

WORLD SPEECH DAY WOMEN-
EAST AFRICAN COMMUNITY
VIRTUAL WOMEN'S FORUM

WHERE WISDOM MEETS ASPIRATION

SPEARHEADED BY
HE FATUMA NDANGIZA AND VINO PILLAY

EAC WOMEN'S
INTERGENERATIONAL DIALOGUE

Featuring reflections and insights from
30+ women leaders shaping the future of
leadership and legacy

**WHERE
WISDOM
MEETS
ASPIRATION**

Theme:

***“The Role of Digital Technologies and Social Media
in Enhancing Women’s Leadership and Empowerment.”***

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By World Speech Day Women and the East African Legislative Assembly
Women Caucus (EALA Women Caucus). Curated and Edited by Vino Pillay.

Cover Description: *The Spiral of Connection:* This digital painting, *The Spiral of Connection*, portrays the timeless bond between generations through a fluid interplay of colour and motion. At its heart, a deep ochre spiral, rich in earthy tones of sienna and clay symbolizes the life journey and wisdom of the older generation. This spiral seamlessly merges with a wider, luminous swirl of blues and purples, representing the vitality and vision of the younger generation. Golden, shimmering threads extend outward from the core, weaving through both spirals to signify the transfer of wisdom, legacy, and shared purpose. The smooth, flowing lines and translucent layers evoke a sense of continuity, unity, and eternal connection; a visual echo of how one generation’s light shapes and strengthens the next.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book would not have been possible without the dedication, conviction, and generosity of many extraordinary individuals and partners who contributed their time, wisdom, and leadership.

We begin by expressing our deepest gratitude to **Her Excellency Fatuma Ndangiza**, whose unwavering commitment to intergenerational dialogue and women's leadership continues to inspire and mobilise regional and global communities. Her vision and advocacy remain the backbone of this initiative.

Vino Pillay - Global Lead for World Speech Day Women, whose passion and dedication turned an idea into a movement - her stewardship in shaping the Virtual Women's Forum and this book has been instrumental in connecting leaders, uplifting young women, and creating platforms for transformative conversations.

We extend sincere appreciation to **Simon Gibson**, Founder of World Speech Day, whose pioneering work laid the foundation for a global celebration of speech, leadership, and civic empowerment. His support and belief in amplifying diverse voices have greatly contributed to the evolution of WSD Women and the success of this initiative.

To the EALA Women Caucus, thank you for your partnership and for championing the **East African Community (EAC) Women's Intergenerational Dialogue**.

To the **National Women's Research and Documentation Centre in Tanzania** and the Young Women Leaders Programme **mentees** and emerging leaders who participated in the Forum: your curiosity, determination, and willingness to learn are the reason this work matters. We are honoured to walk this path with you.

To all **35 women leaders** featured in this book: thank you for your courage, honesty, and generosity in sharing your journeys. Your contributions form the heartbeat of this publication. You have given the next generation a gift that will outlive us all - the gift of visibility, mentorship, and hope.

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This book stands as a testament to what becomes possible when women and those who support them choose collaboration over competition, purpose over applause, and legacy over limitation.

May it continue to inspire action, amplify voices, and strengthen leadership across generations.

**This is our time.
These are our voices.
This is our collective legacy.**

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INTRODUCTION

Where Wisdom Meets Aspiration

In every era, there are moments when women rise, not by accident, but by intention; not in isolation, but together. This book is born from one such moment.

Where Wisdom Meets Aspiration is the culmination of the Virtual Women's Forum, a groundbreaking initiative driven by **World Speech Day Women** and the **East African Legislative Assembly Women Caucus (EALA Women Caucus)** through its flagship program the **East African Community (EAC) Women's Intergenerational Dialogue**. It emerged during the first Intergenerational Dialogue in Arusha, Tanzania where young women called for women in leadership positions to extend mentorship to aspiring young women leaders. This initiative is anchored in a shared belief: *women rise higher when they rise together*.

Launched on International Women's Day, 8 March 2025, as part of World Speech Day's 10th Anniversary and World Speech Day Women's 5th Anniversary, the Virtual Women's Forum was created to build momentum toward the 2nd EAC Women's Intergenerational Dialogue.

At its core, the Forum aims to connect senior women leaders with young women across Africa and the world, fostering intentional mentorship and intergenerational wisdom-sharing. Its central theme - **"The Role of Digital Technologies and Social Media in Enhancing Women's Leadership and Empowerment"** reflects the realities of our time, where leadership, influence, and

opportunity are increasingly shaped by our ability to navigate and harness digital spaces.

Across business, technology, media, politics, academia, and the development sector, the Forum's dialogues explore both the barriers women continue to face and the best practices shaping a more equitable digital future.

This book gathers the voices of 35 exceptional women leaders from Africa, Asia, Europe, and the global diaspora who stepped forward not merely to tell their stories, but to open pathways for the young women who will come after them.

What unites them is not their profession or nationality, but their purpose. Our **30+5 contributors** chosen intentionally to echo the spirit of **Beijing+30 - 30 years of courage, advocacy, and progress while signaling a powerful truth: the next 30 years belong to the women we empower today.**

It is designed to be more than a collection of stories. It is:

- a guidebook for emerging leaders,
- a blueprint for intergenerational mentorship,
- a tribute to the quiet and visible labour of women,
- a digital-era roadmap for using technology to amplify women's influence, and
- a legacy document for future generations.

The Virtual Women's Forum: Key Components

1. Voices of Women: Virtual Episode Series

A curated series of 30+ virtual episodes capturing leadership journeys, challenges, innovations, and triumphs. These episodes, accessible to young women and global audiences' spotlight how women are navigating social change, shaping industries, and unlocking opportunities for others. Recorded sessions playlist are available on all **World Speech Day Women** online platforms.

2. Leadership in Action: Closed Mentorship Circles

Following the recorded episodes, speakers hosted private virtual mentoring sessions with participants mainly from the **National Women's Research and Documentation Centre Young Leaders Programme**. Moderated by Vino Pillay, these circles created intimate spaces for honest dialogue, guidance, and relationship-building.

3. Legacy in Words: Book Publication

This book captures insights, reflections, and transformative lessons from the speakers and mentorship circles, creating a free, accessible resource for young women globally.

Distribution includes a free digital edition, and printed copies through World Speech Day (WSD) South Africa's **United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Book Club** reading corners and other regional partnerships.

Targeted SDGs

- **SDG 4: Quality Education** - Knowledge sharing and learning resources
- **SDG 5: Gender Equality** - Women's voices, leadership, empowerment
- **SDG 8: Decent Work & Economic Growth** - Preparation for leadership and economic resilience
- **SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities** - Access to mentorship, networks, and opportunity

Expected Outcomes

- Greater visibility for women leaders and their development impact
- Strengthened intergenerational exchange and mentorship
- A published leadership guidebook of tangible value
- Enhanced regional collaboration and shared learning
- A lasting knowledge legacy for emerging leaders

About World Speech Day Women

World Speech Day Women was born from the WSD South Africa initiative supporting the *Generation Equality 12 Small Actions Campaign* in 2020 (investing in media produced by men and women for the empowerment of women and girls), which then lead to global collaborations spanning Morocco, Singapore, India, Barbados, Mexico, Germany, Ghana, and beyond. In 2021, WSD Women was among the 1,000 global organisations recognised as United Nations Women Generation Equality Commitment Makers under the Feminist Movements and Leadership Action Coalition.

About the East African Community (EAC)

The East African Community (EAC) is a regional intergovernmental organisation composed of eight Partner States working together to strengthen economic integration, political cooperation, and social development across the region. With its headquarters in Arusha, Tanzania, the EAC promotes free movement, common markets, peacebuilding, and shared prosperity with women's leadership and youth empowerment recognised as essential pillars of its vision for a united and thriving East Africa.

The year **2025** marks several powerful milestones:

- **WSD Women's 5th Anniversary**
- **World Speech Day's 10th Anniversary**
- **The EAC's 25th Anniversary**
- **Beijing+30**

Together, they create a historic moment for reflection, renewal, and collective action.

A Shared Legacy

Each chapter in this book carries the heartbeat of a woman who dared to lead. Each story is a lesson - a mirror- a call to action. And each voice affirms a simple truth:

The future depends on how boldly we nurture the leaders of today and tomorrow.

As you turn these pages, may you find guidance, courage, clarity, and conviction. May you hear not only the stories, but the wisdom between the lines.

May this book inspire you to speak, to lead, and to leave a legacy of your own.

PART ONE:
INTERGENERATIONAL
LEADERSHIP
WISDOM



HE Fatuma Ndangiza

*Regional Legislator in the East African Legislative Assembly
(EALA MP from Rwanda)*

and Women's Empowerment Advocate

Rwanda

Chapter 1

Legacy of Vision, Service, and Transformative Impact

HE Fatuma Ndangiza

A Vision Rooted in Service

HE Fatuma Ndangiza's journey to leadership was anchored in a desire to serve and to transform. From her early work supporting vulnerable women and children, through roles in government and regional institutions, she emphasizes that true leadership begins when we shift from *what we receive* to *what we give*.

She believes that vision for a leader must transcend self-interest: "*My purpose is to create space for others to rise.*" Her professional story reminds us that service and vision together make an empowered foundation for leadership.

For women leaders today, her example is a true reflection of: Embracing a vision not only for yourself but for those who will follow behind you. Let your life purpose be of service to humanity and lift others.

Service That Shapes Systems

Fatuma demonstrates that service is more than individual acts. It is shaping systems. In her various roles from public service in Rwanda's post-genocide rebuilding phase to regional legislation in the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA), she has worked to champion policies, strategies and legislation that advance gender equality, reconciliation, regional integration, good governance and social economic transformation leaving no one behind.

She also emphasises that service must be strategic: "We cannot only treat the symptoms, we must address the structures." Through her legislative and oversight work on regional affairs and conflict resolution, universal health coverage, countering human trafficking, anti-corruption and gender equality laws, compliance to regional and international commitments she shows how service embedded in system-lead to a multiplies impact.

For women leaders, the takeaway is: ask yourself not only *Who will I serve?* but *What will I change?* What is my legacy? And *how will I stay relevant when the system resists?*

Impact Through Influence, Empowerment & Mentorship

While Fatuma occupies significant formal roles, her greatest legacy lies in how she influences, empowers and mentors

others. She has been instrumental in revitalizing the EALA Women's Caucus, championing women's full participation in EAC regional integration agenda and decision-making processes.

She argues that for women leaders, influence often flows less from authority and more from empowerment of other women: "My leadership is successful when others lead." Her approach suggests mentorship is not a courtesy but a responsibility: build other leaders as you grow.

Her impact also spans national, regional and global levels, showing that such leadership is scalable and transferable.

"Gender Equality is a fundamental human rights principle and means equitable access to opportunity - not confrontation between men and women. And that mindset shift must include men as partners."

Lessons for Future Women Leaders

Drawing on Fatuma's story, here are lessons poised for action:

- **Lead with Purpose** - Have a vision that gives sense to your life and serves beyond you.
- **Embed Service in Systems** - Focus not only on acts of service but on changing rules, policies, structures and mindsets.

- **Empower Others** - Your legacy is the next generation of women you help lead.
- **Use Influence Wisely** - Authority may open doors, but empowerment opens hearts and minds.
- **Partner for Progress** - Advancing Gender equality does not concern women alone rather a societal obligation; engage men, institutions and communities.
- **Persist Through Resistance** - Impactful change is not an event; stay committed even when progress is slow and daunting.
- **Humility** - Humility is not weakness; it's about putting the interests of those you serve first.
- **Passion and determination** - The zeal to pursue what you believe in against all odds. You are a treasure never settle for less.

Translating Insight into Action

To translate insights into your leadership practice:

- **Create a vision-map** - Write down whom you serve, what you're changing, and how you'll measure progress annually.
- **System-scan** - Review your institution/sector. What structural barriers exist? Identify one policy or process you can influence this year.

- **Mentorship circle** - Form or join a group of women leaders from different fields. Meet bi-monthly to share goals, obstacles and strategies.
- **Influence portfolio** - Track your formal role + informal roles (advocate, mentor, connector). Balance numbered deliverables (reports, bills, programmes) with qualitative impact (people empowered, narratives shifted).
- **Coalition building** - Design a strategy to engage at least one male or cross-sector ally in your leadership agenda explaining why their involvement matters and getting their commitment.
- **Resilience rhythm** - Establish a reflective practice (journaling, peer retreat, sabbatical thinking) to sustain energy and vision when change is slow.

Conclusion: Legacy in Motion

HE Fatuma Ndangiza's leadership reminds us that legacy is dynamic, relational, generative and created through daily choices we make. Her focus on vision, service and empowerment demonstrates that women's leadership is most transformative when it translates vision into reality and goes beyond personal achievement to collective uplift.

For today's aspiring women leaders: carry your vision forward, serve through structures and systems, and empower the next generation of leaders. Your impact will not only be what you achieve but how you inspire others to attain their dreams.

When you lead with purpose, character, influence, compassion and persist through obstacles, you create a legacy that is not merely yours but impacts others.



Eunice Musiime

Lanyer, feminist and development specialist.

Executive Director of Akina Mama wa Afrika.

Chairperson of the Uganda Association of Women Lanyers

Uganda

Chapter 2

Walking in Her Mother's Footprints: How the Beijing Platform for Action Shaped the Leadership Journey of

Eunice Musiime

When reflecting on the origins of her leadership path, Eunice Musiime traces the roots back to her teenage years in high school during 1995, the year the world converged in Beijing for the **Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women**. Although media access in Uganda was limited at the time, the spirit and language of Beijing found a way into households, communities, and institutions across the country.

For Eunice, that influence came *through the person who shaped her earliest consciousness*: her mother, Hon. Rhoda Peace Tumusiime, then a rising leader in Uganda's emerging national gender machinery. Her mother's journey, convictions, and courage became the earliest classroom where gender equality was taught not as theory, but as lived practice.

A Mother's Awakening, A Daughter's Transformation

At the time of the Beijing Conference, Eunice's mother had just completed a diploma in Women in Development and was serving as one of the first technical officers at the Ministry of Gender. She and her peers later referred to informally as the "*Beijing Women*" were pioneering ideas that challenged entrenched cultural norms. Concepts such as

gender mainstreaming, women's emancipation, and affirmative action entered public discourse, shaping both national policy and community attitudes.

At home, these shifts were equally profound. Eunice watched her mother evolve into a more assertive and development-oriented change agent. She challenged patriarchal norms, insisted that her daughters receive equal opportunities, and modeled the dignity of standing firm even when it meant confronting societal or familial authority.

Her mother's own autobiography captures the struggles and dreams of a woman determined to carve new possibilities. Eunice absorbed these lessons early - observing, questioning, reading, and forming her own consciousness around the barriers women faced and the systems that sustained them.

The Seeds of a Feminist Consciousness

As a young girl, Eunice often read through her mother's work documents, curious about the ideas shaping the feminist movement. One passage — about mothers reclaiming their aspirations and naming their truths — left a permanent imprint. It revealed how culture restricts women's dreams, and how truth-telling becomes a tool of liberation.

This foundation shaped Eunice's academic choices. While she initially applied for Mass Communication, her father

encouraged her to pursue law, recognizing her strong academic performance. She enrolled at the University of Dar es Salaam in 1996, where she encountered feminist legal theory, discrimination against female students, and the intersection between law and social justice.

Although she did not yet publicly identify as a feminist, inequality especially the normalized submission expected of female students deeply troubled her.

Law, Policy, and the Path to Social Justice

Eunice later earned a master's degree in business administration at the University of Birmingham before returning to Uganda. Over the next sixteen years, she committed herself fully to the NGO sector, a space where law, advocacy, gender equality, and development intersected.

Her career unfolded across several influential institutions:

Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment (ACODE)

Where she developed research, analysis, and advocacy skills under strong mentorship.

Uganda Law Society

Where she led policy and advocacy efforts, including key contributions to Uganda's National Land Policy (2013) especially the section addressing women's land rights and discriminatory inheritance practices.

Uganda National NGO Forum

Where she championed democratic governance, anti-corruption campaigns (including the *Black Monday Movement*), and regional advocacy efforts linked to the Millennium Development Goals and later the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

These experiences grounded her as a social justice activist and sharpened her leadership philosophy.

A Feminist Leader Shaped by Beijing

The defining chapter of Eunice's leadership began at Akina Mama wa Afrika (AMwA), a pan-African feminist organisation renowned for building women leaders. In a symbolic moment, she interviewed for Executive Director while nine months pregnant, a testament to her courage and the organisation's feminist ethic.

Joining AMwA required deep reflection and intentional growth. She immersed herself in feminist theory, Pan-African thought, and organisational leadership. She embraced the legacy of the African Women's Leadership

Institute (AWLI); a programme that has trained over 10,000 alumnae who now serve across Africa as ministers, MPs, diplomats, heads of agencies, and civil society leaders.

Under her leadership, AMwA:

- Expanded feminist leadership training across the continent
- Strengthened gender advocacy in labour, land, and economic justice
- Contributed to campaigns that informed the adoption of ILO Convention 190 on eliminating violence and harassment in the world of work
- Equipped over 1,200 young leaders between 2016–2020
- Reinforced Pan-African feminist sisterhood networks

At a personal level, AMwA became the crucible where Eunice refined her vision, consciousness, resilience, and leadership voice.

The Legacy of Beijing 30 Years Later

As the world marks Beijing+30, Eunice stands as both witness and participant in the generational arc of progress. Her mother helped ignite the movement in Uganda. Eunice has carried the baton further contributing to policy reforms,

feminist organising, and continental leadership development.

She credits her journey to the many mentors, colleagues, board members, and family members who shaped her leadership, especially her husband and children, who remain active participants in her feminist reflections.

A Daughter Continues the Journey

Thirty years after Beijing, Eunice's story embodies the power of intergenerational leadership:

- A mother who challenged systemic barriers
- A daughter who inherited courage, curiosity, and conviction
- A movement that continues to grow through women who dare to lead

As African women reflect, Eunice invites them to hold onto one essential question echoing the feminist spirit of joy, resistance, and solidarity:

“What is the purpose of the revolution if we cannot dance?”



Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi

*Anti-apartheid activist, elected to South Africa's first democratic
Parliament in 1994*

Served as a Cabinet Minister and on Boards of Listed Companies

South Africa

Chapter 3

Vision, Resilience & Influence

Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi

Anchoring Vision amid Change

Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi's story is one of vision anchored in purpose. Her career spanning the struggle for democracy, public administration, international development, and academia has been driven by one guiding question:

How can leadership serve people, not power?

She believes that vision is not a distant ideal but a *working compass* - a guide that must be adjusted as circumstances change, yet always points toward justice, inclusion, and equality.

She reminds us that women leaders must cultivate this inner compass because external conditions are often volatile. “*We cannot control every wave,*” she says, “*but we can learn to steer.*”

Vision becomes the stabilising force that keeps purpose intact amid uncertainty.

“Vision is not a slogan. It is the daily discipline of seeing beyond the storm while staying rooted in your values.”

Resilience in Practice

Resilience, for Geraldine, is neither stoic endurance nor blind optimism. It is a creative response to challenge. Through years in government and multilateral institutions, she encountered resistance, scepticism, and systems slow to change. Each obstacle became an opportunity to refine strategy and strengthen resolve.

She describes how women in leadership often face the burden of proving competence repeatedly. *“The answer, she suggests, lies not in hardening oneself but in embracing adaptive resilience, learning, evolving, and remaining authentic”.*

Resilience is a practice: it demands reflection, community, and self-care. It thrives in solidarity. As she puts it, *“We rise by lifting others, even when the climb is steep.”*

Influence Beyond Position

Power, in Geraldine’s view, is most transformative when exercised through influence rather than control. Having held senior roles in government and global organisations, she knows that authority can open doors but influence changes culture.

Her deepest impact, she believes, has been through mentoring. Whether guiding young civil servants, women in academia, or activists across Africa, her mentorship has

been reciprocal. *“When you mentor, you also learn,”* she reflects. *“Each generation sharpens the next.”*

Influence, then, is an act of trust. It expands when shared, not hoarded.

“True leadership is measured not by how many follow you, but by how many you empower to lead.”

Lessons for Women Leaders

From Geraldine’s insights emerge lessons that ground visionary leadership in daily practice:

- **Anchor in Values** – Principles outlast circumstances.
- **See Forward, Act Now** – Pair foresight with implementation.
- **Practice Adaptive Resilience** – Adjust without losing your moral core.
- **Lead with Influence, Not Ego** – Let credibility and service speak louder than status.
- **Mentor as Mutual Growth** – Learn while guiding.
- **Challenge the Systemic** – Never accept structures that silence or limit participation.

These are not theories; they are lived realities drawn from decades of public service and global engagement.

Translating Insight into Action

Geraldine invites women to make reflection part of leadership practice:

- **Revisit your vision** regularly. Does it still reflect your purpose?
- **Build your resilience rituals** - quiet moments, supportive peers, inner renewal.
- **Create mentoring circles** that include cross-sector and cross-generational voices.
- **Stay visible in integrity.** Let consistency build trust.
- **Use your seat, however small,** to shift norms and policies that exclude.

“Leadership, she insists, is iterative and matures through practice, humility, and persistence”.

Conclusion: The Ripple of Courage

Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi’s journey reminds us that effective leadership is not defined by rank but by reach - by how far one’s influence travels through others. Her legacy is not a single role or title; it is the steady ripple of women she has inspired to take their place at decision-making tables.

For today's women leaders, her story is a mirror: your vision is your compass, your resilience is your engine, and your influence is your gift to the next generation.

When you lead with purpose, grounded in values and sustained by empathy, you do more than hold power, you *transform* it.

PART TWO:
LEGACY
IN
ACTION



Ela Gandhi

Social Activist, Peace Builder,

and granddaughter of Mahatma and Kasturba Gandhi

South Africa

Chapter 4

Legacy and Mentorship in Action

Ela Gandhi

The Foundations of Legacy

Kasturba Gandhi, affectionately known as *Ba* was not born into public life, nor groomed for leadership. Yet over the years, through choices of courage, conviction, and care, she came to embody values that shaped not only the path of her husband, Mohandas Gandhi, but also the lives of countless women.

Her granddaughter, Ela Gandhi, reflects that Ba's legacy is one of *action rooted in principle*. While tradition sought to limit her to domestic roles, Ba insisted on dignity. She challenged her husband when she disagreed, spoke her truth when silence was expected, and lived by the principles she cherished.

Leadership is not an inheritance - it is a choice, made daily.

“Legacy, Ela reminds us, is not something handed down. It is created in daily life, in refusing unfairness, in nurturing others, standing firm even in hardship. Ba’s life was marked by illness, imprisonment, and loss, yet she held fast to simplicity, nonviolence, and equality. These values formed the foundation of the legacy she left behind.

“Values matter. Simplicity, nonviolence, respect, and equality are anchors in a world of compromise.”

Mentorship Through Example

For Ela, Ba’s mentorship came not in lectures or formal lessons but in *example*. Her strength was quiet yet persistent, lived out in the ashram, in kitchens, in prisons, and in protest marches.

Ba’s influence reached beyond her family. In prison, she stood with women, fought for their dignity, and ensured vegetarian food was available. She encouraged literate women to teach others, fostering education and solidarity. She proved that mentorship is not about power but about presence and about living in a way that uplifts others.

Crucially, Ba did not simply support Gandhi’s mission - she shaped it. Her challenges and objections made her a moral compass, showing that leadership thrives on mutual respect and not blind agreement.

Lessons for Future Women Leaders

From Ela's recollections of her grandmother, women leaders today can draw powerful guidance:

- **Courage to Speak** - Raise your voice, even when it is uncomfortable.
- **Integrity in Action** - Align your life with your principles.
- **Commitment Over Convenience** - Stand firm in times of trial.
- **Empathy and Service** - Lead by caring for people, not positions.
- **Mutual Mentorship** - Allow others to challenge and shape you.
- **Empower Others** - True legacy is measured in the leaders you create.

These lessons remind us that women's leadership need not mirror traditional power models. It can be rooted in compassion, dignity, and resilience.

"Leadership is seldom solo. It grows in the margins - in homes, prisons, kitchens, and ashrams before it finds its place on the world stage."

Putting Legacy into Action

For today's women leaders, the call is not only to remember Ba but to *embody her spirit*:

- Align decisions with your values, even under pressure.
- Build communities of support, not just networks of followers.
- Confront injustice whether in boardrooms, communities, or daily life.
- Be consistent: how you act privately matters as much as what you do publicly.
- Empower others so your influence multiplies across generations.

The Ongoing Ripple

Kasturba Gandhi's greatest gift was her ability to transform ordinary acts into extraordinary influence. Her legacy endures because it was rooted in values, service, and courage. Through Ela Gandhi's testimony, we see that her mentorship still resonates, reminding us that true leadership is not about dominance but about *guiding others toward their own strength*.

For the women leaders of today and tomorrow, Ba's life offers a simple but profound truth: every act of courage creates a ripple. Each step toward justice clears a path for

others. And every voice raised in dignity becomes part of a chorus that cannot be silenced.



Kasturba Gandhi

1869–1944

Known affectionately as Ba, a mother of resilience and leadership.



Diana Abruzzi

Founder & International Chairman

*International Women's Federation of Commerce and Industry
(IWFICI)*

Australia

Chapter 5

Dare To Challenge

Diana Abruzzi

From the moment Diana Abruzzi first walked into a boardroom in Australia as the only woman on the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry's State Council, she understood two fundamental truths: that the world often looks past half the workforce, and that change rarely begins with permission.

A Journey Rooted in Initiative

Diana's story is one of pioneering vision. Observing that although women made up 48 percent of the workforce in Victoria, they accounted for only 10 percent of the Chamber's membership, she didn't wait for the system to change. She created in Australia the first women's chamber of commerce in the world.

In 1992 she founded the International Women's Federation of Commerce and Industry (IWFCI) - an international platform as a true Women's Chamber of Commerce to aspire from; where great minds, future leaders, creative thinkers, entrepreneurs and innovative can come together and launch all their aspirations. Supporting women business

leaders in identifying new markets and harnessing collective influence.

Over the decades, Diana's leadership has been driven by a simple premise: that mentorship, visibility and networks and trust are the currencies of lasting impact. Under her guidance, the IWFCI grew to fourteen chapters globally, delivering summits, forums, and educational programmes that elevate women's economic voice and leadership.

Translating Visibility into Opportunity

Diana often emphasises that access to opportunity is not just about being qualified, it's about being visible, connected, and engaged. She has dedicated her career to creating platforms where women don't have to wait for change: they become the change.

In her remarks at business forums, she says: *"You don't just join the table, you create it. You don't just seek representation; you build the network."* Her own path reflects this ethos.

"If you see a gap, fill it. If you see a barrier, build the bridge. That is how women begin to lead."

Mentorship as Legacy

One of Diana's most enduring legacies is her belief in mentorship not as an optional add-on, but as the foundation

of sustainable leadership. She has long held that leadership is less about imposing one's will than about lifting others as you rise. Every Summit, workshop, and network event she designs is rooted in that principle.

Among her favourite lessons:

- Lead from behind. Great mentors often guide quietly, enabling others to shine.
- Build networks that last. Connection is multiplied when you include others generously.
- Create visibility for the unseen. “We bring to light those who have talent but lack exposure.”
- Institutionalise support. Mentorship programmes and global chapters are not one-off events. They are legacy vehicles.

The Call to Emerging Leaders

Diana's message is direct:

“Your story matters. Your voice is needed. You have been given the privilege of standing here today, now use it to create a seat for someone else tomorrow.”

She encourages emerging women leaders to ask themselves:

- Who will I mentor?

- What network will I build?
- How will I design an institution that outlasts my term?

Because Diana believes that rising matters, but creating platforms is what ultimately changes the system and changes lives.

Closing Reflection

Diana Abruzzi's journey from the margins of male-dominated business chambers to the helm of a global women's Federation of Nations reminds us that leadership is not just about holding space, it's about widening the space for others.

Her legacy is not in the chapters she opened, but in the doors, she left unlocked for future generations of women entrepreneurs. When women build institutions, they don't just create opportunities, they change histories.

Don't wait to be invited. Build the invitation. And once inside, keep the door open behind you and lead from the front.



Tshapo Ncube

*Managing Director International Coverage Absa Corporate and
Investment Bank (CIB)*

South Africa

Chapter 6

Where Faith Meets Finance:

A Woman's Blueprint for Empowerment

Tshepo Ncube

Tshepo Ncube's story is a powerful reminder that leadership is not born from comfort, but from courage and that the most transformative lessons often come from the women who shaped us long before we stepped into boardrooms.

For Tshepo, empowerment is not a slogan; it is a lived experience rooted in the quiet strength of her mother and grandmother. Her leadership journey began in a home filled with love, loss, and unshakable faith. When her father passed away, her mother, a lifelong homemaker found herself suddenly responsible for five children, four of them girls. With no formal work experience, she faced a choice: surrender to fear or rise through faith. She chose to rise.

Behind her stood Tshepo's grandmother, the silent force who kept the home alive, nurturing the family through her warmth and resilience. Together, these two women demonstrated the power of intergenerational courage - one carrying the world on her shoulders, the other holding it steady.

"That's the beauty of women, when one generation bends, another braces."

Their unyielding spirit became Tshepo's blueprint for life and leadership. Watching her mother start a small business from scratch without capital, training, or connections taught her that true leadership is not about power or position, but about purpose. It's about showing up, even when no one is watching.

Today, Tshepo brings that same resolve to her role as Managing Director of International Coverage at Absa Corporate and Investment Bank (CIB), where she leads global client relationships spanning the United States, Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and China. Her focus is on connecting global markets to pan-African opportunities, and under her leadership, the International Coverage business has become a significant contributor to Absa Group's overall performance.

With more than 20 years of experience across sectors such as services, hospitality, manufacturing, retail, and power utilities, Tshepo has built an enviable track record of strategic leadership, integrity, and innovation. Yet, for her, leadership extends beyond profit and portfolios, it's about people and purpose.

Through initiatives like Banking on Women Absa CIB, she has championed equity and empowerment in the financial sector. As a mentor and advocate, she actively supports the development of young professionals, reminding them that *"you don't have to wait to be perfect to begin - start with what you have."*

The Message

“Don’t give up on your dreams. Use the tools you have.”

Tshepo believes that progress does not wait for perfect timing. It is built, step by step, with what’s already in your hands. Her mother’s story embodies this truth: though she lacked funding, she possessed determination which was her first and most powerful tool.

For Tshepo, finance is not just about numbers; it is about freedom and the ability to dream, build, and thrive. Her advice to women entrepreneurs and professionals is clear and actionable:

Practical Steps for Growth:

- **Formalise your business.** Register it, open a business account, and keep records. Visibility creates credibility.
- **Tell your financial story.** Track your income and expenses; they are evidence of your progress.
- **Know your options.** Explore funding channels such as micro-loans, working capital, and accelerator programmes.
- **Seek mentorship and community.** Growth is never solitary. Surround yourself with women who challenge and champion you.
- **Be investor-ready, not perfect.** Confidence and preparation matter more than perfection.

“The tools exist for you, not for someone else.”

The Leadership Lens

Tshepo's career reflects the transformative power of access and inclusion. She has seen firsthand how women's financial empowerment ripples through communities. Women reinvest up to 90% of their income into their families and societies.

This is why she views empowering women as more than moral obligation; it's an economic imperative. When women rise, economies rise. But transformation requires intentionality: the courage to start, to persist, and to believe that our stories are still unfolding.

In addition to her corporate achievements, Tshepo serves as:

- Board Member, Manitou Southern Africa (French Listed Entity) and Chair, Risk and Ethics Committee
- Board Member, British Chamber of Commerce
- Vice Chairperson, Spanish Chamber of Commerce
- Board Member and Chair of Risk & Ethics, Ford Financial Services
- Ex-Chair, Banking on Women Absa CIB
- Leader of the Absa CIB China Office Coverage Strategy
- Award-winning IMD Programme Research Lead for SME Africa
- Named one of Africa's Most Influential Women

Her work and influence stretch far beyond banking. They represent a bridge between financial systems and human stories.

The Call to Action

To every woman, Tshepo's message is deeply personal:

"Your dream is valid. You are not behind, you are becoming."

There will be moments of uncertainty, but resilience is not about avoiding hardship, it's about rising through it. Each step forward, however small, builds the foundation for the next generation of women who will walk farther because you refused to stop.

Keep moving. Keep learning. Keep showing up. The tools are there and so is your strength.

The Closing Reflection

Looking back, Tshepo sees her mother and grandmother not as ordinary women, but as architects of destiny, quiet builders of courage, integrity, and faith. Their lessons live on in every woman she mentors and every leader she inspires.

"Power is not something you take. It is something you grow into."

Tshepo Ncube's journey is both a tribute and a call to action - a reminder that every woman carries within her the potential to transform her circumstances, her community, and her continent.

**PART THREE:
LEADERSHIP
WITH
PURPOSE
AND
AUTHENTICITY**



Dr. Rania Farouk Rageh

*Head of Research Data Science and University Ranking at the
Arab Academy for Science, Technology & Maritime Transport
(AASTMT)*

Egypt

Chapter 7

Architect of Excellence and Impact

Dr. Rania Farouk Rageh

Dr. Rania Farouk Rageh is a woman who moves seamlessly between worlds - the world of science and the world of people; the data lab and the boardroom; evidence-driven research and purpose-driven leadership. Her journey is a testament to how Egyptian women are shaping the future of education, sustainability, and global collaboration through intellect, vision, and humanity.

As Head of Research Data Science and University Ranking at the Arab Academy for Science, Technology & Maritime Transport (AASTMT), Rania stands at the forefront of transformation in higher education, leading global ranking strategies, driving sustainability programmes, advancing international cooperation, and aligning institutional excellence with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Her career embodies the fusion of scientific precision and compassionate leadership proving that women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) are not only innovators of technology but architects of sustainable progress.

A Journey Rooted in Science, Purpose, and Persistence

Rania's story began at Alexandria University, where she earned her bachelor's degree in power engineering, setting the foundation for a life defined by excellence. She went on to complete her master's and Ph.D. with highest honours, contributing pivotal research on environmentally safe workplaces and sustainable well-being.

Her intellectual curiosity and deep commitment to service propelled her beyond the confines of engineering into the fields of data science, sustainability leadership, and institutional advancement.

At AASTMT, her leadership reflects an ever-evolving blend of expertise and empathy; a model of how purpose and precision can coexist in modern academia.

A Leader in Sustainability, Human Development, and Institutional Excellence

Throughout her career, Rania has built an extraordinary portfolio that bridges technology, leadership, and social impact.

Her early experience as an electrical power engineer evolved into a broader pursuit of organizational excellence, quality systems, and sustainability innovation. This transition equipped her with a multidisciplinary foundation that she continues to apply across academia and international cooperation.

At AASTMT, she spearheads:

- SDG-aligned institutional initiatives
- Global ranking and quality excellence frameworks
- International partnerships and research collaborations
- Sustainability and social responsibility programmes
- The EmpowerHER initiative promoting women in STEM and leadership

Her academic writings, including her advocacy for the *Civic University Model*, urge institutions to act as living ecosystems, translating research into tangible societal value.

Global Impact and International Contribution

Rania's leadership extends far beyond Egypt's borders. Her direction in research data science and university ranking has elevated AASTMT's global standing in major frameworks such as QS and Times Higher Education (THE), including the university's top national ranking in Quality Education (THE Impact Rankings) and the development of its first sustainability report.

Her work in SDG integration, green campus transformation, and EU-funded collaborations (including ERASMUS, PRIMA, and Horizon projects) reflects her ability to bridge academia, policy, and practice, building systems that enable impact at scale.

Through these achievements, she has strengthened Egypt's academic visibility on the world stage, positioning AASTMT as a model for civic responsibility, sustainability leadership, and innovation in education.

Recognition, Honors, and Humanitarian Leadership

Rania's journey of impact has earned her distinguished recognitions and roles, including:

- SPSC Sustainability Ambassador
- Transformation Lab Team Member, University of Copenhagen
- GSFN Gold Medal by SPSC UK
- EFQM Foundation Certified
- CSR Practitioner
- National Expert for Social Responsibility
- European Excellence Assessor (EFQM)
- IRCA Certified QMS, EMS & OH&S Auditor

These accolades reflect not only her technical excellence but also her enduring commitment to ethical leadership, institutional growth, and social advancement.

The Woman Behind the Achievements

Despite her expansive professional portfolio, Rania speaks most proudly of her personal roles as mother, mentor, and community builder.

As a mother of two young men, she believes that family and leadership are not competing forces but complementary callings.

“Motherhood taught me discipline, empathy, and long-term vision,” she shares.

Her philosophy of leadership is one of integration, not balance ensuring that every role informs and strengthens the other. She structures her life with intentionality:

- Guarding family time with the same discipline as strategic meetings
- Protecting research hours as sacred space for growth
- Designing systems that prioritize purpose over pressure

Her lived experience affirms that leadership is not about managing time, it’s about aligning values.

Overcoming Bias, Building Systems, and Engineering Opportunity

In traditionally male-dominated spaces, Rania learned early to let competence silence bias. Preparation, precision, and perseverance became her quiet weapons. Balancing a full-time career with a demanding Ph.D. required redesigning her calendar, engineering time itself to meet personal and professional goals.

Her advice to women is practical and profound:

“Do not wait for the perfect time. Design the conditions you need and move.”

She emphasises that systems rarely hand women the margin to lead. *“We must architect it, protect it, and extend it to others”.*

Her Message to Women Everywhere

Rania’s journey offers timeless lessons for women in every field:

- Honour your family roles - they refine your leadership.
- Protect your learning time - it is an investment in your future.
- Measure your impact - evidence is the foundation of influence.
- Build networks - progress is collective.
- Engineer your opportunities - leadership is an act of design, not chance.
- When you rise, lift others with intention and grace.

A Legacy of Vision and Value

Today, Dr. Rania Farouk Rageh stands as:

- A **scientist**
- A **strategist**
- A **sustainability leader**
- A **global ambassador for academic excellence**
- A **mother and mentor**
- A **visionary builder of systems that empower others**

Her story embodies the essence of modern leadership where intellect meets empathy, and data meets purpose.

Her legacy is one of designing impact, not waiting for it and her message to future women leaders is clear:

“The future is not found - it is built. Design yours with courage and conviction.”



Marian F. Kupee

Minister Plenipotentiary Deputy Chief of Mission

Embassy of the Republic of Liberia, Arab Republic of Egypt

Liberia

Chapter 8

The Power of Purpose

Marian F. Kupee

In the continuing story of women who rise to lead with compassion and conviction, Marian F. Kupee stands as a voice of resilience and purpose. Marian embodies the strength of African women who lead through service, legacy, and love for their communities.

Born and raised in Liberia, Marian's journey has been shaped by both personal devotion and national history. Her life's work in diplomacy, advocacy, and humanitarian development reflects a belief that leadership begins not with privilege, but with purpose.

"I have always been passionate about empowering women and girls," she says. "That is where true nation-building begins."

Her story, grounded in empathy and action, reminds us that even amidst challenges, women continue to rise, to rebuild, to educate, and to lead.

A Legacy of Resilience

To understand Marian's leadership is to understand Liberia's women, their history, struggles, and unyielding

strength. She recalls vividly the years of war when Liberian women took to the streets, demanding peace.

“Our mothers, aunts, and grandmothers stood under the rain and the sun, declaring they would not sleep until peace returned,” she shares.

Their courage defined a generation. It also defined Marian’s own sense of purpose to ensure that the peace they fought for would lead to progress for women and girls.

Today, Marian continues that legacy through her humanitarian and leadership work, building platforms that empower others to rise just as those women once did for Liberia.

Continuing a Vision of Service

Marian’s journey into humanitarian leadership began through love and legacy. The Sumo G. Ki Humanitarian Foundation, which she leads, was originally established by her late husband; a man devoted to helping others. After his passing, Marian chose to continue his vision in his name, ensuring that his compassion lived on through action.

“The foundation,” she explains, *“is dedicated to empowering women and girls in Liberia through education, economic empowerment, and advocacy.”*

Under her guidance, the foundation provides scholarships for girls, vocational training for women, and mentorship programs designed to nurture leadership and confidence.

Each initiative seeks to bridge inequality and offer women the opportunity to thrive not as beneficiaries, but as builders of their own futures.

Through community-based programmes and advocacy campaigns, the foundation also champions policy reforms that promote women's rights and inclusion. For Marian, these efforts are not simply projects, they are lifelines for change.

"When a woman gains education and economic freedom," she says, "she becomes the pillar of her community."

Empowerment Through Sport

Marian's leadership extends beyond classrooms and policy circles. She also serves as the Vice President for Administration and Director for Social Development of a women's football team in Liberia; an initiative that uses sport as a platform for empowerment.

The team now includes over 60 young women, many of whom come from vulnerable backgrounds. Some are mothers, others school dropouts, all in search of opportunity. Marian saw football not just as a game, but as a space to restore dignity and purpose.

"It's not only about kicking the ball," she explains. "It's about building life skills, emotional strength, and self-belief. It's about preparing these young women for life beyond the field."

Through this initiative, she brings mentorship and hope to a new generation of women, guiding them to see that leadership can be practiced anywhere, even on a football pitch.

Lessons in Leadership

In her message to aspiring women leaders, Marian offers timeless wisdom drawn from both triumph and trial.

Leadership isn't about waiting for a position or a title.

It begins every single day in how you show up, how you serve, and how you stay true to your values even when the path ahead feels uncertain.

"Be proud of who you are becoming. Let your values guide you. Your authenticity, your story, your voice, your truth is your greatest strength. Lead with purpose. Lead with heart. The world truly needs the light you carry."

For Marian, "Leadership with Purpose and Authenticity" is not a slogan - it is a way of life.

"Leadership has never been about titles or positions," she reflects. "It's about impact and about using who you are and what you have to make a difference in the lives of others. Authenticity means leading from the inside out, knowing your values, trusting your voice, and showing up as your true self, even when it feels uncomfortable."

She recalls her own journey:

“When I joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a young cadet, right at the very beginning of the ranks, I learned that true leadership isn’t about the title you hold, but about the purpose and integrity you bring to every step of the journey.”

From this perspective, she shares four enduring lessons:

- **Believe in yourself** - women often doubt their abilities, but leadership begins with self-belief. Know your strengths. Trust that your voice matters.
- **Seek mentors and allies** - one of us succeed alone. Find role models who can guide you and surround yourself with women who will lift you when you falter.
- **Step beyond your comfort zone** - true leadership, Marian reminds us, is born from courage and the willingness to take risks, to speak truth, and to pursue vision even in uncertainty.
- **Persevere with purpose** - leadership is a journey and requires resilience, patience, faith and not giving up on your dreams.

Leading Through Legacy

What makes Marian’s story powerful is its quiet strength. She does not define leadership through titles or accolades,

but through service and stewardship. Each scholarship granted, each girl mentored, and each young woman empowered through sport is a testament to her belief that change begins one life at a time.

Her message resonates deeply with women everywhere that *purpose, not position, defines impact*. And that even in moments of adversity, faith and compassion can move communities forward.

As the Virtual Women's Forum continues to celebrate voices of transformation across Africa, Marian Kupee's story stands as a reminder that the most powerful leaders are those who lead with heart. Through her commitment to justice, empowerment, and service, she embodies the spirit of the forum itself- *women building bridges for others to cross*.

Her call to women is both gentle and resolute:

"Believe in your strength. Rise in your purpose. And never stop leading because the next generation is already watching."



Amie Bangura “Mama Afro”

Founder and CEO Mama Afro Investment SL Ltd

Sierra Leone

Chapter 9:

Cultivating Change: The Story of “Mama Afro”

Amie Bangura

Amie Bangura, affectionately known across Sierra Leone as “Mama Afro,” is more than an agripreneur – she is a visionary redefining what it means to grow, nurture, and lead. From the fields of Northern Sierra Leone to national and international development platforms, her story is one of purpose rooted in the soil and powered by innovation.

In a country where women farmers often work unseen and undervalued, Amie has cultivated both land and legacy. Through her company, Mama Afro Investment SL Ltd., she is transforming agriculture into a pathway for prosperity, dignity, and inclusion proving that farming is not just about survival, but about leadership, sustainability, and empowerment.

Seeds of Resilience

Raised in a small town called Kabala in Koinadugu District which is the Northern Province of Sierra Leone, Amie grew up witnessing both the hardship, poverty and potential of rural life. Agriculture was not just a way of life- it was a source of pride, yet also a reminder of the inequalities faced by women and youth.

Determined to change the narrative, Amie set out to build a business that would bridge traditional wisdom with modern solutions. Her early journey was filled with obstacles from limited access to finance and technology, to skepticism toward a woman leading in a male-dominated sector. But her conviction was clear: *if women could grow food, they could also grow businesses.*

Building Mama Afro Investment SL Ltd.

In 2019, Amie founded Mama Afro Investment SL Ltd., a diversified, women-led agribusiness dedicated to food security, income generation, and rural transformation. What began with a few acres of land has since expanded to over 300 hectares of rice and vegetable production, generating thousands of tons of produce each year.

Her company's impact reaches across multiple agricultural value chains:

- **Crop Cultivation:** Large-scale rice and vegetable farming supplying local and regional markets.
- **Livestock Rearing:** Goats, poultry, and cattle reared to boost nutrition and income for rural families.
- **Agro-Processing:** A modern rice milling and packaging facility that reduces post-harvest losses and enhances competitiveness.
- **Farmer Support Services:** Training and market access for 300+ smallholder farmers, especially women and youth.

- **Sustainability and Innovation:** Transitioning toward solar-powered irrigation, clean-energy processing, and cold storage to ensure climate resilience.

Through her leadership, Amie has turned local farming into a profitable, climate-smart enterprise that empowers communities and sets new standards for sustainable agribusiness in Sierra Leone.

Partnering for Impact

Amie's credibility and excellence have earned her partnerships with major national and international organizations.

- Catholic Relief Services (CRS): Supplied over 3,000 bags of rice for the school feeding project, benefiting 310 schools across Koinadugu and Falaba Districts.
- World Food Programme (WFP): Delivered 1,500 bags of parboiled rice for school-feeding projects in Sierra Leone's Southeast Region.
- Njala University of Sierra Leone (Agriculture University) Southeast Region. These collaborations not only strengthened food systems but also validated her company's reliability, transparency, and quality standards.

Innovation at the Core

Perhaps her most visionary undertaking is the ongoing construction of Sierra Leone's first dedicated private livestock clinic/pharmacy, located in Kabala Town. This pioneering facility aims to close a critical gap in animal healthcare ensuring that rural livestock farmers can access medicines, vaccines, and advisory services to improve productivity and livelihoods.

Amie is also preparing to launch fish farming and processing operations, expanding her company's footprint and creating new employment opportunities for rural youth. Her business now generates over \$150,000 in annual revenue, a remarkable feat for a woman who started with little more than determination and community trust.

Empowering Women and Youth

Beyond the numbers, Amie's greatest impact lies in people. Through her mentorship, hundreds of rural women and young people have gained not just income, but confidence, skills, and a renewed sense of purpose.

She embodies the belief that economic empowerment begins with inclusion and that true development happens when communities are given the tools to build their own futures.

Her story demonstrates that sustainable agriculture is not just about productivity; it's about participation, partnership, and power.

A Legacy of Growth and Grace

In recognition of her leadership and innovation, Amie has been celebrated as one of Africa's most inspiring agripreneurs, a winner for the commonwealth businesswomen 2024, a winner for Africa women's Network 2025 and a winner for National awards 2025 her influence extending well beyond Sierra Leone's borders.

From cultivating fields to cultivating futures, she continues to champion renewable energy, women's leadership, and youth employment in agriculture. Her story is proof that the seeds of change grow strongest in the hands of those who refuse to give up.

Amie Bangura's Message to Women Everywhere

"Never give up your dreams for any other thing. No dream is too small, and no soil is too poor for growth. What matters is your will to plant, nurture, and persist. When women rise in agriculture, communities thrive - and nations transform."

PART FOUR:
REWRITING
THE
INNER
SCRIPT



Nurvita Wijayanti

Lecturer, University of Bangka Belitung

Indonesia

Chapter 10

Digital Inclusion for Women

Nurvita Wijayanti

Nurvita Wijayanti, a lecturer at the University of Bangka Belitung, Indonesia and a current doctoral candidate at Universitas Gadjah Mada, explores the opportunities and challenges women face in accessing technology, both in Indonesia and East Africa. She emphasizes the importance of digital literacy, infrastructure, and financial tools in enabling women to achieve independence and thrive in the digital age.

Access to Technology: Opportunities and Inequalities

Nurvita begins by highlighting that while some women enjoy easy access to smartphones and digital platforms, others face significant barriers:

- **Geographic disparities:**
 - Indonesia spans 17,000 islands, meaning some regions have advanced 5G connections and vibrant digital startups, while others have poor or non-existent network coverage.

- Women in remote areas struggle to connect to online resources and opportunities.
- **Financial limitations:**
 - Even with available technology, some women cannot afford devices or internet subscriptions.
 - Economic constraints prevent full participation in digital platforms.
- **Societal and cultural norms:**
 - Persistent stereotypes suggest that technology and innovation are “not for women,” limiting encouragement and support for female users.

Nurvita notes that East Africa experiences similar challenges, though communities have begun implementing innovative solutions to bridge gaps in digital access.

Creative Solutions in East Africa

- **Mobile banking (M-banking):**
 - Women in rural areas can save, invest, and manage money directly via their mobile phones.

- This approach removes the need to visit traditional banks, empowering women financially and promoting independence.
- **Digital entrepreneurship:**
 - Women use technology to run businesses, market products, and create new income streams, even in regions with limited infrastructure.

These examples illustrate that technology is not inherently inaccessible, but solutions must be scaled and supported through targeted programs and policies.

Lessons for Women in Indonesia and Beyond

Nurvita identifies three key takeaways for empowering women through digital inclusion:

1. **Access is more than owning a phone:**
 - True access requires opportunities, support, infrastructure, and digital literacy programs.
 - Women across different regions need the tools and knowledge to leverage technology for meaningful outcomes.
2. **Solutions exist but require scaling:**
 - Initiatives in East Africa and Indonesia are effective but limited in reach.
 - Scaling these programs ensures more women benefit from digital tools, fostering

financial independence and entrepreneurship.

3. Policies and investments are crucial:

- Governments, private sectors, and civil society must treat digital access as a right, not a luxury.
- Investing in digital inclusion ensures equitable participation and prevents women from being left behind.

A Vision for the Future

Nurvita Wijayanti emphasises that technology is here to stay, and inclusion must be a priority:

- Women must have equal access to digital tools and opportunities.
- Policies and programs should focus on education, infrastructure, and financial empowerment.
- Supporting women in digital spaces transforms not only individual lives but entire communities and economies.

“The question is: will women be included, or will they be left behind? Let us make sure the future includes all of us.”



Phoebe Onyango

Member of Public Service Governance, Kenya Civil Society

Kenya

Chapter 11

Breaking Barriers for Girls and Women

Phoebe Onyango

Phoebe Onyango addresses the systemic barriers facing girls and young women in East Africa, highlighting the intersection of cultural norms, social discrimination, and structural inequalities. She draws attention to the urgent need to empower girls with information, resources, and support, while advocating for peace and equality as foundations for leadership.

Challenges Girls Face in Leadership and Politics

Phoebe outlines several critical challenges that limit girls' participation and advancement:

- **Sexual exploitation:**
 - Girls aspiring for elective positions often face coercion from male counterparts who expect sexual favors in exchange for opportunities or certification.
 - Girls from conservative or religious backgrounds may refuse such exploitation, leading to demoralization and withdrawal from leadership pathways.
- **Cultural and social norms:**

- In some communities, girls are socialized to remain silent, confined to domestic roles, and discouraged from public participation.
- Traditional beliefs, especially in areas like Turkana, reinforce the perception that women belong in the kitchen or the home rather than in leadership positions.
- **Discrimination and bullying:**
 - Male counterparts may actively discourage, demean, or obstruct girls from pursuing positions in politics, education, and other fields.
 - This reinforces a cycle where girls internalize limitations imposed by society rather than exploring their full potential.
- **Lack of information:**
 - Many girls, particularly in rural areas, remain unaware of constitutional rights, policies, and mechanisms that guarantee representation, such as the one-third gender rule in politics.
 - Without access to timely and accurate information, girls cannot effectively assert their rights or participate fully in leadership opportunities.
- **Lack of funding and party support:**
 - Campaigns and leadership activities are often financially demanding, yet resources are disproportionately allocated to male candidates.
 - Political parties may withhold nominations or certifications from girls, forcing them to

navigate additional hurdles such as running as independent candidates.

Strategies for Empowerment

Phoebe emphasizes practical strategies for girls to overcome barriers and assert their leadership potential:

- **Persistence and resilience:**
 - Girls should continue to push for their goals despite setbacks or discouragement.
 - Actively engaging in community meetings, voicing opinions, and demonstrating determination opens doors to opportunities and support.
- **Refusal of exploitation:**
 - Girls should stand firm against sexual exploitation, asserting their rights and maintaining their integrity.
- **Advocacy and legal action:**
 - Instances of bullying or rights violations should be reported to ensure accountability and adherence to the law.
 - Knowledge of rights empowers girls to challenge unfair treatment and claim spaces that belong to them.
- **Peacebuilding and mentorship:**
 - Embracing peace within households and communities lays a foundation for girls to thrive.

- Girls should be encouraged to model and spread peace, creating enabling environments for leadership development.

Vision for Gender Equality

Phoebe advocates for 50/50 representation in all sectors, underscoring that:

- Equal participation of men and women is not negotiable; girls should have the same access to opportunities as boys.
- Empowerment through information, mentorship, and community support ensures girls can aspire to leadership positions without fear or limitation.
- Societal evolution is key: as communities adopt new norms, girls are liberated from restrictive cultural and social expectations.

Key Takeaways for Young Women Leaders

- **Challenge stereotypes:** Break free from cultural and societal norms that dictate what girls can or cannot do.
- **Seek knowledge and information:** Awareness of rights, policies, and political structures equips girls to take action.

- **Embrace resilience and persistence:** Keep pursuing goals despite obstacles, lack of resources, or opposition.
- **Stand firm against exploitation:** Maintain integrity and refuse to trade personal dignity for opportunities.
- **Promote peace and mentorship:** A peaceful environment empowers girls to grow and lead effectively.

Phoebe Onyango's message emphasizes that girls' leadership potential is vast and transformative. When empowered with information, resources, and support, young women in East Africa can challenge traditional barriers, claim their rightful place in decision-making, and inspire a new generation of female leaders.

"Let us teach girls to persist, to stand firm, to embrace peace, and to claim the leadership spaces that belong to them. When girls lead, they transform communities, nations, and Africa itself."



Misha Lobban Clarke

*Executive Leader, Governance Specialist and Executive Director,
Barbados Chamber of Commerce and Industry*

Barbados

Chapter 12

Building Bridges, Breaking Barriers

Misha Lobban Clarke

Misha Lobban Clarke draws you into a world shaped by clarity, intention, and deep conviction. She embodies a rare blend of executive discipline and heartfelt authenticity - a woman who leads from both the head and the heart.

As a Caribbean executive with more than two decades of leadership experience, Misha brings a perspective grounded in transformation, governance, and the power of women's voices. Her journey reflects not only her professional accomplishments, but her enduring commitment to advancing women's leadership across generations.

A Journey Rooted in Purpose

Originally from Jamaica and now living in Barbados, Misha's career has been defined by service, strategic leadership, and an unwavering belief in the power of collaboration.

Her path spans roles in corporate governance, organisational transformation, strategic communications, and regional leadership. Today she serves as the Executive

Director of the Barbados Chamber of Commerce & Industry (BCCI)”, a role through which she has repositioned the Chamber as a dynamic, visible, and collaborative institution engaging governments, businesses, and civil society across the Caribbean.

Before this, she led the Institute of Chartered Accountants of the Caribbean (ICAC), where she expanded the organisation’s regional and international influence through partnerships with the International Federation of Accountants, CARICOM (Caribbean Community), and other multilateral agencies.

Across every role, her focus has remained constant: to build systems, organisations, and forging partnerships with leaders and stakeholders who make a meaningful difference.

Misha is candid about the realities women face as they rise into leadership - pressures that often remain unspoken.

She names three enduring challenges:

1. The Pressure to Over-Prove

Across the Caribbean and the rest of the world, women are rising to assume leadership whether in corporations, at the community level or in shaping policy or development agendas. Yet despite the progress made by women over the years, the journey towards breaking barriers to true equity and inclusion for women remains a challenge.

Structural and systemic barriers still limit women's access to C-suite roles and positions in the boardroom.

And the reality is that women in leadership are often held to higher standards than their male counterparts. Misha recalls the repeated expectation to “prove” her competence, even when her qualifications were clear.

2. Limited Support from Some Women in Leadership

Not all women receive support from those ahead of them on the leadership ladder. This, Misha insists, must change:

“Women should build bridges, not barriers to creating opportunities for other women.”

As women in leadership, we need to collectively use our voices and our power to challenge inequalities that continue to disadvantage and marginalise women and to be advocates for the empowerment and advancement of women. When women rise, everyone rises, every society is transformed.

3. Systemic Bias and Stereotypes

Women still face stereotypes about how they should lead, how they should behave, and how they should look while doing it.

But Misha challenges the myth of perfection.

Young women aspiring to leadership need to be taught that they don't have to pretend to have it all figured out. For her, authenticity is strength and vulnerability is not a weakness, but a form of courage.

Transforming Leadership Through Empowerment

Under her leadership, the BCCI launched a Women's P.O.W.E.R Summit in 2022; a signature initiative designed to equip women in business with the confidence, tools, and networks they need to excel.

The Summit brings women leaders together to advocate for equity; share lived experiences and ignite new possibilities for others.

It is the embodiment of her philosophy: leadership is not about climbing alone; it is about bringing others up with you.

Lessons to Emerging Women Leaders

Misha's wisdom, shaped by experience, offers powerful guidance to young women:

- **Show Up Fully** - Consistency, excellence, and discipline open doors when talent alone is not enough.
- **Seek Mentorship Purposefully** - Throughout her career, mentors played a pivotal role in her personal and

professional growth. She encourages young women aspiring to leadership to seek guidance from both men and women.

- **Lift Others as You Climb** - True leadership is measured not only by personal success, but by the number of people we empower along the way. That's leadership that is transformational and has lasting impact.

- **Own Your Presence** - Women must believe they belong in every room and speak from a place of confidence.

- **Stay Intentional About Growth** - Learning should never stop. Every season of life offers new lessons.

The Human Side of Leadership

Beyond her executive responsibilities, Misha is a wife and a mother of two. Her family keeps her grounded, reminding her daily of the purpose underlying her professional pursuits.

She also credits her faith as her anchor, the source of her strength, clarity, and resilience as well as her support system; family and close friends for helping her to balance her multiple roles and demands. In her own words:

"Every season is divinely appointed. On difficult days, I learn. On good days, I celebrate. But always, I move forward with purpose."

A Leader Committed to Legacy

Today, whether she is guiding public-private partnerships, mentoring, or advocating for gender equality, Misha

continues to build a legacy of integrity, empowerment, and transformation.

Her work reflects a simple yet profound belief: Leadership is not about position - it is about impact. It is about influence, compassion, and intentional action.

Her Message to Young Women

Misha Lobban Clarke's message to emerging leaders is clear and powerful:

"Believe in who you are and what you bring to the table. Show up with purpose. Seek mentorship. Lift others as you climb. And lead in a way that leaves people better than you found them."

Her chapter stands as a testament to women who lead with courage, faith, and conviction and to every young woman who is ready to rise.



Mestawot Ketama Aleab

Market Systems Development Advisor at Mercy Corps

Ethiopia

Chapter 13

Roots of Resilience: A Rural Girl's Path to Global Sustainability Leadership

Mestawot Ketama Aleab

Mestawot Ketama Aleab's story reflects a lineage of resilience. Her journey begins in the rural highlands of Arsi Bekoji, Ethiopia, a place known across the world for legendary marathon runners. Yet her race has been a very different one: a race against social norms, deeply rooted gender inequalities, and the structural barriers that seek to limit girls before they ever discover their own promise.

From the environment she has grown in, where early marriage, female genital mutilation, and overseas domestic work are perceived as inevitable paths for girls, Mestawot rose not because the world opened its doors, but because her mother taught her to build her own world.

A Childhood Shaped by Strength and Defiance

Raised by a courageous single mother, Mestawot grew up in a home where discipline walked hand in hand with unconditional freedom. Her mother refused to allow harmful traditional practices to define her daughter's future. She protected her from forced marriage, encouraged

analytical thinking, and taught her to question norms that diminished women.

Her grandmother, her community, and the rural life around her gave her the traditional lifestyle but it was her mother's quiet, determined leadership that has shaped the woman she would become.

The challenges were real. Discrimination, isolation, and societal pressure followed her throughout her school years. But so did her faith, her mother's unwavering support, and the resilience she had inherited.

A Journey of Education and Transformation

Leaving her rural community to attend Hawassa University was a profound turning point as seeing girls leaving for university was rare at the time. University life exposed her to diverse cultures, perspectives, and opportunities. However, living in a dormitory with students whose priorities differed from her's presented its own challenges, including bullying and discrimination. Still, her strong faith, close bond with her mentor (mother), and her personal determination kept her grounded. She graduated with distinction and went on to earn a master's degree in business administration with a specialisation in Project Management. Education became not just a qualification, but a tool she would later use to transform communities like the one that raised her.

A Career Built on Purpose

Over the years, Mestawot has served as a teacher, researcher, trainer, development professional, Business consultant to support business to inculcate green transformation in their work and open a door for women/youth employment and now, a Market Systems Development Advisor at Mercy Corps Ethiopia. Her work is driven by a deep sense of responsibility to elevate women and youth from the margins.

Her approach is holistic and forward-looking. She uses evidence, data, human-centred design, and system thinking to address the structural barriers that keep women from economic growth. She collaborates with government bodies, private sector partners, and civil society organisations to:

- Expand women's access to market-relevant skills
- Improve access to climate information
- Increase wage employment opportunities
- Strengthen gender-responsive financial and business services
- Advocate for social norm change
- Promote inclusion in green and sustainable value chains
- Advocate for girls' education and child safeguarding
- Support women led SMEs and MLEs to economically flourish in their business as a volunteer

To date, her work has transformed the lives of over 46,000 women, enabling 70% of them to secure decent jobs or establish sustainable income. Her interventions have strengthened livelihoods, shifted gender dynamics, improved income resilience, strengthened community resilience to climate shocks through establishing strong community early warning system and sustainable production and elevated women's decision-making power within households and communities.

By linking women's empowerment with climate action, she is helping build the foundations of inclusive economic transformation.

Global Recognition and Influence

Her impact has travelled far beyond Ethiopia. Mestawot has been honoured as:

- **Best Presenter Awardee**
- **Impact-Driven Youth**
- **Global Sustainability Leader**
- **Certified Entrepreneurship Trainer**

She has represented her community and country on major international platforms, including:

- United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 28)
- Presented her research on SDG Conference, Canada

- Climate and Pastoralism Conference, Kenya
- Presented her research on Amplifying and Empowering Voices in Evaluation conference, USA

Whether speaking on global stages or working directly with farmers, she carries with her the voice of rural women voices that are too often unheard.

A Message to Women: Your Origin Is Your Strength

Mestawot's journey is a powerful reminder that leadership is not determined by geography or circumstance. It is shaped by purpose, persistence, and the courage to rise above expectations.

Her message to young women, especially those from underserved or rural communities, is clear:

*"Your origin is your strength - not your limitation."
 "Do not wait for the perfect moment. Create the conditions you need and move." "When you rise, lift others with you."*

Your journey may not be easy, but it will be meaningful. Cultivate your resilience. Use your unique perspective to create positive, systemic change through responsible leadership, advocacy, education, and community development. When you rise, lift others with you. When you lead, lead with integrity, compassion, and courage.

If you believe in your purpose, remain consistent in your effort, and stay true to your values, you will not only overcome obstacles you will build pathways for generations of women to follow.”

Her life stands as proof that resilience can be inherited, purpose can be lived, and leadership can grow from the most unlikely places.

Mestawot Ketama Aleab is not only building systems she is building pathways for her children, future generations of girls who like her, come from communities where dreams are often discouraged.



Carlota A. De Gula-Iremedio

Founder and CEO Cogentc Business Solutions Inc.

Philippines

Chapter 14

Rising with Purpose

Carlota A. De Gula-Iremedio

Carlota “Lotz” A. De Gula-Iremedio has mastered the art of building something from almost nothing using discipline, humility, and courage as her foundation. Her journey is one of steady ascent, shaped by intention, resilience, and an unwavering belief in purpose-driven work.

A seasoned accountant turned entrepreneur, she stands today as the Founder and CEO of Cogentc Business Solutions Inc. (CBSI), a boutique consulting firm in the Philippines that has become a trusted partner for both local and international clients. Yet her beginnings were far more modest, grounded in quiet determination and a bold leap of faith.

Early Foundations: From Numbers to Vision

Lotz built her early career with precision and discipline. Armed with a degree in accounting, she spent more than 20 years in accounting, tax, finance, and corporate services, developing an expertise that would later become the backbone of her entrepreneurial success.

She began as an auditor in one of the Philippines' leading accounting firms, gaining the rigor and technical grounding essential to her field. After two years, she transitioned into private accounting, working for both local and multinational companies. These experiences - seven years of managing diverse financial environments - sharpened her analytical skills and broadened her understanding of business operations.

During these years, she also pursued a master's in business administration, expanding her strategic mindset and opening her world to new possibilities.

It was during this period that she discovered something essential:

Her technical skills were powerful, but her purpose was bigger.

The Leap of Faith: Building Something of Her Own

Encouraged by mentors, clients, and colleagues who recognized her potential, Lotz made a courageous decision that changed the course of her life.

She resigned from stable employment and began consulting independently in 2007; a leap that required both bravery and conviction. What began as a one-woman practice began to flourish rapidly. Her reputation for accuracy, empathy, and integrity spread through word-of-mouth. As clients grew, so did their trust.

By 2009, she formalized her operations as C.A. De Gula & Associates, hiring her first team members. By 2013, the firm transitioned into Cogentc Business Solutions Inc., a full-fledged corporation offering:

- Accounting and auditing
- Tax and compliance services
- Payroll and HR support
- Management consulting
- IT solutions for business operations

From a small home office to a thriving enterprise, her journey was built not on shortcuts, but on consistency and character.

The Rise of Cogentc: When Skill Meets Purpose

The early days of Cogentc were marked by long hours, perseverance, and complete immersion in the needs of her clients. Lotz worked tirelessly taking late-night calls, refining systems, and building sustainable solutions for businesses.

Her firm became known not only for its technical accuracy but for its human-centered approach to consulting. With her background in financial statements, she offered practical, data-driven insights that helped entrepreneurs make sound decisions.

Her leadership qualities became evident:

- **Integrity** in every transaction
- **Empathy** in every client interaction
- **Clarity** in every financial strategy
- **Discipline** in execution

Today, Cogentc is a respected firm with a team largely composed of women, an intentional commitment to cultivating female leadership and supporting women in the workforce.

Key Lessons from Her Journey

Lotz's story carries powerful messages for every woman seeking to carve her own path:

• The Power of Core Skills:

Her technical training in accounting became her passport - unlocking opportunities in consulting, business development, and leadership.

• The Importance of Purpose:

Her success came from aligning her work with her passion for helping others succeed.

- **Resilience and Perseverance:**

Self-doubt and industry barriers never stopped her; she transformed challenges into stepping stones.

Mentorship and Leadership: Giving Back to the Next Generation:

Today, Lotz is more than a CEO. She is a mentor, a guide, and a champion for women in business. At CBSI, she fosters a culture where:

- Ambition is encouraged
- Work-life balance is respected
- Women are empowered to lead
- Continuous learning is a shared value

Her commitment is not simply to run a successful company, but to shape an environment where young women can thrive and envision futures beyond limitations.

Her Message to Women Everywhere

Carlota “Lotz” A. De Gula-Iremedio believes that every woman carries within her the capacity for transformation.

Her message is simple yet powerful:

Use the skills you have.

Believe in your purpose.

And never hesitate to build a career on your own terms.

Through courage, discipline, and intention, she has shown that women can create more than businesses, they can create impact, opportunity, and legacy.

PART FIVE:
POWER OF PRESENCE -
ALIGNING MIND,
BODY AND VOICE



Jocelyn Lee

Family Health Practitioner and Global Health Advocate

Qatar

Chapter 15

Bridging Care, Courage, and Leadership Across Continents

Jocelyn Lee

Healing Beyond Borders

Jocelyn Lee shares a heartfelt reflection on her leadership journey - one that spans continents, cultures, and causes. As a certified medical provider with over 17 years of experience, Jocelyn has worked across the United States, Switzerland, Japan, and Africa, using her expertise in healthcare to build bridges of compassion and impact.

Her story is rooted in courage; the courage to start anew, to learn as she goes, and to lead with purpose. Having practiced medicine in diverse environments, Jocelyn witnessed firsthand the disparities in access to care, particularly among underserved communities in Africa. This experience sparked a deep calling within her to move beyond clinical care and address systemic healthcare gaps.

With no formal business training but an unshakable belief in her vision, she founded a medical NGO dedicated to bringing sustainable, preventative, and primary healthcare to remote communities. The organization's work has already made a significant difference:

- Reached over 1,000 adolescent girls in the past year through menstrual hygiene and cervical cancer education programs.
- Treated and cared for more than 700 patients during medical outreaches.
- Trained **m**edical providers from eight Nigerian states in evidence-based practice areas including paediatrics, antibiotic stewardship, mental health, and art-based medicine.

These milestones reflect Jocelyn's conviction that *empowerment begins with education and collaboration*.

But the journey was far from easy. *"I had no idea where to start - no business background, just passion,"* she recalls. Yet her determination, curiosity, and willingness to ask questions carried her forward. She sought mentorship, shared her vision widely, and found allies along the way including a fellow medical provider in Sierra Leone who became both a mentor and a mirror, affirming that she was not alone.

Through this, Jocelyn learned one of leadership's greatest truths: no one succeeds alone. Growth, she believes, comes from learning and lifting others.

Lessons in Leadership and Life

Jocelyn's message to women everywhere is deeply personal yet universally resonant.

- **Embrace balance.** *"We can love our families deeply and still lead in our professions," she says. "Women can be both nurturers and leaders - we do not have to choose."*
- **Prepare and persevere.** Whether entering a new field or leading a new initiative, preparation builds confidence, but adaptability sustains progress.
- **Confront guilt with grace.** For many women, leadership comes with internal conflict especially around family and societal expectations. Jocelyn reminds us that balance, not perfection, is the goal.
- **Lead fearlessly.** True leadership, she believes, is not the absence of fear but the decision to move forward *despite it*.

Jocelyn also reflects on the enduring barriers women face such as pay gaps, underrepresentation, and the "motherhood penalty" that often slows advancement. Yet she remains steadfast in her belief that empowered women transform communities.

"Every time we dare to do something we thought we couldn't be it speaking up, applying for a role, starting a project, we expand what is possible for the woman who comes after us."

Her story is a reminder that leadership does not require perfection or permission. It begins with the courage to act, to learn, and to keep moving forward.

Key Takeaways from Jocelyn Lee's Journey

- **Build courage through action.** Each small step forward strengthens your resilience and expands your possibilities.
- **Seek mentors and allies.** Collaboration multiplies impact.
- **Lead with empathy and authenticity.** Your story has the power to inspire others to rise.
- **Empowerment is contagious.** When one woman dares to lead, she lights the path for many others.

In her closing words, Jocelyn Lee captures the spirit of the Virtual Women's Forum:

"True empowerment is contagious. When one woman dares to rise, she makes it easier for the next woman to do the same."

Her story stands as a testament to the power of purpose, perseverance, and passion; a reflection of how one woman's journey can ripple across borders to heal, educate, and inspire countless others.



AngeeLia Phua
Image Consultant and Trainer
Singapore

Chapter 16

Reflections of Confidence:

Crafting an Image That Inspires

AngeeLia Phua

The Power of Professional Image in Leadership

AngeeLia Phua, an accomplished image consultant and trainer from Singapore, brings over two decades of experience in shaping executive presence, personal branding, and professional image. Her message is both powerful and practical, that *image is not vanity; it is strategy*.

For AngeeLia, the world of image consulting has never been about fashion for fashion's sake. It is about transformation - helping women leaders ensure that how they present themselves reflects the strength, intelligence, and capability they already possess. She has spent 20 years helping professionals bridge the gap between perception and potential, particularly women whose brilliance often goes unnoticed because their outward image fails to mirror their inner power.

“Highly capable women - brilliant, hardworking, qualified, are often overlooked or dismissed not because they lack ability, but because their image doesn’t reflect who they truly are,” she explains.

This realization became the foundation of her life's work: equipping women to be seen, heard, and taken seriously.

Why Image Matters for Women Leaders

In today's fast-paced, visually driven world, first impressions often precede introductions. AngeeLia reminds us that people make judgments in seconds before a woman even has the opportunity to demonstrate her expertise. Thus, professional image becomes a leadership tool, one that answers unspoken questions such as:

- *Can I trust her?*
- *Is she capable?*
- *Can she represent us?*

These silent evaluations determine opportunities and influence. For young women entering leadership, understanding this dynamic is critical. *"Your image is the gateway to being noticed for your brilliance,"* she notes. *"It is not about being judged for your looks -it's about being recognized for your potential."*

The Three Pillars of a Powerful Image

AngeeLia distills the essence of professional image into three pillars that every woman leader can harness to strengthen her presence and influence.

1. Visibility

Visibility is not just about showing up - it's about being *remembered*. A powerful image creates a lasting impression that aligns with your purpose and message.

- Choose clothing and accessories that reflect intentionality and professionalism.
- Maintain good posture and alert body language that communicate confidence and engagement.
- Present yourself in a way that draws attention naturally, without needing to demand it.

“Visibility draws opportunity to you without you chasing it,” says AngeeLia.

2. Credibility

Credibility is built not only on accomplishments but on how those accomplishments are presented. When outward appearance contradicts capability, trust can be lost before conversation begins.

- Structured, well-fitted clothing reflects clarity and confidence.
- Grooming and attention to detail communicate respect for yourself and others.
- A composed image signals discipline and readiness.

“A credible image says you can trust me with big matters because I take small things seriously.”

3. Influence

True influence, according to AngeeLia, begins long before a word is spoken. It is not about control or dominance but about the calm authority that draws others to listen and follow willingly.

- An influential leader appears centred and steady, not defensive or emotional.
- Controlled expressions, steady posture, and composure inspire confidence.
- Influence grows from alignment when who you are, what you want, and how you present yourself are in harmony.

“People don’t follow loudness,” she observes. “They follow leaders who look composed, clear, and assured.”

Authentic Alignment: The Core of a True Image

One of the most empowering lessons AngeeLia shares is that image is *not pretending*. It is **alignment**. A powerful image harmonizes three dimensions of identity:

1. **Internal Self** – values, identity, and strengths.
2. **External Goals** – professional aspirations, leadership roles, and opportunities.
3. **Visible Presentation** – appearance, communication, and behaviour.

When these align, authenticity and authority emerge effortlessly. Women do not have to wait for a title or position to project leadership; they can *begin by showing up as leaders now*.

“You become a leader when you start looking, thinking, and behaving like one - consistently.”

Key Takeaways from AngeeLia’s Insights

- **Image is influence.** It communicates leadership before you even speak.
- **Visibility creates opportunity.** Be intentional in how you show up.
- **Credibility comes from consistency.** Let your appearance reflect your professionalism.
- **Influence is quiet strength.** Composure, clarity, and authenticity draw respect.
- **Alignment breeds confidence.** When your inner purpose matches your outward image, you become unstoppable.

Closing Reflection

AngeeLia Phua’s message reinforces the mission of the *Virtual Women’s Forum*: to empower women with the tools, mindset, and presence to lead fearlessly in every arena. Her approach reminds women that leadership begins with self-

awareness - that how we carry ourselves is not superficial but deeply strategic.

Through her work, she urges women to own their image as an extension of their voice, to show up with intention, and to let the world see the confident, capable leaders they already are.

“Professional image is not a costume. It is your signature. Wear it with purpose.”



Gina Phan

International Soft-Skills Trainer

Malaysia

Chapter 17

The Power of Lifelong Learning, Networks, and Character in Leadership

Gina Phan

Gina Phan, a Malaysian business consultant and international soft-skills trainer, brings decades of wisdom through her reflections on leadership in the digital age. Her story, rooted in resilience and transformation, bridges the early years of the IT revolution with the present era of artificial intelligence - illustrating how women can thrive through adaptability, learning, and values-based leadership.

With a career spanning over three decades, Gina began as a software developer in an era when the IT industry was dominated by men. Over time, she rose through the ranks to become a Managing Director of a US-based software company before eventually establishing herself as an independent consultant and soft-skills trainer. Her journey mirrors the evolution of technology itself from mainframes and dial-up modems to the dynamic digital networks of today.

Reflecting on her experiences, Gina acknowledges the challenges women faced and continue to face in male-dominated industries. She recalls that while men seemed to run “a 100-metre dash,” women often faced “a 400-metre glass hurdle race.” Yet, she credits her mentors especially male leaders who recognized her potential for encouraging her growth and advancement.

Through her professional and personal evolution, Gina shares three core lessons that define her philosophy of leadership:

1. Continuous Learning and a Growth Mindset

Gina emphasizes the importance of *lifelong learning* and intellectual curiosity. She encourages women to:

- Strive for excellence and deep knowledge in their areas of expertise.
- Invest not only money but also time and effort into continuous learning.
- Seek diverse perspectives, even from those who disagree, as a way to strengthen understanding.
- Cultivate humility and an openness to learn from all experiences.

For Gina, a growth mindset embracing curiosity, self-reflection, and adaptability has been key to navigating multiple career transitions and staying relevant in a rapidly changing digital world.

2. Building Meaningful Relationships and Networks

Echoing the saying “*your network is your net worth*,” Gina reframes it as “*your relationships are your greatest asset*.” She highlights that relationships should not be transactional but rooted in mutual respect and sincerity.

- Build authentic connections without expecting favours in return.
- Surround yourself with role models who inspire growth and accountability.
- Be present and show up. True networks are strengthened through consistent engagement.
- Reflect on who influences your thinking and decisions; choose your circle with intention.

3. Character as the Ultimate Currency

Integrity, authenticity, and kindness are central to Gina's definition of success.

She asks herself:

“Do people smile when they say my name? Do they trust me?”

For her, leadership is not measured solely by achievements but by the respect and goodwill one earns through consistent ethical conduct.

Gina also underscores the importance of balance between ambition and rest, personal life and professional goals. She reminds women that success often looks effortless online, but balance requires deliberate effort.

Her advice:

“Smell the roses while you climb up the mountain - enjoy the journey.”

Closing her message, Gina leaves women with a deeply personal reflection:

“Keep the faith. Whatever your beliefs, remember that the Almighty is watching over you.”

Gina’s insights offer timeless wisdom for women navigating both the opportunities and pressures of modern leadership. By embodying lifelong learning, nurturing genuine relationships, and leading with integrity, Gina Phan exemplifies the quiet strength and self-awareness that define empowered leadership in the digital age.



Melody Chipo Makwaza

*Confidence Coach, Transformational Speaker, Leadership
Consultant and Award-winning Author*

Zimbabwe

Chapter 18

Commanding the Space:

The Art and Power of Visibility

Melody Chipu Makuwaza

Melody Chipu Makuwaza speaks with poise - the kind of presence that fills a room not with volume, but with clarity. Yet, as she often reminds the women she coaches, presence was not always her default. It was a skill she built, a mindset she fought for, and ultimately, the very transformation that reshaped her leadership and her life.

Melody is a Confidence Coach, Transformational Speaker, Leadership Consultant and Award-winning Author whose impact ripples across boardrooms, classrooms and communities in Africa and beyond. She equips leaders to speak with courage, lead with influence, and show up with impact not as a performance, but as a practice. She is also the Founder of *The Mentoring Class*, a non-profit dedicated to skills development and mentorship for high school and university students, proving that leadership must flow downward as much as it climbs upward.

Her work is rooted in her training in Applied Psychology, international coaching frameworks, and her lived experience - the lessons not found in textbooks, but in the raw, unedited chapters of life. Recognized among the *International Renaissance Centre's Celebrating 100 Women Making a Difference*

in Africa, Melody embodies her belief that *real life is the ultimate Masterclass*.

But her chapter in this book begins with a revelation - one that many women will recognize as their own.

The Hidden Cost of Being Invisible

For years, Melody carried a costly belief:
that excellence alone was enough.

She posted beautiful flyers.
She delivered powerful work.
She waited for clients to arrive.

But they didn't.
Not in the way she hoped, not consistently, not sustainably.

And the consequences were no longer professional; they were painfully personal.

There came days when she looked at her children and wondered how she would feed them. The truth became impossible to ignore:

**Invisibility has a price.
And she was paying it.**

*"I was letting my expertise starve," she says.
"I knew I needed to show up, but I kept hiding behind competence."*

One day, during a client meeting, the client looked at her with a mix of honesty and urgency and said:

“Melody, you need to be more visible.”

Those words pierced deeper than criticism.
They awakened her.

She had the results.
She had the competence.
But she was not showing up where it mattered.

It wasn't fear of failure holding her back. It was fear of being seen.

And that was the turning point.

The Myth of Silent Excellence

Melody has worked with leaders across industries; young professionals, mid-career managers, executives navigating high-stake transitions and she has seen the same struggle in all of them:

Brilliance buried behind silence.
Competence suffocated by invisibility.
Leadership muted by fear of taking space.

Women, especially, are socialized to “do excellent work quietly,” expecting that good work will eventually speak for itself.

"It won't," she says plainly.
"Not if no one can hear it."

She calls it *the myth of silent excellence*. It holds women back from promotions, opportunities, partnerships, funding, recognition and from the respect they deserve.

Visibility is not vanity.
Visibility is strategy.
Visibility is leadership.

The Shift: From Competence to Communicated Value

The heart of Melody's transformation came from a single realization:

You must become the spokesperson for your own excellence.

Not arrogantly, not loudly, but intentionally.

She now teaches leaders to make one crucial shift:

From competence alone → to communicated value.

It means:

- articulating your impact, not assuming others will notice it
- speaking up in meetings, not waiting to be invited
- asking questions, even with knocking knees and a trembling voice

- sharing your ideas before someone else says them
- showing up where your voice can create opportunities

“Do not leave any room without saying something,” she tells young women. “If you are terrified, write it down first. Then say it. Then say it again. That is how courage is built - through repetition.”

Presence is not a gift.

It is a discipline.

And discipline is how women rewrite their narratives.

The Woman Behind the Leadership

Melody’s work is not built on theory alone. It is built on the battles she has fought.

She knows the weight of being a mother with dreams, the pressure of carrying a business, the sting of financial uncertainty, and the silence of unacknowledged potential.

She knows what it is to be overlooked.

She knows what it takes to rise.

Her leadership consultancy now shapes leaders across the continent. Her nonprofit nurtures the leaders of tomorrow. Her voice commands stages, rooms, and hearts.

She stands not as a perfect leader, but as a present one.

Her Message to Women: Take Up Space

There is a seed of greatness within you.

Water it.

Stop whispering your worth.

Start commanding your space.

Closing Reflection

Melody Chipso Makuwaza's journey reminds us that leadership is not only shaped by skill, but by presence. It is not enough to have a voice - you must be willing to use it.

Her legacy is a call to women everywhere:

Be heard.

Be known.

Be seen.

*Not for the applause,
but for the impact your visibility will create
for yourself, your family, your community, and the women who will
walk after you.*

**PART SIX:
DIGITAL POWER
FOR WOMEN
LEADERS**



Muji Bekomson

Founder and CEO of FEMME Health Companion

Nigeria

Chapter 19

Rewriting the System:

The Courage to Build What Doesn't Exist

Muji Bekomson

Innovation begins not in the lab, but in the mind. Muji Bekomson's journey reminds us that every breakthrough starts with an inner shift, the courage to question what we've been told is normal and to rebuild systems that serve, include, and heal. Her story is where science meets empathy, and innovation becomes an act of reimagining womanhood itself.

Muji is a quiet fire - a woman who translates frustration into innovation, and pain into purpose. A scientist by training and a disruptor by design, Muji's story is one of refusing to accept "normal" when "normal" was never built for women.

She is the Founder and CEO of FEMME Health Companion, a digital health platform that reimagines how women experience care, support, and solidarity in a system that too often ignores their pain. But before she built technology, she built understanding, beginning behind a microscope.

From the Microscope to the Movement

Muji began her professional journey as a medical laboratory scientist, where she spent years studying samples under the lens searching for clarity, precision, and truth in data. She believed science could solve anything. But what she found instead was a deeper systemic flaw.

“Even with perfect science,” she says, “women’s pain is dismissed. Our realities are downplayed. Our struggles are called normal.”

For Muji, this realization was a breaking point not with science, but with the systems around it. The issue wasn’t that women lacked care; it was that the system had been designed to minimize their experiences.

Her awakening came through a single, unforgettable moment. After sharing her struggles with painful periods and exhaustion, a doctor looked at her and said:

“Just get pregnant. It will fix your symptoms.”

That comment became her catalyst. It revealed how deeply the healthcare world misunderstood women, treating their bodies as problems to escape, not systems to understand.

“I carried that sentence with me,” she recalls. “It didn’t haunt me; it fueled me.”

Building FEMME: From Frustration to Framework

That moment marked the birth of FEMME Health Companion, a revolutionary women's health platform built not to diagnose, but to accompany. FEMME isn't a tracker or a wellness app. It's a digital ally for women navigating hormonal health, reproductive care, and burnout.

At its core, FEMME delivers empathy in a digital form; a space where women hear the words too few professionals ever say:

"Your body isn't broken. The system is."

Through FEMME, Muji redefines what it means to design for women. The platform's model integrates science, storytelling, and solidarity giving women both evidence and emotional support. It is, in Muji's words, "a companion built to stand by women."

Her innovation has earned her recognition as a Top 50 Voice in African Tech and a SheLeadsAfrica 50 Under 30 honoree, cementing her role as a leading voice in Africa's femtech movement.

But Muji insists it's more than technology - it's a movement.

"FEMME is proof that frustration can be the blueprint for innovation - that healing the system begins with healing how we listen."

The Lessons of Leadership

As a founder, Muji has faced the doubts and dismissals familiar to many women innovators.

When she presented her ideas, she was often told:

“Periods are normal.”

“Women just need to relax.”

“Your idea is too niche.”

Her response? Clarity and conviction.

“When they can’t see the problem, they’re not your audience,” she says. *“Their limits don’t define your vision.”*

For Muji, every “no” was redirection, not rejection. Every skeptical room became another opportunity to advocate for a system that listens.

Today, FEMME bridges the gap between health and humanity, proving that women don’t need fixing, they need understanding. Her platform brings together data, technology, and lived experience to create care systems that finally make sense to real women living real lives.

A Message for the Next Generation

Muji’s message to young women is one of radical permission and quiet rebellion.

"You don't have to have it all figured out. I don't. Purpose doesn't arrive with clarity. It arrives through pain, through questions, through those moments when you say: 'This isn't right. Someone must fix this.' And then you realise, that someone is you."

She reminds women that leadership isn't about perfection, but persistence.

"Start messy. Start scared. Start anyway," she says. "Because your lived experience, the thing you think disqualifies you is your superpower."

Muji believes that women's pain and imperfection are not weaknesses to hide, but evidence of resilience to harness. Every story, every scar, becomes a seed for innovation.

Legacy in Progress

When that doctor once told her to *"escape her period,"* Muji decided instead to rebuild the world that told her to.

FEMME Health Companion stands as a testament to what happens when women refuse to adapt to broken systems and instead design new ones. It's a declaration that women's health should be simple, human, and in solidarity not buried under bureaucracy or bias.

"The world doesn't need more permission-seekers," she says. "It needs builders. Disruptors. Women who refuse to accept 'normal.'"

Through her work, Muji is doing just that, rewriting what care means, one woman at a time.

FEMME isn't just a company. It's a movement. And for Muji Bekomson, it's proof that when women build from pain, they build systems that heal the world.



Dr Rema Ramchandran

*Management Consultant; Strategic Advisor to
FundsIndia Private Wealth Management Company
India*

Chapter 20

Empowering Women in the Digital Age

Dr Rema Ramchandran

In a world increasingly defined by technology, Dr Rema Ramchandran stands as a voice of clarity and conviction. A management consultant, Strategic Advisor to FundsIndia Private Wealth Management Company, global NGO leader, and Director on the Board of the International Women's Federation of Commerce and Industry (IWFCI), Rema has seen first-hand how digital tools are reshaping women's empowerment and leadership. Her reflections shine a light on how women everywhere can turn connectivity into opportunity and visibility into leadership.

Rema emphasizes that *empowerment begins with access*, and in today's world, access is digital. *"If we are to truly empower women,"* she asserts, *"we must put the tools of the future into their hands today."*

For Rema, this is not just a statement about technology. It is a call to action for inclusivity, equity, and innovation. The mobile phone, she notes, is not merely a device. It is *a gateway* to education, markets, collaboration, and influence. It has the power to lift women from isolation into networks of learning and enterprise. In her words, the digital space is "a new arena where we can lead, speak, build and inspire without waiting for permission."

From Access to Action: Women Leading Digitally

Drawing from India's diverse and dynamic experiences, Rema shares vivid examples of how digital transformation is already changing lives. She speaks of Rani Kumari, a young mother from rural Bihar, who used WhatsApp groups to access farming advice, sell her produce, and coordinate with other women farmers in her self-help group. Through her smartphone, Rani transformed from a dependent housewife into an entrepreneur and community leader.

She also tells the story of Harsha Arora, a 16-year-old coder from Mumbai who, through free online tutorials and open forums, built an app later acquired by a Silicon Valley firm.

These women, Rema explains, are not exceptions. They are the beginnings of a movement. A movement where women are not passive participants in the digital world, but active creators, innovators, and leaders.

Across India, platforms like *Sheroes*, a women-only social network, are enabling thousands of women to connect, learn, and access remote work opportunities. Each story reaffirms her message: when women are given access to technology, they do not just consume - they *create value*.

The Gendered Digital Divide: Challenge and Possibility

Despite these advances, Rema acknowledges that the journey toward digital equality is far from complete. She warns that the *gendered digital divide* remains one of the greatest obstacles to women's empowerment in developing economies. Citing research, she highlights that women in low- and middle-income countries are still less likely to own smartphones, access the internet, or feel safe online.

This divide is not only technological but cultural. Social norms and limited digital literacy, and affordability barriers still keep millions of women disconnected. Yet, Rema refuses to see these barriers as permanent. Instead, she calls for courage and collaboration: "*We do not overcome these barriers by retreating. We overcome them by entering the space boldly together.*"

Her appeal is for collective empowerment - women standing together to claim their digital space, to learn, to innovate, and to lead. She insists that safety and inclusivity online must be built by women themselves, not awaited from external institutions.

Best Practices: Learning, Mentorship, and Storytelling

Rema turns her attention to what works; the practices that are transforming women's digital participation into leadership. She highlights initiatives such as the *Digital Empowerment Foundation* and *Internet Saathi* (a Google-Tata collaboration), which are training rural women in digital

literacy and entrepreneurship. Mentorship networks like *She Leads Tech* connect aspiring entrepreneurs with experienced mentors, creating pipelines of opportunity for women to lead in technology and business.

But perhaps her most compelling insight is about *storytelling as leadership*. “*In today’s world,*” she says, “*your story is your power.*” She points to young activists like Licy Priya Kangujam, a 13-year-old climate leader using platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram to mobilize global attention for environmental justice. Through these stories, women and girls are redefining leadership, not by title or status, but by *message and impact*.

Rema reminds women that influence today is built on visibility. The digital world rewards authenticity, consistency, and collaboration. Every post, every shared insight, every voice raised in solidarity contributes to a larger narrative, one in which women are seen, heard, and respected.

Building the Future: Leadership in the Digital Arena

In her closing reflections, Rema paints a vision of the future where digital leadership is synonymous with empowerment. Platforms like Etsy, Meesho, and Instagram Shops, she explains, are enabling women to turn creativity into enterprise and small ideas into global ventures. Studies suggest that women-led digital enterprises in India alone could generate over 150 million jobs by 2030 which is a testament to the transformative potential of women’s participation in the digital economy.

To young women leaders listening across Africa and the world, her advice is clear and urgent: *“Your digital identity is your leadership brand. How you show up online, what you share, whom you support, and what you speak for, all of this creates influence.”*

She encourages women to *own their narrative*, to create content, build communities, and support one another. Because in the digital era, *visibility leads to credibility, and credibility leads to opportunity*.

A Call to Digital Sisterhood

Dr Rema Ramchandran’s message is more than an address. It is a roadmap for women in the 21st century. She challenges us to think of technology not as a privilege but as a platform for purpose. Her words echo the spirit of collaboration that is a reminder that empowerment in the digital age is not individual; it is collective.

Her call is for a *digital sisterhood*. Women across continents must use their voices, skills, and stories to light the path for others.

Because when women lead online, they inspire change offline.

And when they connect, they create the future.



Professor Sara Zouhir

*Judge, Professor of Law, and Advocate for Gender Equality in the
Judiciary*

Morocco

Chapter 21

Justice, Integrity and Leadership in Action

Professor Sara Zouhir

Justice as the Foundation of Empowerment

Professor Sara Zouhir's story begins with a deep conviction that the law must serve as a shield for the vulnerable and as the foundation for equality. With over sixteen years of experience as a judge and a professor at the Higher Institute of Magistrature, she brings both scholarship and service to the pursuit of justice.

In her words, *"the law should serve as a shield for the vulnerable and the foundation for equality."* This belief guided her decision to join the judiciary and continues to shape her mission: to ensure that justice is not only done but is accessible to all, especially women who remain marginalised in many parts of Africa.

Sara reminds us that true justice cannot exist without representation. When women take their rightful place in courts, councils, and parliaments, justice becomes more humane and inclusive. Their presence ensures that the law reflects the lived realities of those it seeks to protect.

Breaking Barriers, One Case at a Time

Her journey, however, has not been without challenges. Sara recalls entering rooms where she was the only woman and was her competence questioned simply because of her gender. Yet she chose resilience over resentment, excellence over excuse.

One story she shared captures this journey vividly. Early in her career, she presided over a case in a small town. An elderly man, upon seeing that the judge was a young woman, hesitated to proceed, convinced that justice could only be dispensed by men. He even turned to the opposing party to suggest settling the matter outside, doubting her authority.

In that moment, Sara faced not just one man's disbelief, but the reflection of centuries of social conditioning. With patience and professionalism, she assured him that *"the law does not discriminate based on age or gender - justice is about fairness, not who delivers it."*

He agreed to proceed, and by the end of the hearing, his perception had begun to shift. For Sara, this encounter became a defining moment, a reminder that change rarely happens in sweeping gestures, but *"one mind, one case, one moment at a time."*

Digital Transformation and Women in Justice

Sara also highlights how digital technologies are reshaping the legal and leadership landscape in Africa. Virtual court

hearings, online legal aid services, and social media advocacy are making justice more accessible than ever.

She views this transformation as an opportunity for women. *“More than ever,”* she notes, *“young women have access to information, mentorship, and opportunities that were once beyond reach.”*

Social media has become a tool of empowerment giving women judges, lawyers and activists a platform to advocate for human rights, raise awareness about gender-based violence, and inspire others. Sara sees this as a powerful shift that allows women to own their narratives and redefine leadership in their communities.

“Technology, she insists, is not merely a tool for efficiency, it is an instrument for equality”.

Resilience, Excellence and Integrity

Despite significant progress, Sara acknowledges that gender inequality in leadership remains a reality across Africa. The judiciary and legal professions have long been male-dominated spaces, where women often work twice as hard to earn recognition and respect.

She shares candidly that she too faced doubt and discrimination in her early years from being underestimated to navigating societal expectations of what a woman *“should be.”* Yet she chose to meet bias with brilliance and prejudice with professionalism.

Her guiding principle is simple yet powerful: *“Excellence, resilience, and integrity are the strongest weapons against discrimination.”*

For Sara, integrity is non-negotiable. Leadership without ethics, she warns, is hollow. Women leaders must model the change they seek by leading with honesty, fairness, and courage.

“We are not just making decisions; we are breaking barriers, reshaping mindsets, and proving that justice and competence have no gender.”

Lessons for Future Women Leaders

From Sara’s journey, several key lessons emerge for women aspiring to lead with impact and purpose:

1. **Anchor leadership in justice** – Whatever your field, fairness and equality must guide your actions.
2. **Turn barriers into opportunities** – Every challenge is a chance to prove capability and shift perceptions.
3. **Harness technology for empowerment** – Use digital tools to advocate, connect, and amplify your voice.
4. **Lead with integrity** – Let ethics and excellence define your legacy.
5. **Mentor and uplift** – Create pathways for younger women to rise within systems still resistant to change.
6. **Be patient but persistent** – Transformation is gradual; change grows from consistency.

These principles show that women's leadership is both a personal commitment and a public service and a call to build systems that mirror justice and equality.

Translating Insight into Action

To bring Sara's lessons to life:

- **Model fairness daily:** Treat every decision as an act of justice, however small.
- **Challenge bias through example:** Let your performance speak louder than prejudice.
- **Leverage digital advocacy:** Use online platforms to raise awareness and share resources that empower other women.
- **Establish peer mentorship circles:** Encourage dialogue between senior and emerging women leaders in your profession.
- **Champion institutional reform:** Advocate for policies that advance women's representation and transparency in governance.

By translating belief into action, women leaders can turn individual achievements into collective advancement.

Conclusion: The Future is Ours to Shape

Professor Sara Zouhir's story is one of courage, intellect, and conviction. She embodies the kind of leadership that balances wisdom with humility, tradition with innovation, and justice with compassion.

Her message to African women and to women everywhere is clear: *"You are capable, you are worthy, and your leadership is needed now more than ever."*

Her words remind us that the future of justice and equality depends on the women who dare to serve with integrity, lead with empathy, and transform with purpose.

Change begins not in institutions but in individuals - in each woman who chooses to believe that her voice, her work, and her leadership can make a difference.



Dr Houda Chibi

Senior Engineer, Tunisie Telecom

Tunisia

Chapter 22

Women Inclusion in the Digital Age

Dr. Houda Chihi

Dr. Houda Chihi explores women's inclusion in technology, highlighting the challenges, skills, and opportunities for women in the digital age. She emphasizes digital equity, upskilling, and safe online practices as essential for women to succeed in tech and contribute to economic growth.

Context: The Digital Age and Women

The pandemic taught us that work, education, and daily activities can be performed remotely, creating new opportunities for technology use. Yet, women still face limited access to digital tools and underrepresentation in tech and leadership positions.

Key challenges include:

- **Rejection and obstacles** due to gender biases
- **Limited access to devices and internet connectivity**, especially in rural areas
- **Insufficient technical skills** to fully participate in the digital economy

Houda stresses that closing the gender gap in tech is essential for economic growth, equity, and diversity. Women must be included fully in digital spaces to achieve sustainable development.

Challenges and Regulations for Inclusion

- **Affordable and accessible devices:** Ensuring smart devices are low-cost and widely available
- **Digital literacy and STEM encouragement:** Teaching women and girls to pursue STEM and tech careers
- **Online safety:** Educating women on safe internet use to prevent cyberbullying and online violence
- **Policy and regulation:** Establishing laws and policies that guarantee universal access, protect online rights, and promote gender equity

Digital inclusion must reach urban and rural areas alike, providing equal opportunities for all women.

Required Skills for Women in Tech

Houda emphasizes the importance of both soft and hard skills for digital success:

- **Digital and technical skills:** Learning how to use the internet, digital tools, AI, and machine learning
- **Communication and language skills:** Writing professional emails, presenting oneself effectively in meetings, and networking
- **Continuous learning and reskilling:** Staying updated with new technologies, attending webinars, and pursuing certifications
- **Planning and goal-setting:** Knowing your strengths, identifying your dream job, and defining a clear career path

She also encourages women to seek mentorship, attend conferences, and leverage online platforms to upskill and gain professional opportunities. Free resources such as Coursera, Udemy, and other online programs can help women advance without financial barriers.

Inspiration from Dr. Chihi's Journey

Houda shares that success in tech requires determination, discipline, and continuous learning. She highlights the importance of:

- Being proactive and taking calculated risks
- Networking and learning from mentors
- Maintaining health, well-being, and family relationships while pursuing career goals
- Being the driver of your own change, embracing challenges, and staying resilient

She stresses that women must show up, speak up, and claim the opportunities that belong to them, particularly in emerging fields like AI and digital innovation.

Conclusion: Driving Inclusion and Growth

Women's inclusion in technology is critical for economic development, equity, and empowerment. By addressing connectivity, access, regulation, and skills, and by promoting continuous learning and mentorship, women can thrive in tech, contribute to innovation, and inspire the next generation of female leaders.

“Be unstoppable. Keep learning. Speak up. Show up. Lead. Your participation in technology is not just about opportunity - it is about shaping the future.”

PART SEVEN:
GLOBAL PATHWAYS
FOR
WOMEN-LED
ENTERPRISES



Rhonda Bowen

Global Strategic Communication Guide,

Bells Communication Across Cultures

Germany

Chapter 23

Leading Through Co-Creation and Communication

Rhonda Bowen

In the evolving landscape of women's leadership, Rhonda Bowen exemplifies the power of communication, collaboration, and co-creation. A global strategic communication guide, Rhonda works with professionals across business, engineering, science, and technology to help them communicate more effectively across cultures, both geographical and organizational. Her work resonates deeply with the mission of the Virtual Women's Forum, fostering intergenerational dialogue, mentorship, and the empowerment of women through clarity, connection, and action.

Raised in the United States and residing in Germany since 1983, Rhonda brings a wealth of cross-cultural experience. She understands the challenges of bridging differences whether between people from different countries or individuals from different organizational departments. Throughout her career, she has observed that even the most talented professionals often struggle to articulate their ideas clearly, leading to misunderstandings and missed opportunities. Her mission has been to transform communication into a tool for influence, empowerment, and leadership.

Empowering Through Co-Creation

Central to Rhonda's philosophy is the concept of co-creation; the idea that the wisdom of a group can generate solutions and inspiration far beyond what any individual can achieve alone. She has developed a model called "*Wispiration and Action*", where participants bring both their knowledge and their questions into a shared space. Through collective learning and dialogue, participants not only gain insights but are inspired to act turning conversation into tangible outcomes.

This approach mirrors the goals of the Virtual Women's Forum. By creating spaces for senior women to share wisdom and younger women to bring fresh perspectives, the forum cultivates mentorship and collaboration across generations. For Rhonda, leadership is less about authority and more about facilitating environments where every voice is valued and every participant can contribute.

Leadership and Digital Fluency

Rhonda emphasizes that leadership today cannot be separated from digital literacy. Social media and digital technologies are critical tools for visibility, networking, advocacy, and mentorship. In her work, she guides women in leveraging these platforms to amplify their voices and create meaningful impact. Whether through online forums, LinkedIn, YouTube, or other platforms, she demonstrates how digital spaces can become arenas for leadership, collaboration, and co-created solutions.

Her perspective is clear: communication is power, and in the digital age, power requires intentionality. She encourages women leaders to understand their unique communication styles, embrace authenticity, and harness technology to connect across boundaries and amplify their influence.

Listening, Mentoring, and Leading

Rhonda's work also underscores the importance of listening, mentorship, and empathy. She helps individuals navigate challenging conversations, manage differences in perspective, and communicate effectively across cultures and generations. By fostering environments where people feel heard and supported, she nurtures confidence and competence, foundational qualities for women leaders.

Her philosophy can be summarized in three key insights:

- **Collaboration is essential.** True progress is rarely achieved alone. Collective intelligence and teamwork amplify impact.
- **Communication is a leadership tool.** Being understood is more important than merely speaking; clarity, empathy, and active listening are critical.
- **Digital fluency extends influence.** Social media and technology, when used strategically, empower women to lead, mentor, and advocate globally.

A Call to Women Leaders

Rhonda Bowen's story demonstrates that leadership is not only about individual achievement but about creating spaces for others to thrive. By sharing wisdom, listening actively, and leveraging both human and digital networks, women can extend their influence far beyond conventional boundaries.

Her work reminds every woman that leadership is an act of service, co-creation, and empowerment. It is about facilitating understanding, inspiring action, and connecting people across cultures, disciplines, and generations.

In her example, communication becomes both a bridge and a tool for leadership enabling women to lead confidently in the real and digital worlds.



Clare Rowley

*Head of Business Operations and Global Relationship Management
GLEIF*

Switzerland

Chapter 24

Bridging Worlds:

The Transformative Power of Connection

Clare Rowley

Building Bridges

Clare Rowley, Head of Business Operations and Global Relationship Management at the Global Legal Entity Identifier Foundation (GLEIF), is a distinguished leader in the world of global financial regulation and identity systems. Her journey offers a profound reflection on what it means to lead with both intellect and empathy in an increasingly interconnected digital and financial world.

Clare shares her story with humility and purpose, a story she describes as being about “*building bridges*.” Bridges between technical expertise and human understanding, between generations and partners, and between challenges and opportunities.

“*Building bridges*,” she says, “*is how we create the trust and the networks that make us not only leaders but catalysts for positive change.*”

A Journey of Purpose and Preparedness

Clare's leadership journey began in 2005 when she joined the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) in the United States as a Research Assistant. Her role involved managing a newly acquired database on *subprime mortgages*, a task focused on coding, statistical analysis, and report preparation.

However, the 2008 global financial crisis would soon redefine her path. As subprime mortgages became the centre of global attention, Clare's technical expertise was suddenly in high demand. She found herself presenting insights not only within her department but also to senior executives and policymakers.

This pivotal experience taught her the importance of translating technical knowledge into accessible, strategic communication, a bridge between data and decision-making.

"My ability to bridge technical understanding with communication helped me gain the trust and confidence of senior leadership," she reflects.

Her growing expertise led to her appointment on the executive management team of a bank held in receivership, where she became involved in daily operational decisions and long-term resolution strategies.

Today, as a global leader in financial identity and data transparency, Clare continues to draw on that same skill, bridging the technical and the human to lead effectively.

The Bridge Between Technology and Humanity

In her current role at GLEIF, Clare oversees global relationship management and business development. Her success, she notes, lies not only in understanding systems and regulations but in communicating them with clarity, empathy, and impact.

She observes that women often excel at balancing these two critical dimensions - technical precision and emotional intelligence.

According to Clare, effective communication in leadership requires:

- **Intentional listening** – truly hearing others before speaking.
- **Adaptability** – observing reactions and adjusting tone and message in real time.
- **Empathy** – connecting ideas to human values and shared goals.

“To be a leader, especially in technology, you must bridge both worlds; the technical and the human.”

This ability to communicate clearly while understanding people’s perspectives fosters trust, team cohesion, and collaboration, both within organizations and across global networks.

Overcoming Challenges in a Male-Dominated Space

Clare's rise in the global financial and regulatory sector has not been without challenges. She acknowledges that being a woman in a male-dominated industry often invites assumptions and sometimes, biases based on appearance rather than ability.

Her approach to overcoming such challenges is rooted in preparation, composure, and authenticity.

She offers practical strategies for women navigating similar environments:

- **Prepare thoroughly** – know your material, the people in the room, and the goals of the discussion.
- **Present yourself with intention** – from attire to punctuality, let every detail speak to your professionalism.
- **Accept the unpredictable** – you cannot control others' perceptions, but you can control your response.
- **Stay calm and composed** – often, the most powerful tool is a sincere smile.

“No matter what happens on the outside, remain calm, cool, and composed. Speak with confidence, speak slowly, and make sure your voice is heard.”

Leadership, Clare believes, is about the bridges we build between knowledge and empathy, ambition and integrity, and vision and execution.

The Power of Networks and Passion

Clare emphasizes that leadership does not exist in isolation. It is strengthened by community, collaboration, and courage. She encourages women to take opportunities even when they feel intimidated and to see risk as a necessary ingredient of growth.

Her guiding advice to women leaders includes:

- **Build your network.** Your network will endorse your leadership and amplify your message.
- **Embrace risk.** Without risk, there is no reward.
- **Pursue passion.** When your work brings you joy, people will feel your energy and be inspired by it.

Conclusion: Leading with Connection and Courage

Clare's story is a reminder that leadership is not about titles or technical mastery alone. It is about building connections that inspire trust and transformation. Her message to women everywhere is simple yet profound:

"Equip yourself with knowledge, communicate with clarity, lead with empathy and never be afraid to take the next step across the bridge."

Through her journey, Clare Rowley embodies a leadership philosophy grounded in resilience, readiness, and relational strength - a model for women who aspire not just to succeed but to lead with meaning in a rapidly changing world.



Xiaxiahn Z. Vaccalluzzo

Founder and CEO, ONEZSM

Estonia

Chapter 25

Digital Bridges:

Redefining Trade and Trust Through Storytelling

Xiaxiahn Z. Vaccalluzzo

Xiaxiahn Z. Vaccalluzzo, known to many as Zazi joins us from Tallinn, Estonia - one of the smallest yet boldest digital nations on earth. Her message is one that bridges continents, industries, and ideas. For Zazi, leadership begins with storytelling; the simple yet profound belief that *every transformation begins with a story*.

A Journey Woven from Stories

Zazi's professional path has been anything but linear. It is a mosaic of experiences across Southern Africa and Northern Europe, connecting diverse cultures, causes, and communities. Through her work with entrepreneurs, social innovators, and changemakers, she has seen firsthand that visibility creates trust and trust creates opportunity.

She recalls working with entrepreneurs who had no marketing budgets but carried big dreams, with women who had no platforms but possessed powerful voices, and with communities that needed only to be *seen* to be believed.

This deep understanding of the human side of visibility led to the creation of her life's work which is building ecosystems where digital storytelling becomes a driver of trade, collaboration, and empowerment.

ONEZSM: Where Visibility Becomes Trust

A few years ago, this vision crystallized into ONEZSM, a global digital trade ecosystem born from a radical idea that a business card should *breathe*.

ONEZSM reimagines the traditional directory as a video-first platform and marketplace, a living library of stories from Small, Medium, and Micro-Enterprises (SMMEs) across Africa and beyond. The platform focuses particularly on women in trade, marginalized business owners, and informal traders, ensuring equitable access to opportunity.

Each entrepreneur records their own story in their own voice and language sharing who they are, what they do, and why they began. That story becomes their *passport to trade*.

*“When buyers, investors, and partners can see the person behind the enterprise, trust is born.
And when trust is born, trade follows naturally.”*

This simple but transformative philosophy is captured in ONEZSM's slogan: *“Where visibility becomes trust, where trust becomes trade, and where trade becomes transformation.”*

Though headquartered in Estonia, ONEZSM's heartbeat is African. It has built partnerships and signed MoUs across the continent, preparing to launch new visibility projects in Mauritius and the Baltics.

Each initiative tells a powerful story; of a woman in Dar es Salaam launching her herbal brand, a filmmaker in Botswana challenging stereotypes through digital storytelling, or a cocoa entrepreneur in Ghana finding new buyers through increased visibility.

Together, these stories form part of a digital trade revolution, one led by storytelling and fuelled by authenticity.

Global Chamber® Estonia, Baltics: Building Bridges Across Borders

Parallel to her work at ONEZSM, Zazi serves as Executive Director of Global Chamber® Estonia, Baltics, part of a network spanning more than 500 metropolitan regions worldwide.

The Chamber's mission is to connect leaders across borders, building trust-based trade corridors between Africa, the Baltics, and beyond.

“In the Baltics, we’ve learned that technology can make small nations powerful. In Africa, I’ve witnessed that community makes large nations resilient.”

Through this network, she is merging two strengths; technology and community, to empower entrepreneurs with global visibility, attract capital, and amplify their stories.

Together, ONEZSM and Global Chamber® Estonia are transforming trade from something transactional into something human: a chain of trusted stories linking continents and people.

The Power of Digital Storytelling

Zazi's work aligns perfectly with the Forum's theme, *"The Role of Digital Technologies and Social Media in Enhancing Women's Leadership and Empowerment"*.

She believes digital tools are modern storytelling instruments:

- **Social media** allows women to broadcast their truth.
- **Video** lets them be seen.
- **Digital platforms** connect them beyond geography and class.

Yet, empowerment doesn't come from technology alone.

"It comes from how we use it to tell our stories authentically, to mentor across generations, and to build visibility for others as we climb."

In this way, technology becomes a force for transformation. This is the essence of ONEZSM and of World Speech Day Women - ensuring that women's voices are not just heard for a day but remembered and respected for generations.

A Call to Courage

As Xiaxiahn Z. Vaccalluzzo concludes her story, she extends an invitation to every woman leader and aspiring changemaker:

“See yourself not only as a participant, but as a story-keeper and a story-sharer. Your experiences, your lessons, your courage are not footnotes. They are the raw material of the future.”

She calls on women to make visibility the new currency of leadership and to build digital bridges between Arusha and Tallinn, Nairobi and Vilnius, Kigali and Helsinki bridges made not of concrete, but of stories, trust, and collaboration.

“When a woman tells her story with courage,” she reminds us, *“she does more than inspire. She alters the economy of belief.”* And that is how, together, women will transform not just their communities but the world.

Key Takeaways for Aspiring Women Leaders

- **Authenticity is power:** Your story is your strongest asset.
- **Visibility creates opportunity:** Let yourself be seen and heard.
- **Use digital tools strategically:** Technology is your bridge to the world.
- **Build trust before trade:** People invest in people, not just products.
- **Leadership is storytelling:** When you tell your story with courage, you lead by example.

PART EIGHT:
LEADERSHIP
IN
POLITICS, MEDIA
AND ACADEMIA



Dr Nayab Gazelle Abang

Political Science Lecturer and Researcher

Cameroon

Chapter 26

Changing Narratives Through Leadership

Dr. Nayah Gazelle Abang

Dr. Nayah Gazelle Abang, a political science lecturer and researcher, believes that leadership is more than holding office. It is about decision-making at every level of life. She emphasizes that politics is not just electoral campaigns or titles, but the art of making common decisions for the benefit of a group. In her view, every woman is a decision-maker whether in the household, workplace, or community — and therefore every woman is inherently political.

Early Leadership and Motivation

Nayah began her leadership journey at a young age, taking on responsibilities in primary school, secondary school, and later at university. She faced societal skepticism and stereotypes, especially as a woman in political science, a field often perceived as male dominated.

Her motivation came from looking beyond those who failed and instead focusing on African women leaders who had succeeded despite challenges:

- Professor Mas Nadin, President of the African Association of Political Science.
- Professor Mir Manga Edimo, Vice President of the International Public Policy Association.

These silent role models inspired her, demonstrating that success was attainable despite societal obstacles. Dr. Abang stresses:

“In any field, do not focus on those who failed; focus on those who succeeded and model your journey after them.”

Redefining Leadership in Education

As a lecturer, Nayah made a conscious decision to innovate in her teaching and engage students beyond traditional methods. Her approach was:

- **Teacher-centered learning:** Making lectures interactive and engaging, encouraging students to think critically.
- **Field-based research:** Valuing quantitative and qualitative data collection, allowing students to witness real-world applications of theory.
- **Breaking stereotypes:** Demonstrating that women can excel in political science and research, challenging societal norms.

By combining interactive teaching with active field research, Nayah inspired her students and created a distinct presence in academia. She emphasizes that women leaders must go beyond expectations to change narratives, doing what society often believes they cannot.

Research and Impact

Nayah has consistently prioritized research that makes a tangible difference in communities. Her methodology highlights:

- **Community engagement:** Speaking directly with beneficiaries of policies, understanding their lived experiences.
- **Policy evaluation:** Collecting insights from medical personnel, administrators, and other stakeholders to ensure research addresses real needs.
- **Innovation in scholarship:** Striving for original findings that advance knowledge and influence policy.

A recent study on Cameroon's Health Check Policy illustrates this approach: Nayah combined field interviews, panel feedback, and policy analysis to generate findings that were both original and actionable.

Balancing Responsibilities and Setting Timelines

Nayah acknowledges that women in leadership often face competing responsibilities. She advocates:

- **Time management:** Establishing timelines and objectives for research, teaching, and personal responsibilities.
- **Excellence across spheres:** Striving to do one's best in all areas, whether family, teaching, or research.

- **Prioritization:** Ensuring that career goals and personal growth are aligned and balanced.

Her disciplined approach allows her to maintain productivity, achieve research milestones, and mentor students effectively.

Guiding Principles for Women Leaders

Nayah distils her journey into a few guiding principles for women aspiring to lead and create impact:

- **Leadership is service:** It is about creating opportunities for others to thrive and making informed decisions that benefit the collective.
- **Dare to be original:** Stand out through innovation, originality, and dedication. Do what others have not dared to do.
- **Persistence over perception:** Ignore societal doubts and stereotypes; let your actions redefine expectations.
- **Field engagement matters:** Understanding real-world contexts gives credibility and depth to research and leadership.
- **Timeline-driven success:** Set objectives, track progress, and ensure consistent achievement across personal and professional spheres.

A Call to Action

Nayah concludes with a message of empowerment:

- Women are the pillars of the world.
- Leadership is about changing narratives and demonstrating capability.
- Each woman has the potential to be a game-changer in her community and field.

By combining scholarship, service, and mentorship, Nayah exemplifies how women can reshape societal expectations, inspire the next generation, and leave a lasting impact.

Dr. Nayah Gazelle Abang's journey reminds all women leaders: "The world is counting on you to lead, innovate, and transform."



Hon. Geraldine Kaubo

Member of Parliament

Democratic Republic of Congo

Chapter 27

The Power of Determination and Discipline

Hon. Geraldine Kaubo

Hon. Geraldine Kaubo, a Member of Parliament of the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) and an active member of the East African Women's Caucus emphasizes that the mission of the East African Women's Caucus is to:

- Encourage and mentor young women leaders of tomorrow
- Promote gender equality across the region; and
- Foster intergenerational dialogue to bridge the gap between senior and emerging women leaders.

A Journey of Resilience and Leadership

Geraldine's story is a powerful testimony of resilience and determination. She reflects on her own path, marked by both triumphs and challenges - a journey that has taught her that falling is not failure, but rather an opportunity to rise stronger and wiser.

“When we fall, we must rise again and continue toward our goals. Turning failure into opportunity is the secret to progress,” she affirms.

From her earliest years, leadership came naturally to her. Even as a young girl, she showed a strong desire to take

responsibility and ensure that things were done well. She recalls how this passion for leadership was shaped by her early experiences both at home and at school.

During secondary school, a visit to an orphanage left a lasting impression on her. Seeing children living in difficult conditions ignited a deep sense of compassion and purpose. Moved by what she witnessed, she rallied her classmates to form a movement called “*All for the Orphans*.”

“We may not have been able to help everyone in the country,” she recalls, “but we could at least do something for those children.”

Together, the group saved their pocket money and visited the orphanage each month, providing food and support. This was the spark that set her lifelong commitment to service, leadership, and empowerment ablaze.

Education, Advocacy, and Vision for Women

Determined to make a difference, Geraldine pursued studies in Law, believing that understanding the constitution, human rights, and justice would enable her to advocate for vulnerable groups, particularly women, widows, and orphans.

At university, she co-founded another youth movement, “*Jeunes Patriotes*,” whose mission was to raise awareness among young people about responsible citizenship and leadership for a better Congo.

Despite facing challenges including limited resources and systemic barriers, she continued to work tirelessly, engaging in community sensitisation, youth leadership development, and advocacy for gender equality.

Her passion for communication and partnership-building later led her to study English and Mandarin at Livingstone University in Zambia. This decision, she explains, was strategic to build bridges across cultures and attract international partners for her community development initiatives.

During her time abroad, she again displayed her natural leadership by founding a movement among students aimed at promoting discipline, dignity, and personal responsibility among young Africans. Her ability to lead with vision and integrity earned her respect and recognition, laying the foundation for her eventual rise in public service.

Leadership Lessons and Personal Philosophy

Geraldine's story is a reminder that leadership is not born from privilege but from purpose. She attributes her success to a few key principles:

- **Discipline** - the foundation of achievement.
- **Determination and courage** - the will to persevere against all odds.
- **Vision** - knowing where you are going and setting clear, realistic goals.
- **Continuous self-improvement** - embracing lifelong learning and skill development.

- **Faith and resilience** – turning setbacks into stepping stones.

“Success is personal,” she says. “Whatever your circumstances, there is always a way to do better. It is never too late for a woman to rise.”

A Message to Young Women

Geraldine offers a stirring message to young women everywhere; one rooted in self-belief, ambition, and service:

- **Never lose hope.** Whatever your background, your dream is valid.
- **Discipline yourself.** Success demands focus and self-control.
- **Have a vision.** Write down your goals and pursue them relentlessly.
- **Believe that the means will follow your purpose.** Money follows vision. When your heart and mind are aligned with purpose, resources will come.

She challenges young women to reject dependency, particularly the notion that marriage or circumstance defines their destiny.

“We must stop believing that marriage is the final goal. Women must stand on their own. We must achieve by ourselves, for ourselves, and for our communities.”

Conclusion: Women as Architects of Africa's Future

Hon. Geraldine Kaubo embodies the strength, courage, and vision that define African womanhood. Through her story, she reminds us that discipline and determination can transform even the most difficult beginnings into a legacy of leadership.

Her life is a call to action for young women to believe in themselves, to lead with conviction, and to rise together for the development of Africa.

"We are strong. We have ambitions. We can go very far - even further than we imagine. The future belongs to the women who dare to believe."



Hon. Sadia James Sebit

Member of Parliament

South Sudan

Chapter 28

From Humble Beginnings to Political Leadership

Hon. Sadia James Sebit

Hon. Sadia James Sebit shares her journey to leadership as a testament to the power of perseverance, community support, and determination. She reflects on how her humble beginnings, personal resilience, and commitment to public service shaped her path from a shy child to a Member of Parliament and ultimately a representative in the East African Legislative Assembly.

Early Life and Career Beginnings

Growing up as a quiet and reserved child, she initially aspired to become a doctor. Over time, her path shifted toward public service and leadership:

- She started by serving her community association as Secretary for Finance while working in a pharmaceutical company.
- Recommendations led her to work for a National Member of Parliament, initially as a private secretary, and later as an office manager.
- These early roles provided her with hands-on experience in administration, governance, and leadership, laying the foundation for her political journey.

Her pursuit of higher education was a key milestone:

- She obtained a master's degree in China, further enhancing her expertise and leadership capacity.
- Returning home, she resumed her work in parliament while engaging in political parties, ultimately joining the opposition party, which opened the path to legislative leadership.

Overcoming Barriers for Young Women Leaders

Her story illustrates the unique challenges faced by young women in politics, particularly in patriarchal societies:

- **Social and cultural beliefs:** Many communities doubt the capacity of unmarried women to assume leadership roles.
- **Financial constraints:** Campaigning and political engagement required resources that were often difficult to secure as a young professional.
- **Political risk:** Joining opposition parties carries inherent challenges and requires careful navigation of political structures.

Despite these barriers, Sadia emphasizes that support systems, mentorship, and personal determination are crucial for overcoming obstacles:

- Assistance from colleagues, friends, and senior leaders helped her secure resources to run for office.
- Trust and recognition built through diligent service to her bosses and community strengthened her credibility.

- She encourages young women to approach leadership with clear intentions, integrity, and perseverance.

Lessons from Her Political Journey

Sadia's rise to leadership is marked by practical strategies and guiding principles:

- **Start small, excel everywhere:** Deliver excellence in every role, no matter how small, to build trust and credibility.
- **Leverage mentorship and networks:** Relationships developed through early work in parliament and political engagement opened doors to higher leadership roles.
- **Persistence despite perceptions:** Ignore societal doubts and cultural stereotypes; focus on performance and commitment.
- **Financial and strategic planning:** Secure resources and plan carefully to navigate the demands of political campaigns.
- **Representation matters:** Advocacy for women's participation is not just personal ambition but a commitment to ensuring women's voices are heard in governance.

The Importance of Women's Political Participation

Her experiences reflect broader trends in East African leadership:

- Affirmative action policies in South Sudan mandate 35% women representation following the 2018 revitalized peace agreement.
- Across East Africa, women hold key leadership positions:
 - South Sudan: Two female vice presidents and a female speaker of parliament.
 - Uganda, Kenya, and Rwanda: Women serving as ministers and members of parliament, with Rwanda achieving 60% women's representation.

Despite structural opportunities, cultural and social norms continue to limit women's political engagement. She stresses that young women must navigate these barriers with intentionality, courage, and strategic planning.

Key Takeaways for Aspiring Women Leaders

- **Begin with humility, act with excellence:** Small beginnings matter; demonstrating competence opens doors for greater opportunities.
- **Build trust and credibility:** Delivering consistent results builds networks and recognition essential for leadership.

- **Seek support and mentorship:** Collaboration with allies, colleagues, and senior leaders is critical to overcoming systemic barriers.
- **Navigate risks intentionally:** Understand the political and cultural landscape and act strategically.
- **Commit to representation:** Leadership is about creating space for others and changing societal narratives about women's capacity.

Hon. Sadia James Sebit's journey illustrates that determination, preparation, and the support of others can empower women to achieve leadership roles, even in challenging and male-dominated environments. Her story is an invitation to young women to embrace their leadership potential, pursue their ambitions, and contribute meaningfully to decision-making in their communities and beyond.

“Do not despise small beginnings. Perform every task with excellence, and opportunities will open before you. Your commitment can change perceptions and inspire other women to rise.”



Hon. Cathy Kezimana

Member, East African Legislative Assembly (EALA)

Women's Advocate & Community Leader

Burundi

Chapter 29

Courage in the Crossfire

Hon. Cathy Kezimana

Hon. Cathy Kezimana's journey is a powerful testament to courage in the face of structural barriers, perseverance in political spaces, and the vital role of women's voices in leadership and governance.

Early Life & Path to Service

Growing up in rural Burundi, Cathy witnessed the challenges faced by women and girls in her community, those whose voices were rarely heard and whose ambition was often curtailed by tradition and circumstance. She saw how women were expected to remain unseen, unrepresented, and voiceless in the public sphere. It was these early observations that planted a seed of resolve: to speak out, to represent, and to transform.

She entered political activism at a young age, aligning herself with reform-oriented movements and working at grassroots level. Her rise into public service came at great personal cost. Cathy's candidature and her engagement as a woman in political space in Burundi exposed her to scrutiny, intimidation, and arrest. These experiences did not diminish her purpose; they deepened it.

Breaking Barriers in Governance

When Cathy joined the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA), she did so not simply for personal advancement but to open doors for others. She knew that for women in East Africa to lead, they must first be seen, heard and trusted. Trust is built through presence, service, and visibility.

Her work at EALA has focused on youth, women's empowerment, regional integration, and inclusive governance. Through speeches, committee participation, and community engagements, she has advocated for policy changes that enhance women's representation, access to resources, and leadership opportunities.

Cathy's leadership demonstrates how women in politics must often run longer, hurdle higher, and remain steadier than others. She uses her platform to mentor younger women, to encourage them to run for office, and to challenge a system that still expects women to raise their hands even before being asked.

Lessons for Women Leaders

From Cathy's story emerge several core lessons:

- **Visibility matters.** When women step into political spaces, they disrupt old narratives and create new possibility.

- **Persistence is key.** Loss of freedom, social pressure, arrest or intimidation are not final; they can serve as catalysts for change.
- **Mentorship and community matter.** Cathy makes time to support other women candidates and to share that “you are not alone.”
- **Use your voice.** Representation is more than presence; it is action. Speaking up, challenging norms, demanding policy change.

Call to Emerging Women Leaders

To every young woman with dreams of leadership, Cathy’s message is clear:

“Your voice is your power. Do not shrink it. Do not hide it. Use it to speak for yourself, and for others who cannot yet speak.”

She invites women to seek elected office, to run for leadership roles not only when conditions are perfect, but now. Because perfection is not prerequisite, purpose is.

Closing Reflection

Hon. Cathy Kezimana’s journey through Burundi’s political terrain, into the regional parliament of EALA, mirrors the uphill path many women face often unseen, often under-supported, and yet undeterred. Her leadership is a sign of what becomes possible when fear is confronted with conviction, when barriers are replaced by bridges, and when one woman’s courage lights the way for countless others.

“When one generation bends, another braces.

And when a woman dares to rise, many can follow.”



Hon. Jacqueline Amongin

Member of Parliament

East African Legislative Assembly

Uganda

Chapter 30

Championing Sustainable Futures:

The Leadership Journey of

Hon. Jacqueline Amongin

When Hon. Jacqueline Amongin speaks, she carries with her not only the authority of a regional legislator, but the lived experience of a woman who has dedicated her life to service, sustainability, and transformation across East Africa. As a Member of Parliament at the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) representing Uganda, her leadership is rooted in conviction, shaped by community realities, and propelled by a vision of an empowered Africa that advances together.

From the outset of her career, Jacqueline's work has centred around uplifting communities, fostering inclusive development, and strengthening regional cooperation. She stands firmly at the intersection of policy, advocacy, and grassroots mobilisation, and uses her voice to build bridges across borders.

A Journey Rooted in Purpose

Jacqueline's leadership began well before she entered political office. Raised in a community where women's roles were often confined to the margins, she chose a different path, one defined by education, courage, and a commitment to public service.

Her journey has taken her from local development work to the highest regional platforms. As an MP at EALA, she champions issues that directly affect everyday citizens:

- Sustainable development and climate action
- Women's rights and gender equality
- Youth leadership and education
- Regional integration under the East African Community (EAC)
- Peace, stability, and community resilience

At every level, her work reflects a powerful belief: sustainable development must be people-centred, inclusive, and driven by those closest to the challenges.

Championing Sustainability and Climate Resilience

Jacquiline is widely recognised for her contributions to environmental governance and climate advocacy. She has been actively involved in shaping climate resilience policies, promoting nature-based solutions, and engaging communities especially women and youth in environmental stewardship.

In the episode, she emphasises that climate change is not abstract; it is a lived reality for millions of East Africans:

- Farmers losing crops
- Women walking longer distances to access water
- Youth migrating in search of livelihood opportunities
- Families grappling with unpredictable weather patterns

Her message is clear: climate resilience must be integrated into every aspect of national and regional planning.

A Voice for Women and Youth

Central to her leadership philosophy is the empowerment of women and young people. Jacqueline believes that any society hoping to advance sustainably must intentionally position women and youth as key actors not beneficiaries.

She advocates for:

- Increased representation of women in political and decision-making spaces
- Tailored economic empowerment programmes
- Leadership mentorship for young women and girls
- Education and skills development for youth
- Social protection and community-driven safety nets

Her work highlights the potential that emerges when women are given the tools, platforms, and support they need to lead.

Strengthening Regional Cooperation

As an MP at EALA, Jacqueline understands that progress cannot be achieved in isolation. Regional integration is not a luxury; it is an imperative.

She champions:

- Harmonised policies across the East African Community
- Cross-border collaboration in trade, peacebuilding, and climate action
- Youth and women-led innovations that benefit the entire region
- Platforms for intercultural dialogue and unity

Her work reinforces a deeply held truth: Africa is stronger when it moves as one.

Jacquiline offers profound lessons for emerging leaders:

- Leadership is a responsibility, not a position.
- Empowerment begins with awareness and grows through action.
- Youth are not the future; they are the present.
- Climate justice requires community-led solutions.
- Women must take up space, speak boldly, and lead courageously.
- Regional unity strengthens national progress.

These principles shape not only her own leadership journey but also her vision for East Africa's future.

A Legacy of Service, Impact, and Hope

Hon. Jacqueline Amongin continues to serve as one of East Africa's most dynamic and influential voices; an advocate for sustainability, a champion for women and youth, and a bridge-builder committed to regional progress. Her chapter stands as a reminder that leadership is a lifelong journey, rooted in service and carried forward by purpose.

Her message to young women is both simple and powerful:

“Start where you are. Lead with integrity. Believe in your voice. And remember, your impact begins the moment you decide to act.”



Hon. Iman Falbada

Member of Parliament

East African Legislative Assembly

Kenya

Chapter 31

Courage at the Table:

The Leadership & Resilience of

Hon. Iman Falhada

As a Member of Parliament at the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) representing Kenya, Hon. Iman Falhada brings conviction in uplifting women's voices across East Africa, especially those committed to justice, youth empowerment, and regional unity.

Iman offers insight into her journey, motivations, and the values guiding her work. It stands as testimony to what is possible when women step into public life with courage, integrity, and a vision for generational change even in spaces that don't always welcome dissenting voices.

From Aspiration to Representation

Iman's presence in EALA marks more than political representation; it signals a commitment to ensuring that women's voices shape regional discourse. Her role is not merely symbolic. She seeks to translate representation into action.

She reflects on how leadership, for her, is rooted in responsibility: the responsibility to represent communities that rarely see themselves in

decision-making spaces; the responsibility to model integrity; and the responsibility to amplify the concerns of women and youth.

Her story resonates because she demonstrates that leadership is not reserved for a few but earned by those who dare to speak, build coalitions, and persist despite obstacles.

Championing Youth, Gender, and Regional Solidarity

Within the broad remit of EALA, Iman uses her platform to spotlight issues core to the future of East Africa. In her remarks, she emphasises:

- The urgency of creating **opportunities for youth** not just jobs, but meaningful inclusion in policy, innovation, and civic life.
- The necessity of **gender equality** in representation, access, and influence especially for young women whose aspirations are often bottlenecked by traditional norms.
- The value of **regional integration and cooperation** in trusting that collaboration across nations strengthens political will and social progress.

For her, the East African project is not just a political ideal. It is a vision anchored in communities, in shared challenges, and in collective hope.

Resilience Amidst Challenges

Public life seldom welcomes dissent, especially for women speaking truth to power. Iman's path has not been without controversy. Like many women in leadership, she has faced structural resistance, criticism, and challenges that can discourage even the most steadfast.

Yet, in her address she makes it clear: resilience is not optional. It is essential. She reminds listeners that the cost of silence is often too high. She encourages women, especially young ones, to step forward, to speak out, and to trust that their voices, their lived experiences matter.

Her storytelling underscores a central truth: leadership demands more than ambition. It demands persistence, integrity, and the willingness to stand firm when conditions are difficult.

Connecting to the Virtual Women's Forum Vision

Iman reaffirms the power of solidarity across borders. Her chapter speaks directly to the core themes of the book:

- **Legacy and Mentorship in Action:** she becomes part of an intergenerational chain, showing younger women what leadership in regional governance can look like.
- **Leadership in Politics, Media, and Academia:** as a parliamentarian in a regional assembly, she embodies the convergence of governance and accountability.
- **Breaking Barriers - Overcoming Social Conditioning and Fear:** her journey models how to navigate and transform systems that often resist female agency.

Her participation highlights the belief that *women's voices can shape policy*, and that *regional unity is a path to shared progress*.

Takeaways for the Next Generation

From Iman's story, emerging women leaders can draw several vital lessons:

- **Representation is just the beginning**, meaningfully wielding that representation requires courage, clarity, and commitment.
- **Youth and gender justice are inseparable from regional development**, advocating for one means advocating for all.
- **Resilience transforms resistance into progress**, obstacles are part of the journey, not the end of it.
- **Solidarity across borders can amplify impact** - collaboration, not competition, builds sustainable change.

Her message invites each woman reading this: *to stand up, to speak out, to believe that your voice can echo far beyond the room you enter today*.

A Promise of Hope and Action

Hon. Iman Falhada closes her contribution with a clear call: *leadership is built by those willing to act, to serve, and to stand in the spaces others leave empty*.

Her message takes the form of an invitation - an invitation to lean into discomfort, to challenge injustice, to build bridges, and to lead with heart.

As readers and aspiring leaders, we are called to honour that invitation and to rise together.

PART NINE:

PURPOSE

IN ACTION

FOR

IMPACT



Rose Mtei

Manager, National Women's Research and Documentation Centre

Tanzania

Chapter 32

Nurturing the Next Generation of Women Leaders

Rose Mtei

In Tanzania, Rose Mtei embodies the principle that leadership is cultivated through service, mentorship, and a commitment to empowering others. As Manager of the National Women Research and Documentation Centre, hosted by the Tango Institute of Community Development, Rose has devoted her career to nurturing young women leaders and ensuring that the voices of senior women leaders guide the next generation.

Rose's journey into leadership began early. From primary school through college, she consistently stepped into leadership roles, learning firsthand the challenges women face in balancing societal expectations, family responsibilities, and professional aspirations.

"Leadership is never easy," Rose reflects. "As a woman, you navigate stereotypes and multiple responsibilities, at home, at work, and in your community. These challenges teach you resilience and balance."

Building Leadership Through Mentorship

Under Rose's guidance, the National Women Research and Documentation Centre runs the Young Women Leadership Programme, a flagship initiative that pairs emerging leaders with experienced senior women mentors. The program equips young women with practical leadership skills while offering insight into the successes and challenges faced by those who have gone before them.

Key elements of Rose's mentorship approach include:

- **Learning from challenges:** Young women gain perspective from senior leaders' successes and setbacks.
- **Skill development:** The program focuses on building leadership, communication, and problem-solving abilities.
- **Continuity of leadership:** Preparing the next generation to assume leadership positions ensures that progress is sustained.

Rose emphasizes that mentorship is more than guidance, it is a process of multiplying leaders.

Leadership as service: *"It's about nurturing young women to take the reins when senior leaders retire, ensuring continuity, growth, and the sustained empowerment of women across society."*

Celebrating Milestones in Tanzanian Leadership

Rose situates her work within the broader context of Tanzanian progress in women's leadership, highlighting national achievements such as:

- Tanzania's first female President, marking a historic milestone in national governance.
- Dr. Julia Axon, Speaker of Parliament, who also represents Tanzania in the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), a global network of parliaments.

"These achievements demonstrate that women's leadership is possible at the highest levels," Rose notes, "and they inspire the next generation to rise."

A Vision for the Future

For Rose, the ultimate measure of leadership is its capacity to cultivate others. Through programs like the Young Women Leadership Program, she envisions a Tanzania where young women are not only prepared to assume leadership roles but are empowered to innovate, serve, and inspire.

Her philosophy is grounded in three key principles:

- **Leadership is a process, not a position:** True leadership is demonstrated through action, mentorship, and service.
- **Multiplying opportunities:** Empowering others ensures that leadership is sustainable and impactful.
- **Resilience and guidance:** Women leaders must balance challenges while mentoring the next generation to thrive.

Rose Mtei's message to young women is clear:

Leadership is about service, resilience, and preparing the next generation to carry the torch.



Medha Sharma

Founder and President, Visible Impact

Nepal

Chapter 33

Leading Without Permission

Medha Sharma

In the evolving story of women's leadership, few voices capture courage and conviction like that of Medha Sharma, Founder and President of *Visible Impact* in Nepal. Medha represents a generation of women who are redefining what leadership means in the digital and social era.

She begins her story with humility and truth: "*I didn't plan to be a leader. I just refused to stay invisible.*" From those words alone, a powerful theme emerges - leadership as the act of choosing visibility, of showing up even when the world expects you to stay silent.

Medha's life is a testament to this quiet revolution. Growing up in Nepal, she imagined a simple path for herself perhaps a career in science or medicine. But her studies opened her eyes to something deeper: that the healing the world needed went beyond medicine. It was about giving voice and dignity to women who were denied both.

Her decision to study public health was the beginning of a journey that would transform not only her life, but the lives of countless young women across Nepal. She began to question everything. Why women's worth is tied to their

reproductive roles, why menstruating women are banned from temples, and why men dominate conversations in spaces of power while women are invited only to speak of home.

“Why,” she asks pointedly, “do women always seek permission before taking the lead?”

Visible Impact: Turning Questions into Movements

Ten years ago, Medha stopped asking for permission and started building solutions. Along with a few friends, she founded *Visible Impact*, a young women-led organization determined to bring social transformation through empowerment, advocacy, and youth leadership.

Their beginnings were modest: no funding, no formal structure, just determination and conviction. But that conviction proved stronger than any obstacle.

Visible Impact began by addressing taboos like menstruation, reproductive health, and bodily autonomy - topics often silenced in conservative communities. Their first project, *MenstruAction*, sparked national conversations about dignity and rights. What began as a local initiative now reaches thousands of young people across Nepal, empowering them to speak boldly about their bodies, their futures, and their voices.

Today, Visible Impact has more than 1,000 youth champions across the country that work with hundreds and thousands of other peers and communities, creating ripples of transformation across the country. These young leaders are not only advocates; they are facilitators of intergenerational dialogue, working with policymakers, communities, and peers to shape the future they want to see.

Medha's pride is not in the number of projects completed or stages reached but, in the seeds, *planted*. "*When one person you've mentored starts mentoring others,*" she reflects, "*that is what intergenerational leadership is all about.*"

Leadership Lessons from a Dinner Table

Medha recalls a pivotal moment early in her leadership journey that reshaped her understanding of what leadership looks like. Invited to a strategy dinner for the UN's new generational leadership initiative, she found herself seated beside Her Royal Highness Crown Princess Mary of Norway.

Listening to the Princess speak, Medha felt a deep connection despite their vastly different worlds. "*She leads one of the most gender-equal societies in the world,*" Medha recalls, "*and I come from a country where patriarchy is deeply rooted. Yet, our passion for empowering women united us.*"

In that instant, Medha realized that the circumstances we come from and the pedestal we stand on should never define our commitment to leadership.

That evening transformed her forever. From dusty roads in rural Nepal to the glossy corridors of the United Nations, Medha carried the voices of women and youth from her community to global platforms, the United Nations High-Level Political Forum, the Universal Periodic Review, International Conference on Population and Development, and others. But she insists that her true pride lies not in the recognition, but in the *seat she created* for herself and others.

“Sometimes,” she says, “you have to create your own table and invite others to sit with you.”

The Heart of Leadership: Resilience and Empathy

Medha’s journey, like that of many women leaders, has not been a straight path. She speaks candidly of the loneliness that sometimes comes with leadership - of failed projects, lost funding, and moments of self-doubt. There are times when social systems push back harder than progress can move forward, and times when she has questioned her relevance and impact.

But each setback, she says, becomes a moment to rise stronger. “When a young girl tells me, ‘I didn’t realise my one voice could be so important,’ that’s when I remember why I started.”

Her philosophy is simple but profound: leadership is not about titles; it is about service. She distils her experience into three guiding lessons:

1. **Leadership is an act of service.**

“Learn to lead even when nobody is watching.”

Leadership begins in the quiet decisions, showing up, helping others, and doing the right thing even without recognition.

2. **Collaboration is power.**

True progress, she reminds us, is never the work of one person. It takes teams, communities, and partnerships to create sustainable change.

3. **Empathy is strength.**

“Being caring is not weakness. Empathy is the strongest form of influence.” This lesson, she insists, is especially important for young women who may feel pressured to harden themselves to be taken seriously.

A Call to Young Women Everywhere

Medha ends her message with an invitation not to follow her path, but to create one's own. *“Your story doesn't have to start with power,” she tells young women. “It can start with persistence.”*

You do not have to wait for permission to lead. You do not have to fit anyone else's definition of success. The most powerful act you can do is to help others rise with you.

In her story, leadership is no longer about standing on a pedestal. It is about building bridges. It is not about being the loudest in the room, but about being the one who refuses to stay invisible.

And as she concludes, her message resonates beyond borders: *“Dream boldly. Speak bravely. Lead unapologetically.”*

Through her courage and compassion, Medha Sharma reminds every woman that visibility is not vanity. It is power.

When we refuse to stay invisible, we not only change our own story, but light the way for others to follow.



Renuka Thakor

*Founder & CEO, Global Sustainable Futures Network CIC;
Director, Centre for Socio-Legal Studies, University of Central
Lancashire*

United Kingdom

Chapter 34

Never Too Late to Lead:

A Journey of Learning, Leadership, and Legacy

Dr. Renuka Thakore

Dr. Renuka Thakore's life story is a powerful reminder that leadership does not always begin in youth, nor does it unfold in a straight line. Her journey is a testament to reinvention, courage, lifelong learning, and the transformative power of purpose. From her early life in India to her global sustainability leadership in the United Kingdom, she has modelled what it means to begin again, with conviction, humility, and unwavering service.

Early Foundations: Curiosity, Courage, and a Love for Innovation

Born in Vadodara, Gujarat, India, Renuka grew up in a family of engineers where innovation was part of everyday life. Encouraged by a visionary father who ran a successful engineering firm, she learned early that engineering was not simply about machinery but about *improving human life*.

Her childhood was filled with curiosity; sketching, observing, analysing - all seeds that would later influence her path in sustainability.

Her personal journey, however, followed the traditional expectations placed on many young women. She met her future husband at eleven, fell in love at fourteen, and married young. Together they built a family and a construction business. She dedicated herself to raising two daughters, both of whom would eventually become aerospace engineers.

Many might have seen this as the completion of a life path. For Renuka, it was preparation for a new beginning.

A Second Beginning: Education, Reinvention, and a New World

Upon migrating to the United Kingdom, Renuka made a bold decision: to return to study. As a mature student in a new country, she embraced the challenge with humility and determination, pursuing qualifications in Environmental Management, Sustainability and the Built Environment.

Her career in the UK began modestly as a household recycling advisor. Yet she approached this role with deep commitment, engaging families and businesses to adopt environmentally conscious habits. Her passion for sustainability soon propelled her into national projects, including the Mayor of London's Green Procurement Code, where she helped embed sustainability into organisational and policy frameworks.

These years shaped her philosophy that sustainable change must begin with people, not policies.

The Scholar: Learning as a Lifelong Commitment

At the age of 56, when many prepare for retirement, Renuka embarked on and completed a PhD in Sustainability Leadership and Governance. Her research explored how collaborative engagement between government, business and citizens drives meaningful transformation.

Her doctoral work produced the Vertical and Horizontal Stakeholder Integration Model, an innovative framework demonstrating how cross-sector collaboration can accelerate progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

But research alone was not enough. Renuka believed leadership must translate into action and so she created a global movement.

Global Sustainable Futures Network CIC: Building Progress Through Partnerships

In 2020, Renuka founded the Global Sustainable Futures Network CIC (GSFN); a collaborative global platform advancing sustainability by connecting researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and communities.

Today, GSFN spans over 60+ countries with 100+ experts, delivering programmes across:

- climate literacy and climate justice
- green skills development
- biodiversity and conservation
- youth leadership

- sustainable agriculture
- community-led SDG implementation

Her guiding mantra is one she repeats often:

“Progress through partnerships, because sustainability is not a solo act.”

Through GSFN, Renuka has created a model where collaboration becomes the engine of transformation.

Empowering 20 Million Farmers Across Africa

Among her most ambitious initiatives is the 20 Million Farmers Program, designed to empower farmers through sustainable agriculture, digital training, and community-led innovation.

The programme responds directly to farmers’ needs such as increasing productivity, improving incomes, and strengthening environmental stewardship. To date, it has:

- impacted over 3 million farmers,
- trained 400+ community champions,
- and laid the groundwork for a 20-million-farmer movement.

This initiative reflects Renuka’s belief that global sustainability is built on empowered local communities.

Leading by Example: Sustainability as a Lifestyle

For Renuka, sustainability is not an academic discipline; it is a lived practice. For over two decades, she has refused to buy new clothes, wearing only second-hand or repurposed garments, even at international summits and family events. She avoids printing documents, proudly noting that her PhD thesis was the last item she printed.

Her discipline is simple:

“If I cannot live what I teach, my words have no meaning.”

The Power of Continuous Learning

Despite her achievements, Renuka dedicates at least one hour daily to learning by reading, researching, or engaging with peers, students, or community leaders.

Her message to women who believe they are “*starting too late*” is unequivocal:

“I didn’t start late. I started exactly when I was ready.”

Her journey resonates widely with women who paused their dreams for family, for work, or simply for life. Renuka serves as a reminder that leadership has no age limit.

A Legacy of Hope, Leadership, and Global Impact

Today, as Founder & CEO of GSFN and Director at the University of Central Lancashire's Centre for Socio-Legal Studies, Renuka continues to lead with empathy, collaboration, and purpose. She has been recognised globally for her volunteer leadership, entrepreneurial thinking, and sustainability impact, yet remains grounded and humble.

Her leadership is defined not by titles but by service. Her commitment to uplifting communities, mentoring emerging leaders, and advocating for inclusive, people-centred sustainability.

Her Message to Women Everywhere

"Every woman has two choices - to wait for change, or to be the change. I chose the second. And every woman can too. No matter your age or circumstance - your story is not over. Start where you are. Learn what you can. Lead with compassion. The world needs your voice - now more than ever."

Closing Reflection

Dr. Renuka Thakore's remarkable journey is proof that leadership can begin at any age, in any place, under any circumstance. Her life teaches us that courage is timeless, that learning keeps us alive, and that service grounded in empathy creates lasting global impact.

Her legacy is clear:

It is never too late to lead, and it is always the right time to begin.



Vino Pillay

Global Lead World Speech Day Women,

President IWFCI South Africa,

Owner Women LEAD SA (Pty) Ltd

South Africa

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In the Quiet of Purpose, Leadership Found Her

Vino Pillay

Vino Pillay's leadership journey did not start with a carefully crafted plan or a pursuit of titles. For her, leadership is not a destination, but an evolving process shaped by clarity about her values, her place in the world, and how she uses purpose to make a meaningful impact.

Vino was surrounded by a supportive family and community who nurtured her confidence and encouraged her to take up space. Their belief in her capabilities built a foundation of trust and strength that carried her through many seasons of life. In recent years, her circle has expanded to include a remarkable sisterhood of women leaders from around the world, united by a shared vision of empowerment and collaboration.

Still, Vino's path was not without obstacles. As a woman navigating the dual demands of motherhood and career, she encountered a system often unforgiving to those seeking to pursue both simultaneously. After completing her postgraduate qualifications and achieving early career success, she made the conscious choice to step back for her family.

When the time came to re-enter the professional world, the career gap demanded creativity and reinvention. Vino turned to volunteering with non-profit organisations, reigniting her sense of purpose and service. This experience led her to found Digital Marketing Edge SA, following her certification and training with Google South Africa. Her digital expertise became a tool for empowerment, helping non-profits gain visibility, sustainability, and influence.

Her journey evolved further when she became the National Ambassador for World Speech Day South Africa, marking the beginning of her work in advocacy, communication, and leadership development. As she puts it, *“the tapestry began to weave itself”*. Her digital expertise, passion for social change, and belief in the power of voices all converged into something much greater.

By 2020, these threads came together in a defining year. She formally registered World Speech Day South Africa as an NPO and launched the Generation Equality Podcast Series, which became a springboard for the formation of World Speech Day Women, later recognised as a UN Generation Equality Commitment Maker, promoting advocacy under the theme *Feminist Movements and Leadership* (investing in media produced by men and women for the advancement of women and girls). These milestones laid the groundwork for her next major initiative - the establishment of the International Women’s Federation of Commerce and Industry South Africa (IWFCI SA), officially registered in 2022.

Vino notes that these milestones were not achieved alone. They were made possible through the unwavering support

of people like Dr. Evan Govender, Simon Gibson, Diana Abruzzi, Her Excellency Fatuma Ndangiza, the boards of WSD SA and IWFCI SA, along with a local and global community of kind-hearted women and men who shared her vision of inclusive growth.

2021 brought profound personal loss. The passing of her husband, and soon after her mother, marked the most difficult season of her life. Rebuilding herself while continuing to lead others demanded immense strength and deep reflection. Through grief, she found renewed purpose, inspired by the communities she had helped uplift. She recalls how her late husband had always championed her choices - whether to study full-time, pause her career, or forge new paths. His belief in her continues to guide her work today.

Through the pain, she found purpose. With the continued support of her children, dedicated colleagues, and a global network of women leaders, Vino pressed forward, finding herself at the helm of initiatives like hosting the 8th Annual IWFCI Global Women's Trade Summit 2024, the rollout of 50 WSD SA United Nations Sustainable Development Goals reading corners in 2025, and other platforms aimed at empowering women and youth. Her work was recognised when she received the 5th Pan African Transformational Leadership Award in Egypt in 2024. Her approach remains as it began: achieving impact with minimal resources, big-hearted people, integrity, and pure intentions.

Today, through Women *LEAD* SA (Pty) Ltd (formerly Digital Marketing Edge SA), IWFCI South Africa, and

platforms like World Speech Day South Africa and World Speech Day Women., she continues to amplify women's voices and create pathways for young female leaders to thrive in the areas of leadership, entrepreneurship, advocacy, and development.

Vino believes deeply in the Virtual Women's Forum which marks the beginning of something much bigger i.e. the Global Women Leadership Caucus - an evolving movement that will provide ongoing leadership mentorship for aspiring young female leaders across Africa and beyond.

Reflecting on her journey, Vino recalls a moment of aspiration that came full circle:

"An International Women's Conference taking place in Bali in 2010, piqued my interest and inspired me to aim for spaces where women lead change. Ten years of focused effort and impact later, I came across a quote that summed up my journey:

'Sometimes it takes 10 years to reach the year that changes your life.' 2020 was that year, I found myself among the likes of those very women and in a place earned through dedication, purpose, and meaningful contribution."

Key Takeaways for Aspiring Young Women Leaders

1. **Leadership is earned, not given.** Focus on impact, purpose, and growth rather than titles.
2. **Patience and persistence matter.** Transformation often comes after years of consistent effort.
3. **Build your network.** Surround yourself with supportive people who inspire, challenge, and uplift you.
4. **Turn challenges into opportunities.** Career gaps, setbacks, and personal loss can become platforms for reinvention and impact.
5. **Serve with purpose.** Leadership thrives when your skills are used to empower others.
6. **Believe in your vision.** Even when the path is unclear, a clear sense of purpose will guide your journey.
7. **Pay it forward.** Mentorship and creating pathways for others amplify your own legacy.

Vino Pillay's story is one of faith, resilience, and unwavering belief that leadership is not about position or perfection but about creating pathways for others - with grace, courage, and a purpose that outlasts circumstance.

We are our ancestors' answered prayers and the first horizon of possibility for every daughter who will follow.

The End

Where Wisdom Meets Aspiration is a landmark. A signpost along the global journey of women's leadership. It offers powerful insights from over 30 remarkable women, as well as a blueprint for mentorship, digital empowerment, and intergenerational connection. It shows a world where women rise by lifting others.

As Founder of World Speech Day, I am deeply grateful to Vino Pillay, WSD South Africa Ambassador and Founder of WSD Women, whose unceasing dedication turned a good idea into a global platform. Her drive and energy shaped the Virtual Women's Forum and the mentorship circles that gave life to these pages, creating space for voices that will inspire generations to come.

Together with the vision of HE Fatuma Ndangiza and the East African Legislative Assembly Women's Caucus, they have forged a remarkable and enduring project.

This book is a celebration of leadership, courage, and collective purpose.

As the book so memorably states:

"These are our voices."



Simon Gibson
Founder
World Speech Day

