me he had fast-tracked me because I had proven myself. When I started at BDO in 2007, concerns were raised by HR that I was allocated to a difficult partner to work with, since I came across as passive. Another BDO partner remarked that if I could work with my previous boss for six years, I could work for anyone.

Learning that emotion is not weakness

My BDO career journey has not been easy. I moved from audit into advisory as an Associate Director in 2017, expecting a director appointment within one to two years. It did not materialise until 2024. When career discussions were held, one thing shared with me was that I "wore my emotions on my sleeve." For me, what you see is what you get, but I had to learn quickly that emotion is perceived as a weakness in

a male-dominated industry. It took a long time to balance emotion with maturity and perception, and it seems to have worked, since I was promoted to director.

I also had the privilege in 2024/2025 of being chosen as one of BDO's representatives to attend the DUKE/FASSET/IWFSA leadership programme. This journey was remarkable; I met so many inspirational women, all with difficult journeys in male-dominated environments, and I was allocated inspirational mentors through the programme. I had to teach myself again that there is nothing wrong with showing emotion, though there is a distinction between emotional maturity and emotional immaturity, and that distinction has stayed with me since.

What #GiveToGain looks like at day's end

Being present, empathetic and logging off at the end of the day knowing I made a difference to someone, by teaching them something or simply adding laughter or cheer that made them smile, is what #GiveToGain means to me in my day-to-day work.

Passing on the baton



Yolanda Weaver-Sasman: BSO Partner

To me, #GiveToGain means giving back and passing on the baton. I have benefited from mentoring and support during my career, and I believe it is important to offer that same guidance to others, particularly young women, so that their own growth journey can continue. I have seen several women from the firm progress into senior roles in commerce after leaving BDO, and for me, this reflects the lasting impact of investing in others and creating opportunities for them to grow. That impact does not stop when someone leaves the firm; if anything, seeing it continue elsewhere is proof that it took root properly in the first place.

The two men who opened the first door

From the start of my career, I was goal-driven and determined to succeed, but the support of Alan Ipp and Ebrahim Rooknodi made a meaningful difference in my journey. Ebrahim interviewed and employed me straight after I completed matric, giving me the first opportunity to start a career that may otherwise have been difficult for me to access. Together with Alan, he encouraged me to pursue my ambitions and complete my CA exams despite the challenges I faced. Their belief in my potential, guidance and consistent support gave me the confidence to keep moving forward, and they placed their trust in me

by giving me important responsibilities and continuing to support my growth into management.

Mentoring at their own pace

For the past three years, I have mentored young women in the "She Leads" programme, guiding and assisting other women with their career development. It has meant a lot to me to actively mentor others, as I know the impact that mentorship and guidance can have on a career path. Throughout my career I have informally mentored women by providing continuous support and career guidance, encouraging them to grow, achieve and believe in themselves, but to do this at their own pace without the pressure that society often places on women, and highlighting the fact that they own their own destiny to succeed.

One of my current managers joined the firm 28 years ago as a trainee from CPUT. From the beginning, I could see that she was motivated, hardworking and eager to learn. I did my best to guide and support her career development, not only by mentoring her, but also by encouraging her through the challenges she faced along the way. It has been incredibly rewarding to see her progress from junior to senior level and then into management, and she has since gone on to mentor women in her own team, passing that same support on to other young women.

First female partner in the office

I matriculated in 1986 and joined Alan Ipp & Partner as one of three female trainees. While serving articles, I studied part-time because I could not afford full-time studies, and through hard work, sacrifice and peer support, I obtained my degree in 1991. I then worked mainly in Client Accounting, progressing into management while pausing my studies to focus on family and work commitments. Determined to qualify as a CA, I resumed my studies in 1998/1999, completed my honours degree and passed my board exams in 2001. I was promoted to Partner, becoming the first female partner in our office, at the time leading

our Internal Finance Team and Client Accounting Services division while also serving as audit partner to small and medium-sized clients. Through several mergers, my journey has led me to my current role as a Director/Partner in the BSO division.

Today, success means being a respected leader and role model for other women, and showing that directorship or management is achievable through commitment, resilience and a strong work ethic. It is not a race; the journey can include detours and pauses along the way, and none of those pauses have to mean the end of the road.



GIVING TO GROW:

leadership, sponsorship and impact beyond the boardroom



Chan-ré Pietersen: Financial Services Partner

My career journey has been anything but linear, and I have come to see that as one of its greatest gifts. Some of the experiences that shaped me most were not part of a carefully mapped-out plan. They were the unexpected opportunities, secondments and detours that required me to step into unfamiliar environments, work with different teams and see the world through a new lens.

Those moments taught me that growth rarely happens when we remain where we are comfortable. It often begins when we are brave enough to say yes even when we do not feel completely ready. They also taught me that no meaningful career is built alone.

Throughout my journey, mentors and leaders invested their time, knowledge and belief in me. The people who influenced me most were not those who presented themselves as having all the answers. They were honest about their successes, their struggles and the sacrifices that often sit behind professional achievement.

Their authenticity gave me permission to be human while still striving for excellence. More importantly, they saw potential in me during moments when I struggled to see it in myself. That is what #GiveToGain means to me.

It is the understanding that when someone gives us an opportunity, shares a lesson or supports us through a difficult season, we gain more than knowledge. We gain confidence, courage and the belief that we can keep moving forward. In turn, we carry a responsibility to give that same support to someone else.



Leading with Credibility, Humility and Intention

My leadership style has been shaped by these experiences. Today, I strive to lead with credibility, humility and intention, balancing accountability with empathy. I believe in having honest and direct conversations, including those that may feel uncomfortable. Constructive feedback, when delivered with genuine care, builds trust and creates space for people to grow.

However, leadership is not only about encouraging others to change. Every conversation is also an opportunity for me to reflect on how I can listen more carefully, communicate more clearly and become a better leader. For me, success cannot be measured only by the results we deliver or the positions we attain. It must also be measured by the people we help to grow along the way.

Giving Others What I Once Needed

A significant part of my leadership journey is dedicated to developing trainees, managers and future leaders. I

intentionally share lessons that I had to learn through experience so that others can navigate their journeys with greater confidence and clarity.

This is particularly meaningful to me when supporting aspiring CA(SA) candidates because my own path to qualification was not straightforward. It included failures, setbacks and moments of deep self-doubt.

At the time, those experiences felt like obstacles. Looking back, they became some of my greatest teachers. They showed me that success is not defined by never failing. It is shaped by our willingness to rise, learn and continue despite the disappointment. Because of this, I try to offer people more than technical guidance. I coach them on resilience, effective study and work habits, and the mindset needed to move through difficult seasons. I want them to leave our conversations not only with stronger skills, but with greater confidence in their ability to succeed.

Sometimes, giving means opening a door. Sometimes, it means sharing an honest lesson. At other times, it simply means reminding someone that one setback does not determine the rest of their story.

Creating a Ripple Effect

One lesson I consistently encourage is to pay it forward. True leadership is not a destination we reach; it is a responsibility we carry. When someone invests in our growth, the greatest way to honour that investment is to create opportunities for others. This is how #GiveToGain becomes more than an individual act. It creates a ripple effect.

One person gains confidence and then encourages another. One person receives an opportunity and later opens a door for someone else. Over time, these individual acts strengthen teams, organisations, professions and communities.

I believe most people can point to a moment when someone chose to invest in them a mentor, teacher, colleague or leader who saw something they could not yet see in themselves. Creating those moments for others is one of the most meaningful ways we can contribute to society. Impact does not require a particular title or position. It is found in how generously we share our knowledge, how intentionally we create opportunities and how consistently we support the people around us.

Impact Beyond BDO

My commitment to giving back also extends beyond my role at BDO. As Chairperson of the SAICA Audit Matters Workgroup, I have the opportunity to contribute to the development of the profession and help strengthen the standards that guide our work. I also sponsor the Banking Peer Report for Tier 1 and Tier 2 banks, creating a platform for greater collaboration, shared insight and a more resilient financial sector.

These roles allow me to contribute to something larger than my own career. They reinforce my belief that knowledge becomes more valuable when it is shared and that our collective progress depends on our willingness to invest in one another.

What #GiveToGain Means to Me

For me, #GiveToGain is the belief that giving and gaining are not opposites. When we give someone our time, guidance, honesty or belief, we do not lose anything. We gain stronger people, stronger teams and stronger businesses. We build relationships grounded in trust, create opportunities that extend beyond ourselves and contribute to a society in which more people can realise their potential.

The greatest legacy we leave will not be defined only by what we achieved. It will be reflected in the people who grew because we took the time to invest in them and in the people they, in turn, choose to uplift.

Take the Harder Room



Boitumelo Lekoko,
Head of Forensics,
BDO South Africa.

I have never kept anything I found

That is the nature of forensic work. You follow the trail, establish the facts, hand over what you have learned and begin again. For a long time, I thought that was simply the shape of the job. Now I think it has also shaped the way I lead.

We sometimes speak about giving as though it is soft, charitable, or something you do once you have achieved enough to be generous. I do not see it that way. Giving often costs something. It can mean giving up control, sharing expertise that took years to build, telling the truth when silence would be easier, or placing your credibility behind someone who is still finding their confidence. For me, #GivetoGain is about making those choices deliberately. It is understanding that what we hold too tightly cannot grow beyond us.

Take the harder room

Some of the most important decisions in my career have not looked like obvious progress from the outside. I have moved between different professional environments, including the private and public sectors, and taken the step of building something of my own. Each move required me to leave behind something familiar: a title, a clear trajectory or a version of success other people could understand without explanation. Nobody applauds those decisions in advance.

What I have learned is that the role that stretches you is often worth more than the role that flatters you. A flattering role confirms what you already know about yourself. A stretching role asks new questions, and puts you in situations where your title cannot do the work for you. That is where growth happens. Do not be afraid of a move that looks sideways. Sometimes the detour is the education. Take the harder room. It may cost you something in the short term, but it can give you something more valuable than comfort: depth.

Making courage less costly

I believe in courageous, ethical leadership, and I use both words intentionally. Ethics on its own can remain a document. Courage is what turns those words into a decision, usually at an inconvenient moment and often when it would be easier to look away. Courage is not a personality type. It is a habit, developed in small, unglamorous moments: raising a concern that would have been easier to ignore, admitting you do not have the answer, or taking responsibility when an outcome is not what you expected.

My work has reinforced this repeatedly. Difficult matters often come to light because one person noticed something was wrong and decided to speak. That person is not always the most senior person in the room. My responsibility is not simply to be the brave

person in the room. It is to make courage less costly for the people around me. A culture is not defined by what it says about integrity when everything is going well. It is defined by what happens to the person who tells an uncomfortable truth.

Give away what you are good at

When you have spent years becoming good at something, it can be tempting to hold on to it. But if I continue doing everything I am already good at, I may deliver excellent work today while failing to build the capability we will need tomorrow. Leadership means giving the work away: allowing someone else to lead the process, run the meeting or present the findings, and accepting that they may eventually do it differently, and perhaps better. Your role changes. You become the person who made that capability possible in others, which is a much larger contribution.

This is also where sponsorship matters. Mentorship offers advice. Sponsorship means putting someone's name forward when they are not in the room, trusting them with the client or assignment that will make their ability visible. That requires risk, because you place some of your own credibility behind another person. But many talented people do not lack ability. They lack access. A leader can change that with one decision: invite the junior colleague into the meeting, let them present the work, and share the information that is rarely written down.

Build something that outlives your name

Some of the work that matters most will not remain attached to you. Capability you helped build should continue after you leave. If something collapses the moment you are no longer there, you may not have built it. You may simply have performed it. Skill that is protected too carefully helps only the person holding it. Skill that is passed on multiplies. We cannot build resilient organisations, or a resilient economy, without developing more people who can exercise sound judgement and lead with integrity. Talent is not scarce. Opportunity is.

Every instinct tells us to hold on: protect the expertise, guard the relationship, keep doing the work that makes you necessary. I have come to believe leadership asks us to do the opposite. Take the harder room. Make courage less costly for the people around you. Give away the thing you are best at before you feel completely ready. Speak someone's name in a room they have not yet entered. You do not lose knowledge by sharing it. You deepen it. You do not lose influence by creating more leaders. You extend it. Give it away.

Build for WHAT COMES NEXT



Palesa Gaasenwe: Director: BDO Digital



Resilience is designed, not assumed

Technology has taught me that resilience is not built when the crisis arrives. It is built much earlier, in the decisions nobody notices at the time: the systems we choose, the data we protect, the people we prepare. I think leadership works in much the same way. You cannot wait until someone is ready for a senior role before you begin investing in them, or only start looking for women when a seat becomes available. You have to build the pipeline long before the opportunity appears. That is what #GivetoGain means to me: giving people the knowledge, access, confidence and responsibility they need now, so they are ready to lead what comes next.

In digital transformation and enterprise architecture, resilience is not an abstract idea. It is visible in whether an organisation can adapt when its environment changes and make decisions using information it can trust. But technology is only part of the story. A system can be technically sound and still fail if people do not understand why it exists or what decisions it is meant to improve. The real work is alignment. Over my career, working across complex corporate separations, technology migrations and board advisory, one lesson has been reinforced: resilience is not about predicting every disruption, it is about building the ability to respond well when the unexpected happens.

The human work behind digital change

We are entering a period in which artificial intelligence and automation will reshape almost every part of professional services. It is easy to become distracted by the technology itself, but people still have to decide what problem it is meant to solve and what risks the organisation is prepared to accept. That is why I believe some of the most important skills for future leaders will remain deeply human: strategic foresight, complex problem-solving that cuts across departments, and translation. One of the most valuable skills a digital leader can have is the ability to explain a technical issue in business language. Senior leaders do not need more jargon; they need clarity on the business case, the risk and the outcome the technology is expected to deliver.

No algorithm can replace the work of building trust across a multi-generational workforce or helping people understand why change is necessary. Innovation does not happen because a tool has been purchased. It happens when people are invited to contribute, question and experiment.

Success has changed for me

Earlier in my career, success was closely linked to execution: could I deliver a high-stakes migration, establish a secure environment during a complex separation. Those things still matter. But my definition of success has changed. Today,

success is less about being the person who delivers every answer and more about building an environment in which other people can deliver. That is where servant leadership becomes important to me. It is not about making yourself less significant. It means asking what your team needs to succeed, removing barriers, and being prepared to let other people lead. Leadership is not measured by how indispensable you remain. It is measured by the capability you build around you.

Sponsorship is an intentional act

Mentorship is important; people need guidance and the benefit of experience. Sponsorship requires something more. It means identifying talent and doing something with that knowledge: putting a person forward for a demanding assignment, introducing them to senior stakeholders, saying their name when an opportunity is being discussed and they are not in the room.

Too often, organisations talk about developing women without giving them the opportunities through which development actually happens. You cannot prepare someone for executive leadership while keeping them away from executive decisions. Women need more than encouragement. They need access, and they need honest feedback too; sponsorship should mean making sure they receive the challenge that will help them grow, along with the visibility required to convert that growth into progress. The real goal is decision-making power. Women should not only be

present in boardrooms. They should be fully prepared to contribute, challenge assumptions and influence direction, and that preparation begins years before the appointment is announced.

Building for more than one generation

There is a difference between building something that works today and building something that will still work when the environment changes. The first may solve an immediate problem. The second creates resilience. The same principle applies to people: a leader can focus only on current delivery, or develop the people who will carry the organisation forward. The person you sponsor today may only fully step into leadership several years from now. That does not make the contribution less valuable. It makes it larger.

For me, #GivetoGain is about building with intention: systems that can withstand change, women who are ready to take their place in boardrooms, organisations that remain strong after today's leaders have moved on. Success is no longer only about what I can deliver myself. It is about whether the women we sponsor are able to influence outcomes, not simply occupy seats. What we give today becomes the capability we rely on tomorrow. That is how giving becomes gain.



The women of BDO who lifted me first



Marcelle van Rensburg: Associate Director: Tax

A sector that still has work to do

As a mother of two, and part of the “sandwich generation” balancing the needs of both my children and my parents, I have learned that no one succeeds alone. Behind every career milestone is often a network of people who offer support, understanding and encouragement when it matters most. That has certainly been true for me. The demands of a career do not pause to accommodate the demands of family life, and pretending otherwise only makes both harder to manage.

The women who stood beside me

I have been incredibly fortunate to experience that support throughout my career at BDO. At different stages of my life, remarkable women stood beside me. From the P&C Partner in the Pretoria office when my children were young, to the Managing Partner who supported me through the illness and loss of my parents, to the Equity Partner I work with today, each has shown genuine empathy, compassion, and the understanding that life’s most challenging moments do not pause for our careers. Each of those relationships looked different, because each stage of my life needed something

different, but the constant was that someone was willing to be present for it.

Beyond these leaders, I have been uplifted by countless female colleagues whose encouragement, kindness and generosity have been immeasurable. Their support helped me navigate the competing demands of family and career, and gave me the confidence to keep moving forward when the path felt difficult. It is easy to underestimate how much that everyday kindness matters until you are the one relying on it.

Paying the support forward

Looking back, I know I would not be where I am today without

the women of BDO who invested their time, trust and belief in me. Their example has shaped the leader I strive to be. Today, I am committed to paying that support forward, creating space for empathy, understanding and encouragement, and helping other women build fulfilling careers while navigating the realities of life, whether that is a young family, an ageing parent, or simply a demanding season of work that does not let up.

In many ways, that is what #GiveToGain means to me: lifting others as we rise, just as others once lifted us. It is not a grand gesture so much as a habit, practised consistently, of being the kind of colleague to someone else that others were once for me.

The right sponsor doesn't need to look like you



Terri Weston: Financial Services Partner

Doing your best is the actual goal

I don't believe anyone ever truly "has it all." There will always be moments when you feel you're falling short somewhere, but the goal is simply to do your best and be intentional about how you manage your priorities.

What has helped me most is structure and planning. One of the things I value about BDO and the audit profession is the flexibility to plan around future deadlines. I block important family events, school activities, sports matches and concerts in my diary well in advance, and I protect that time. Having a supportive spouse has also been critical; career progression is much easier when responsibilities at home are shared and both partners have the flexibility to step in when needed. Most importantly, I've learned to be honest when family needs must take precedence. Clients and colleagues are human too. When life happens, people are often far more understanding than we expect.

Protecting family time, unapologetically

The most important boundary I've learned is to unapologetically protect family time. I do school drop-offs every morning, and between 5:00pm and 8:00pm I don't attend meetings or engage in work commitments. Everyone I work with knows and respects that boundary. If someone schedules a meeting during that time, I decline it and propose another option. I'm always available to help, just not during the time I've reserved for my family. After the children are asleep, I can reconnect and attend to work if necessary.

I've also learned that honesty matters. During Covid, I realised it was okay to admit when I simply couldn't do everything. Saying, "I can't meet that deadline right now because my family needs me," doesn't cause the world to stop. In fact, people usually appreciate the transparency. That experience taught me that maintaining healthy boundaries isn't selfish, it's necessary for long-term sustainability and balance. The biggest support has come from the flexibility offered within the audit profession and at BDO, a culture that

respects personal boundaries, and leaders who openly shared their own experiences and regrets, which helped me make more deliberate choices about where I invest my time today.

The word "aggressive"

I have often found myself the only woman in the room. Recently, during discussions with senior legal and compliance executives, I was required to hold firm on an ethical position. Afterwards, I was told that I had come across as "aggressive." That feedback was surprising, because my intention was simply to be clear, professional and decisive. Being the only woman in the room has required confidence, resilience and a willingness to stand by my convictions, even when they are not always received the same way.

One assumption I've had to challenge is the idea that an assertive woman is automatically aggressive. The experience reinforced that unconscious bias still exists: assertiveness is often expected and accepted in men, but women can be judged differently for demonstrating the same leadership qualities. One of the greatest strengths women bring to leadership is the ability to diffuse tension and create connection. Women often bring empathy, perspective and emotional intelligence into high-pressure environments, qualities that are incredibly powerful in building trust, managing stakeholder relationships and leading teams effectively.

A male sponsor for eighteen years

A common misconception is that women need female mentors or sponsors to succeed. For the past 18 years, I've had a male sponsor and mentor, Lance, in my corner. He consistently backed me, advocated for me and pushed me further than I would have pushed myself. Effective sponsorship isn't about gender. It's about having someone who believes in your potential and opens doors for you. The right sponsor doesn't need to look like you. They simply need to believe in you enough to open doors.

SUCCESS

is how I feel on a Sunday evening



Farhana Hassim, Director

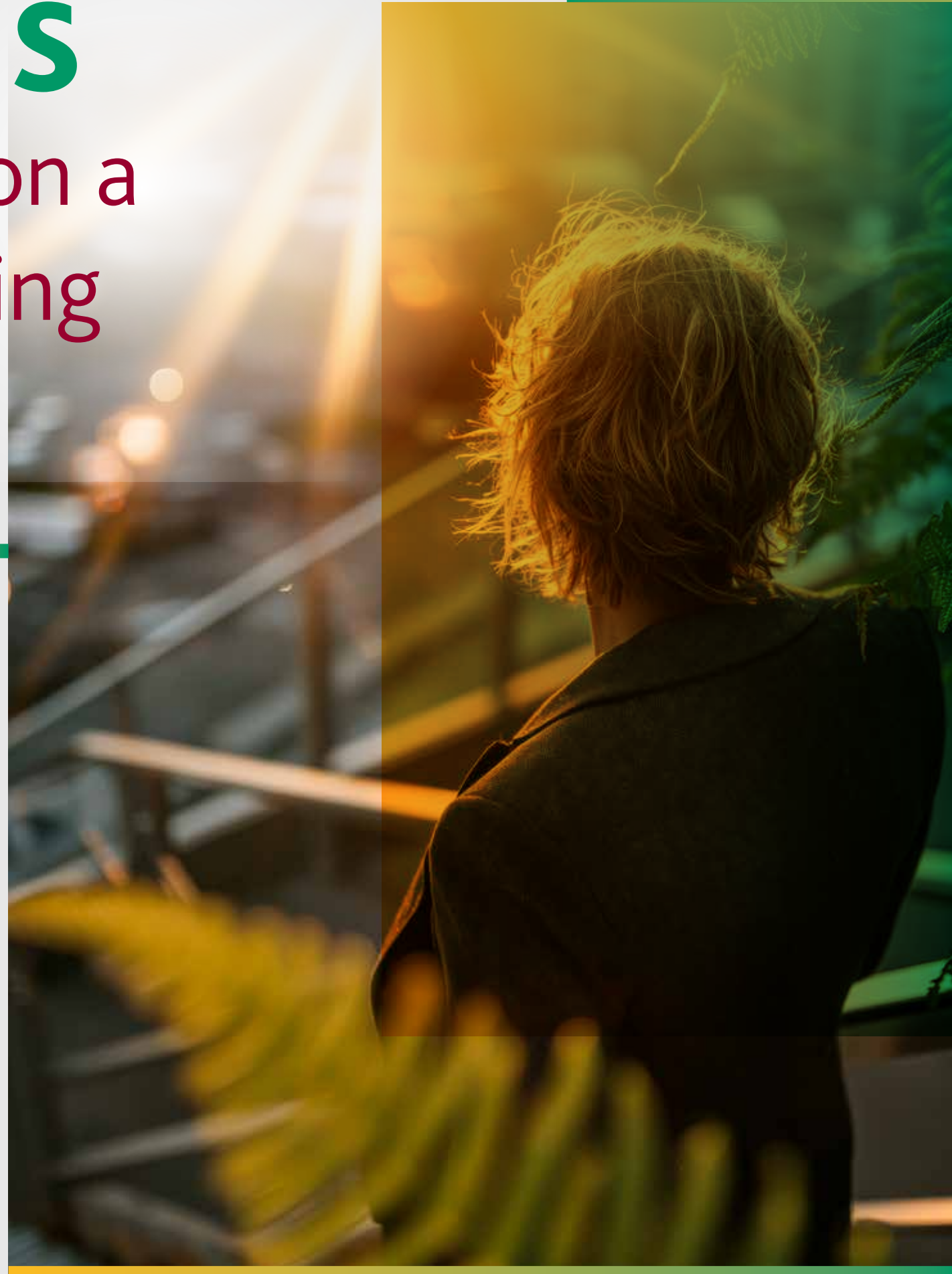
Sponsorship as a dual role

My career journey has been anything but linear, and I have. For me, sponsorship goes beyond providing technical and leadership development opportunities. It is about playing a dual role: helping young professionals build the skills and confidence they need to succeed, while also advocating for them in rooms they may not yet have access to. Early in my own career, I benefited from leaders who took the time to guide me, challenge me and create opportunities for me to grow, and having experienced the impact of that support firsthand, I understand how important it is to pay it forward.

Sponsorship also means believing in individuals and having their backs, whether they are in the room or not. Sometimes that means creating opportunities for them to present to senior management or an audit committee, or introducing them to key stakeholders. At other times it means advocating for them during performance discussions and ensuring they are considered for future leadership opportunities. Ultimately, sponsorship is about helping people see possibilities in themselves that they may not yet see.

Advocating for myself, sooner

Looking back, one thing I would do differently is advocate for myself sooner. Early in my career, I was fortunate to have supportive leaders who invested in my development, and I assumed that if I worked hard and delivered consistently, my career progression would naturally follow. What I later realised is that while sponsors and advocates play an important role, they cannot be solely responsible for driving your career forward. There were opportunities and promotions that, in hindsight, may have progressed differently and quicker had I been



more intentional about advocating for myself. That realisation probably cost me a few years on my career journey, but it also taught me one of the most valuable lessons of my professional life. Today, I encourage young professionals, especially women, to believe in their own potential and to be their own advocates.

Success is how I feel on a Sunday evening

My definition of success has changed significantly over the years. Earlier in my career, success was closely linked to career progression, promotions and the next milestone. Today, success means something much broader. It's no longer just about a title or a pay cheque; it's being able to be present both professionally and personally. Perhaps the biggest shift has been my understanding of balance. As a working mother, success is not only about delivering results at work, it's also about being there for the moments that matter at home. For me, a good measure of success today is how I feel on a Sunday evening. If I am looking forward to the week ahead, and comfortable in the knowledge that I can be both committed to my career and present for my family, then I consider that success.

Belonging doesn't mean fitting in

There have been occasions throughout my career where I have been the only woman in the room, or one of very few. Early on, I thought that meant I needed to fit in, but over time I realised that the real value comes from embracing what makes you different rather than trying to be the same. Belonging does not come from fitting in, it comes from being comfortable enough to be yourself. Today, if I find myself the only woman in the room, I see it as an opportunity to bring a different perspective and demonstrate that diversity of thought strengthens leadership and decision-making.

The opportunity cost of yes

Without a doubt, the boundary I've learned to hold is learning to say no. For a long time, I believed that being successful meant always being available and always saying yes. I've learnt to pause before agreeing to a request and ask myself what the opportunity cost of saying yes actually is. Ironically, learning to say no has allowed me to say a more meaningful yes to the things that matter most: my family, my team, my clients, and myself.

I think we also need to change the way we think about technology and AI. Too often the conversation centres on whether it is coming for our jobs. I see AI and automation as tools that can help us work smarter by reducing time spent on administrative and repetitive tasks, creating more space to focus on solving complex problems and building trusted relationships. The skills that will matter most are the ones technology cannot easily replicate: critical thinking, judgement, intuition, empathy and emotional intelligence.

I would tell my younger self to enjoy the journey, and not to be so hard on failures and setbacks. A career is rarely a straight line; those experiences are not detours, they're part of what makes you wiser. The advice I received early on that still guides me today is simple: do the right thing, always. Integrity is built in the moments when no one is watching.

WHAT I CARRY FROM THE WOMEN OF 1956



Lynn Stevens - Chief Brand Officer

Lineage, leadership and the responsibility to widen the circle

The inheritance of 1956

The more than 20 000 women who marched to the Union Buildings in 1956 organised, acted and confronted a system designed to diminish their freedom and humanity. Their march shifted our country, even though the work they began remains unfinished.

I am one of the generations who came after them.

As a Black woman in corporate South Africa, I carry something of that march with me: the struggle and activism of those who came before me, the responsibility created by their sacrifices and the knowledge that my advancement cannot be separated from the lives and communities around me.

That does not mean I have navigated my life perfectly. I have doubted myself, misread situations and stayed too long in

places that were diminishing me. But I have also acted. I have raised my voice, changed direction and sometimes begun again. Even when my choices were imperfect, they were mine.

My career has moved through advertising, financial services, reputation leadership, social-impact work, governance and professional services. Alongside it has run a commitment to young people at risk, gender justice, education and community transformation. These are not separate versions of me. Together, they form the consciousness from which I lead.

Moving between many worlds

I move between many roles: professional, activist, family member, friend, community member, spiritual being and leader. I have learnt to traverse these worlds fluidly, but not effortlessly.

Corporate life can demand pragmatism when activism demands urgency. Spirituality can call me towards humility when leadership requires authority. Responsibility to community can sit uneasily beside the need to protect space for myself.

As a Black woman, I carry responsibility. Some of it comes from lineage. Some comes from having access to rooms and decisions that shape other people's lives. I cannot experience success as mine alone.

The social construct around me also shifts. Confidence can be called leadership in one person and arrogance in another.

Directness can be admired in one leader and judged harshly in another. I have often had to read the room while also proving that I deserve to be in it. That can sharpen you, but it can also tire you.

Sitting in the fire

My deepest growth has come from sitting in the fire. That does not mean accepting harm or surrendering my agency. It means staying present long enough to feel what a difficult experience is asking of me before rushing to turn it into a lesson.

I have cried for what I have lost. I have also cried for the small victories: a door opening, a younger woman finding her voice or a difficult truth finally being heard.

I have not done this alone. Coaches have challenged my assumptions and helped me work on my shadow self: the fears, patterns and defences that can quietly influence me. They have also coached me to celebrate who I am, not only what I achieve, and to recognise my strengths without apology. This work has helped me understand how all these parts of myself shape the way I respond, relate and lead.

I have built circles of love across the different worlds I inhabit. This support has not diminished my agency. It has deepened it.

Resilience is not enough

This is why "Building Resilient Economies for All" matters to me. But I am wary of how easily we praise women for resilience when what we really mean is that they have learnt

to survive systems that remain unequal.

I do not want women to become better at carrying impossible loads. I want us to change the conditions that make those loads seem normal.

Resilience must be more than the ability to endure. It must include the agency to challenge, reshape and sometimes reject the structures that require so much endurance in the first place.

Widening the circle

Women's Month must centre women, but its meaning should not be trapped in a narrow definition of womanhood. I believe the spirit of the 1956 march asks us to remain inclusive and to keep widening the circle.

Their protest brought women from different backgrounds together around a common purpose. In our time, I believe that same courage should make room for women in all our diversity, as well as non-binary and gender-diverse people who are marginalised by rigid definitions of gender.

The women of 1956 did not leave us a finished world. They left us an example of what becomes possible when people act together.

What I carry from the women of 1956 is not only resilience. It is a consciousness shaped by agency, courage and responsibility. It is the understanding that whatever access and influence I have cannot be only for me. It must also help widen the circle and create possibility for others.



