Challenges facing women in the workplace
– A man’s perspective

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In preparation for a dialogue with women colleagues at our flagship programme, Blue Heels, I polled a number of women leaders I have worked with in different countries across the African continent. I asked them three main questions:

• What obstacles have you encountered as a woman in your career?
• How did you experience my leadership during the time we worked together?
• What could I have done better or differently as a leader?

The aim of this issue of Conversations is to use the valuable and deeply personal feedback to:

• show some of the obstacles these amazing women continue to face or have faced in their careers;
• demonstrate how some of the obstacles are similar across different countries and cultures;
• celebrate the success of these women leaders in spite of the challenges they have faced along their way;
• sensitise male colleagues to the challenges women colleagues face and the support and encouragement they need from us as leaders; and
• share the feedback, insights and lessons from these amazing colleagues to enable other (mainly male) leaders to lead better.

Although this is a self-reflective conversation about our experiences, I hope it will resonate with many readers, give hope to women going through such challenges and provide some lessons for current and future leaders.
Challenges facing women in the workplace (continued)

Olufunke Isichei  
Regional Manager,  
Lagos Island 2 (Nigeria)  
Worked with me for more than three years.

Roselyn Mkwes-
za-Thupa  
Head, Commercial Banking,  
Stanbic (Malawi)  
Worked with me for at least three years.

Doris Dzeha  
Head, Operations, Stanbic  
(Ghana)  
Worked with me for more than three years.

Saara Shivute  
Head, Branch Distribution  
(Namibia)  
Worked with me for two years.

Hannah Annobil-Acquah  
Head, Personal Markets,  
Personal and Business Banking (Ghana)  
Worked with me for three years.

Sandra Balca  
Head of Channels, Personal and Business Banking (Angola)  
Worked with me for three years.

Thabi Mabile  
Head, Customer Service,  
Africa Regions (South Africa)  
Worked with me for three years.

Claudia Viana  
Head, Personal Markets (Angola)  
Worked with me for more four years.

Dr Margaret Kubwalo-
Chaika  
Head, Personal and Business Banking (Malawi)  
Worked with me for 14 years.

Yande Sikazwe-Mothae  
CEO, Letshego Financial Services (Zambia)  
Worked with me for five years.

Continued on the next page…
Challenges facing women in the workplace (continued)

Mercia Bloem  
Managing Director, Jamerc Fine Things and Taung Office Supplies (South Africa)  
Worked with me for five years.

Sylviane Bulanza  
Head, Business and High Value Personal Banking (Democratic Republic of Congo)  
Worked with me for two years.

Sakeenat Bakare  
Chief Operating Officer, Wealth Division (Nigeria)  
Worked with me for almost three years.

Joyce Uredi  
Head, Customer Channels, Stanbic IBCT Bank (Nigeria)  
Worked with me for a little over five years.

Sarah Adjele Kuma  
Branch Manager, Personal and Business Banking Channels, Stanbic Bank (Ghana)  
Worked with me for three years.

Naira Victoria Salumbo Viegas  
Regional Manager, Personal and Business Banking (Angola)  
Worked with me for around two-and-a-half years.

Oluwatobi (Tobi) Boshoro  
Head, Digital Strategy, Issuing and Service Management (Nigeria)  
Worked with me for more than two years.
Challenges facing women in the workplace (continued)

“What obstacles have you encountered as a woman at work?”

When I asked this sterling group of women, who have been my colleagues at various times and for various lengths of time, this question, I found the answers enlightening.

**Working harder**

By far the most common reply was that a woman has to work harder than a man to prove herself. *Yande* put this right at the forefront of her answer and *Olufunke* expanded her answer by saying that she observed that women have to show they are qualified. It is just assumed that a man is. *Hannah* added that she found that men doubted her capabilities and ability to lead. This was also a challenge for *Doris*, who found that, in a male-dominated culture, some male team members would resist women in leadership, trying to frustrate progress and not readily accepting direction from women.

*Margaret* said the need to work harder for recognition is particularly pronounced when working with men from a patriarchal background. She cited this example: “When I had just been appointed Head of PBB, a male client mentioned to me three times in very clear terms that I would not cope with the job as I would be too busy with the home, husband and children. He even mentioned that he did not understand why the bank would appoint a woman to replace a man. (My predecessor was a tall man of big build.) I ignored it until I realised that he was trying to call the shots in terms of how the bank treated him and was even trying to determine pricing on his facilities. I put my foot down and he soon realised I was not to be messed with and ended up extremely respectful of me.”

Customer perceptions also came up in *Naira’s* answer. She said: “It can be difficult for customers until they realise you are only about business. A woman can suffer some harassment.”

She also mentioned that, when she was appointed as a regional manager with six men reporting to her, it was hard to deal with some of them in the beginning. However, she won their trust over time because, as she puts it: “I kept reminding them that I was just a team player at the company, and I wake up to get the work done and not to be bossing people around for my own pleasure.”

*Mercia* mentioned that she felt she was dismissed simply because she was a black woman and had to employ Sun Tzu’s *Art of War* to survive. She then said she was glad all that changed when I came along to be her line manager, which I found most heartening.

*Sarah* and *Sandra* stood out in that they said they encountered no obstacles. *Sarah* added: “I recognise that obstacles can sometimes be gender specific but I haven’t encountered any that are significant to speak of.”

*Sylviane* had an interesting opinion. She felt that other women don’t accept female power, leading to ego clashes. *Margaret* also mentioned this issue, but said: “We women generally do not collaborate well and men play us against each other to distract us from the real issues. I always step back when I find myself in conflict with another woman. I deal with the issue, never the person.”

*Saara* also touched on this issue. She said: “As women, we need to celebrate each other’s successes. Envy must fall!”
Challenges facing women in the workplace (continued)

It is not enough to simply appoint women to key positions; we must provide the support and air cover for them to succeed.

These are painful testimonies, they reveal the ongoing dominance of patriarchy and gender discrimination in our organisations and a leadership failure to support and nurture talent by creating or allowing a hostile environment. It is incumbent on all of us as leaders, both male and female, to define the rules of engagement in our departments so that women have the space and opportunity to realise their potential. It is not enough to simply appoint women to key positions; we must provide the support and air cover for them to succeed.

Juggling home and work

The second most common obstacle mentioned was having to juggle home and work responsibilities. Almost all the women I spoke to mentioned this in some way.

Doris highlighted that being away from home for long business trips, sometimes at short notice, made it difficult to balance family time and work.

Sylviane singled out maternity leave as an obstacle related to work-life balance for women and Yande mentioned that making a decision to put family first comes down to family responsibilities “getting in the way” and impacts on your ability to be considered for senior roles.

Naira said it is definitely a challenge to keep up with family and work. You can forget about time for yourself and it’s hard to juggle being a competitive professional, being a good housewife and having enough time for your husband and children, never mind the rest of the family.

Claudia said she also found it a challenge to manage her work-life balance while having children and building her career.

In my role as a leader of people, I have found this to be a difficult nut to crack because men and women have a largely different response to the guilt of being at work and leaving children at home. For most women and some men, this sense of guilt is intense and gut wrenching. As a leader, you have to be close enough to your staff to immediately pick up any signs of anxiety, fear, frustration or guilt as women juggle many balls. We must emphasise, in words and deeds, that work-life balance is unique to each person, and that we understand each individual’s fears, frustrations and sense of guilt about juggling home and work. This sense of guilt or anxiety about juggling home and work is magnified when:

• the children are small;
• there is no proper support system at home;
• disability or special needs come into play; or
• there is an unsupportive line manager and boyfriend or husband.

Money matters

Being paid less than male colleagues for the same or better performance also received a fair amount of airtime. For me, Mercia’s response was the most encouraging on this score. She said: “I was remunerated much less than my male counterparts, even when my performance was better. Yes, I had to work thrice as much to prove myself. Lincoln fixed that, including performance rewards, the best I have ever experienced.”

There will be times where all a staff member needs is a word of encouragement, a shoulder to cry on, a listening ear, or flexibility as to how she does her work. There is no rulebook for most of these things. We need leaders with empathy and a sense of ubuntu.

As Saara put it: “In general, women are perceived as either carrying their emotions on their sleeves or being slave drivers. During my leadership journey, I had to put a special focus on overcoming the challenge of being perceived as being a slave driver instead of goal driven. It’s simple… no effort, no result. We don’t get rewarded for trying.”
Sakeenat’s response in a similar vein heartened me. She spoke about starting off her career confident, sprightly and expressive, only to realise at some point that she had become consumed by her environment. “I had become invisible,” she said.

At work, she was overlooked for advancement, intimidated—and apologised to later, in private, as if that made everything all right. “I spent so much time ‘doing’ – at work, for family, for friends… in the process, I neglected to stay in touch with who I am,” she lamented.

She told me how coaching helped her look inward and realise that she was missing something she had possessed before – the aptitude to take charge. She realised she could face her challenge with the appropriate support, and… “When the next hurdle came along, I handled it like a pole vault!”

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Challenges facing women in the workplace (continued)

If we have the courage to seek help and to work at issues, we can succeed beyond our own expectations.

Many a time, all our staff need is a word of encouragement, or somebody to listen to their frustrations, to guide them along a difficult path, or to show in words or actions that they understand and empathise.

Thabi (South Africa) observes that my presence in a room speaks for itself, as I am always full of life and it rubs off on other people. She singled out the way I treated her the day I visited her branch and she was unhappy and wanted to leave the bank. She chose the third, fought for what was right and gained her colleagues’ respect.

Our role as leaders is to create a conducive and empowering environment for women to succeed. There may be times, like in Thabi’s case, where people are on the verge of defeat, or where they feel nobody understands. It is our job to give them perspective on the stark choices they face, then give them space to make, but more importantly to own, their decisions.

She also mentioned that I have a very passionate outlook on my work and help to set the vision clearly, and that I make myself available to support achievement.

For Roselyn (Malawi), what stood out was the way I understood how women operate and opened doors in Malawi by creating a conducive environment to bring out the best in her.

Being understanding, making other people a priority and appreciating their contribution was mentioned by Doris (Ghana).

Saara (Namibia) focused on the way I treat everyone with equal respect and share knowledge. She singled out the coaching and guidance I provide during branch visits as valuable.

It amazes me, sometimes, how people will remember every moment and interaction you have with them. We, as leaders, must always be available to guide, to teach, and sometimes to give confidence.

Sandra (Angola) likes my energy and my willingness to help anyone in the team, whether they are at the bottom or the top of the hierarchy. She finds me to be a real commercial person and a role model who is able to motivate big teams to achieve their goals.

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Our role as leaders is to create a conducive and empowering environment for women to succeed. There may be times, like in Thabi’s case, where people are on the verge of defeat, or are ready to give up. In such cases, our role as leaders is to give them a broader perspective on the stark choices they face, then give them space to make, but more importantly to own, their decisions.

Olufunke (Nigeria) said she appreciated that I don’t have a one-size-fits-all approach to management and that I first seek to understand my team before engaging with them.

Challenges facing women in the workplace (continued)
The best way to get to know our teams, to get the best out of them, is to get to know them, their families, their dreams and their aspirations.

During her interview, Sylviane (DRC) already saw a difference in my approach. She said it was the first time she saw a boss happy to see that she places her family first. She pointed out: “He cares about my personal life, which pushes me to do my best at work.”

I was delighted to hear this, I think that there is still a lot of old style thinking in the way we lead people. We seem to only want to relate to them at a superficial level. The best way to get to know our teams, to get the best out of them, is to get to know them, their families, their dreams and their aspirations. I have been blessed to be part of the personal and professional journeys of the women I have worked with.

She also mentioned my willingness to travel economy class and eagerness to visit customers, rather than keeping colleagues late at the office or expecting to be entertained.

I think sometimes we allow the roles/titles to be more important than the mission. We must never be defined by our fancy titles, the powers we have, or the decision rights given to us. The best way to lead is to be humble and normal, be willing to serve and always to see yourself as a member of a team. Business class seats, reserved seating and all the other perks should never define you or distract you from your path or mission.

Hannah (Ghana) remarked that my ability to see her capabilities rather than her gender made her happy. She said: “He treated me with respect and earned my trust. He was the first man at work to whom I opened up and poured out my heart – my frustrations and emotions – without holding anything back.”

I remember travelling with Hannah for days through Ghana. We had an opportunity to talk about our lives, family, career aspirations, setbacks and plans for the future. One of the key roles of leaders is to create an environment in which people can share their thoughts, wishes and frustrations. This starts when the leader is vulnerable and opens up. There is no manual for working with or supporting a woman going through troubles like a messy divorce, a miscarriage, an abusive relationship, an inability have children, a sick child, or a loved one who has been diagnosed with a life threatening disease. We need to go back to our common humanity. Through ubuntu, we can support those we work with in the way Hannah described.

Claudia’s comment meant a lot to me. She said, “I never felt gender discrimination from Lincoln. I and my direct team, all women, were new in our roles. Lincoln helped each one of us, finding our strengths and guiding us on our leadership journey.”

For Margaret, what made a difference was the way I stood up for her when she had no voice and was being discussed negatively at high levels in the bank, while she was still in a junior position. She says I saw her potential way before others did and took time to encourage her, becoming instrumental in her career and her growth in the bank.

She emphasised: “I know for a fact that, had Lincoln not stood up for me twelve years ago, my career would have taken a different path. He gives all women they respect they deserve as professionals and strikes an amazing balance between having a professional relationship with you and taking an interest in knowing you personally.”

Margaret is a young lady who survived a very difficult and public divorce, that started to spill over into work. My role as a leader was to protect a staff member, to do the right thing and ensure that she was given the space, support and atmosphere to deal with what she needed to deal with. Margaret has since remarried, to a loving man who supports her career. She is now the Head of our Retail and Business Bank in Malawi and has just completed her PhD.

Challenges facing women in the workplace (continued)
Challenges facing women in the workplace (continued)

“I think one of the best opportunities to teach, guide and lead is where there is disagreement.”

God thought it through when He gave us one mouth and two ears. I think one of the biggest criticisms from our staff is that we don’t listen enough, don’t get the pulse of our teams and have no empathy with how our people feel. It’s important for leaders to always check on their teams, individually and collectively, either through visits or simply by using the latest communication tools.

For Yande, the robust conversations we had in a bid to become a better performing team and to improve individually made my leadership style stand out. “He is a very bold and candid leader, with no hidden agenda,” she said. “You are free to tell him exactly how you feel without worrying that it will be used against you. He opened doors and gave ample guidance.”

One of the most important attributes for a leader is honesty and integrity. A leader has to be able to deal with issues of performance soberly and dispassionately. This means that, during the process of performance management, a leader has to accept that favouritism and victimisation are two sides of a bad coin. Discussions about performance for an individual, a team or a business unit must be robust yet respectful, must be factual, yet empowering and, most importantly, must be transparent, yet sensitive.

Equally, it is important as a leader to encourage your teams to be free to debate, to criticise, to offer alternative approaches. More importantly, you must foster an environment in which your team can give you feedback about what you are doing right and what you are doing wrong. Interacting this way will not affect your position; you won’t lose your title. Instead, you will get to understand how people feel and what is on their minds. You then have an opportunity to articulate your views and overall perspective clearly.

Leadership is about influence, but it is important to understand that you can’t influence unless you are prepared to be influenced; you can’t persuade unless you are prepared to be persuaded.

Sarah noted that I am focused on women empowerment, not just in Standard Bank, but across Africa. She described me as a true son of Africa intent on unearthing and harnessing African talent for African growth and called me a great motivator who displays simplicity and humility. Amidst all this serious stuff, she also mentioned that she finds me fun loving, which I find encouraging.

One of the key growth points for young leaders is the ability to lead across business units, countries and various disciplines. When one gets an opportunity to lead across...
Challenges facing women in the workplace (continued)

“I have grown and benefited from the different cultures I have experienced and learnt from across the continent.”

play pranks and practical jokes on one another. It’s important that, as leaders, we don’t take ourselves too seriously; that we are able to work hard, play hard and have lots of fun.

And speaking of awareness, Joyce pointed out that she finds me to be sensitive to the general issues that women face in the workplace and able to give women a fair chance, without compensating on gender. She also finds that I understand the contribution that a woman can bring to a conversation and am able to guide appropriately to get the best out of the women I work with.

Any leader who works with women must always be attuned to their special circumstances, create a conducive environment for their success and be prepared to remove obstacles they face. This means being able and willing to back them to succeed even though the majority thinks otherwise. I have been blessed to have highly talented women leaders in my team. I have never hesitated in trusting them with crucial roles and they have not disappointed me.

Probably most humbling of all was the input I received from Mercia, who said she could be dismissive and very cynical at the time when we met, because of the prejudicial stereotypes she had had to combat all her working life.

She said: “Lincoln taught me that it’s OK to be vulnerable – in fact, vulnerability is a strength. As a result, I could be authentic and I found my stress levels dropping. I was more creative and empowered to implement my ideas. What’s more, I became interested in what other people had to say because it wasn’t necessary to be on the defensive the whole time.”

Wow! Knowing I made such a difference in someone’s life really encourages me! I have worked with many women who have had to struggle against patriarchy and chauvinism throughout their lives and careers. These battles made some of them hard-core. Some adopted a male persona, became cynical about leaders or colleagues or became less empathetic towards staff.

Part of my role has been to reach out to these women leaders, to gently persuade them that the fight is over and that they need to remove the protective mask they are wearing. This means asking people, whose trust levels are at an all-time low, to lower their defences. But there is no substitute for being vulnerable and genuine.

What I would like to improve

Of course, it would have been a serious mistake for me to have stopped there with my questions. I asked what I could do better as a leader leading women. The amazing, honest...
feedback I received has led me to draft this to-do list for myself. I may not be able to do all of it, because not all the decisions are up to me alone, but I will certainly work towards these things wherever I can:

• Trying to have more influence on a cultural shift, getting more men and women to believe in women’s leadership.
• Negotiating flexi-time for women who need it.
• Having more engagement sessions with women leaders to focus on how to overcome their fears.
• Sharing the lessons I have learned in my career more loudly and staying in touch.
• Making more time for mentorship and trying to give of my time to more women.
• Handling some conversations better.
• Fighting a tendency to write people off if they have exhausted my patience.
• Continuing to hone my self-awareness.

• Helping women to develop their political quotient.
• Women can be limelight-shy and end up underappreciated. I would like to be instrumental in achieving more focused leadership support for women so that we can speed up closing the gender gap.

This has been an amazing journey of discovery and renewal. I’ve certainly benefited from the words of these powerful women leaders, many of whom shared painful parts of their journeys.

Please join me in fighting gender discrimination, sexual harassment, sexism and the marginalisation of women. Let us make sure that we bring about fundamental change for all our women colleagues.

As Claudia pointed out, Ronald Reagan noted that the greatest leader is not necessarily the one who does the greatest things. He is the one who gets the people to do the greatest things. I aspire to be that kind of leader and my heart overflows with joy when I see you making changes that make our world a better place.

Where you have given me very positive feedback, I am humbled and grateful for your warm and kind words.

If you are reading this article, please examine your conduct, your outlook towards women. If the issues raised resonate with you, please lead in the same way and, most importantly, learn from the feedback so that you can become a better person and leader.

Last, but certainly not least, I also thank the participants for the constructive feedback you have given me. I will be working on it with the view to succeed.

Until we speak again,

Lincoln