



11th Women in HR Conference

Theme: "Beyond HR – Elevating Women to Lead Culture, Strategy, and Innovation"

Speech

by

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Accra

The President, Ghana Employers' Association,

Industry leaders,

Distinguished guests,

Friends from the media,

All protocols duly observed.

I bring you warm greetings from the Bank of Ghana.

It is truly an honour to join you at this important gathering. Let me begin by acknowledging the Ghana Employers' Association, which for 75 years has been at the forefront of advocacy, shaping labour policy, promoting industrial harmony, and supporting business growth. Your role as a partner in national development is undeniable, and today's conference is another testament to your enduring impact.

I am deeply grateful for the invitation to speak on the theme, ***"Beyond HR – Elevating Women to Lead Culture, Strategy, and Innovation."*** It is both a privilege and a responsibility I do not take for granted.

Personal Disclaimer & Storytelling

Let me begin with a small disclaimer. There is absolutely nothing wrong with women excelling in Human Resources, Communications, or Corporate Social Responsibility. These roles are essential and deserve recognition. Yet, we must also remember that true leadership is not limited to certain departments; it can emerge from any corner of an organization when courage and preparation meet opportunity.

In my own journey, I never set out with the dream of becoming a Deputy Governor at the Central Bank. But I did nurture the desire to grow, to stretch beyond the familiar, and to embrace new challenges, even when they came in unexpected forms. For me, it was truly about going ***"Beyond Journalism, Media Management, Communications, and Business Development"***. ***"Elevating Women to Lead Culture, Strategy, and Innovation"***. That phrase captures my path: moving from one world where I was already visible and successful, into another where I had to start over, learn afresh, and ultimately discover new dimensions of leadership.

Fifteen years ago, I took what many thought was an unthinkable step: leaving behind a celebrated media career to join a little-known bank. At the time, I was a Radio and TV anchor and Managing Editor for one of Ghana's most respected news and current affairs platforms. Walking away from national visibility into the role of Head of Branding and Communications at Access Bank—which then had only three branches, looked, to many, like a step backwards. My family and colleagues asked, *"Why trade*

the spotlight for this?" But deep inside, I longed for more than recognition. I wanted growth, I wanted reinvention, I wanted to test myself in uncharted waters.

That decision came at a price. I had to start over, strip away the comfort of being an expert, and embrace vulnerability. The journalist who had built a reputation for asking the tough questions now had to learn how to answer them. I immersed myself in banking policies, studied financial systems, and retooled with courses in risk management, product development, and financial analysis. And yes, there were moments when I had to humble myself and learn from colleagues far younger or less experienced than me.

In time, new doors opened. I was asked to lead the Women's Banking Initiative, then Private Banking, and eventually retail banking. Each role stretched me further, teaching me how to craft long-term strategy, how to juggle the demands of work, school, and family while pursuing my MBA, and the Chartered Banker Course and above all, how to seize opportunities even when the path ahead seemed daunting.

The lesson is clear: real growth never happens in the comfort zone. It comes when we dare to take risks, when we embrace the unknown, and when we commit ourselves again and again to the discipline of continuous learning.

Why "Beyond HR" Matters

That journey of leaving my comfort for growth brings me directly to today's theme, why "Beyond HR" truly matters.

For far too long, society has celebrated women leaders mainly in Human Resources, Corporate Social Responsibility, and Communications. These are noble and essential functions, but they are not the only places where leadership should be seen. My own story proves that stepping outside traditional boxes can unlock new possibilities.

The real challenge is that the boardrooms, where culture is shaped, where long-term strategy is crafted, and where innovation is ignited remain heavily male-dominated. And when women are absent from these critical spaces, organizations are deprived of fresh perspectives, collaborative approaches, and the inclusive decision-making that drives resilience.

So here is the message I want to stress today: **women are not just nurturers of people, we are architects of vision, of strategy, and of transformation.**

The evidence is undeniable. Research shows that women often adopt transformational and participative leadership styles. These styles **prioritize vision, collaboration, and empowerment**. They are the very traits that strengthen organizational **culture**, spark meaningful **innovation**, and sustain change over the long term.

Three Pillars of Women's Leadership

A. Women as Culture Architects

Let us begin with culture. What is culture? It is not the posters on the wall or the glossy mission statements framed in the reception area. Culture is what happens when no one is looking, it is the invisible current that guides how people think, act, and perform.

When I first joined Access Bank, my role was technically Communications, but very quickly I realized my work touched something deeper. I had a chance to influence the *spirit* of the organization. I remember insisting on an open-door approach, encouraging colleagues to speak up, and promoting fairness in performance measurement. There were days when junior staff would walk into my office simply because they trusted that they would be heard. That trust became part of our DNA.

The results spoke louder than any campaign. Between 2010 and 2015 while I was head of Communications, Access Bank won multiple local and international awards for CSR, Sustainability and the Most Influential Bank on social media. The Women Banking initiative I took won many accolades, Best Bank for Women Entrepreneurs - 2023 World Economic Magazine Awards, Best Financier for Women Entrepreneurs, the Banker Magazine Award for Best Bank for Women, to mention a few. The Retail Banking franchise grew its profit contribution from just 25 million cedis to over 145 million. Yes, we developed new products and campaigns tailored to the lifestyles of customers, but the real driver was a culture where people felt accountable to one another and proud of what they were building together.

Globally, we see similar examples. **Mary Barra**, CEO of General Motors, inherited the company during the 2014 ignition-switch crisis. Instead of hiding behind legal walls, she launched the "*Speak Up for Safety*" initiative, apologized publicly, and rebuilt GM's culture on accountability and psychological safety. That cultural reset is now taught worldwide, and it was led by a woman. The data only confirms what we know. Studies by Deloitte and McKinsey show that companies with more women in leadership are more trusted, more collaborative, and more inclusive. Culture is not "soft." It is the backbone of performance and profitability.

B. Women as Strategic Leaders

The second pillar is strategy. Strategy is not simply reacting to pressures of the day, it is long-term, transformational thinking. And here too, women excel.

As I narrated earlier, in my own career, I was asked to lead the Women's Banking Initiative and later Private Banking. We designed a **five-year plan** to grow women's market share from barely one percent to five percent. At the same time, we expanded

Private Banking's clientele base. By the second year, that unit was contributing 30% of retail deposits and 15% of profits. That was not luck. It was deliberate strategy: understanding our market, identifying opportunities, and executing with discipline.

Globally, look at **Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala**, now Director-General of the World Trade Organization. She has consistently shown that strategy at the highest level is about balancing national interests with global priorities, long-term thinking, not short-term fixes.

Or consider **Indra Nooyi**, who led PepsiCo with her mantra "*Performance with Purpose*." Long before sustainability became a business buzzword, she repositioned Pepsi's strategy toward healthier products and embedded purpose into every portfolio shift. **She proved that profitability and responsibility are not opposites, they are partners.**

The lesson is clear: women do not separate strategy from purpose. We bring a holistic lens, ensuring that strategy serves not just profits, but people, sustainability, and long-term resilience.

C. Women as Innovators

The third pillar is innovation. Too often, innovation is narrowly defined as technology. But real innovation is cultural, social, and human-centered. It is about reimagining solutions for real human needs.

In my own journey, I led a project to digitize village savings groups. At first, it seemed straightforward: put these groups on digital platforms. But then reality struck. Many people could not afford the devices required to participate. Instead of giving up, we asked a different question: "*What if we could make access itself affordable?*" That insight led to the creation of device financing loans, simple products that allowed customers to spread payments and gain access to digital tools. That was innovation, not because it was flashy, but because it solved a real problem inclusively.

Here at home, **Patricia Obo-Nai**, CEO of Telecel Ghana, has championed digital access and built initiatives that expand opportunities for young people. Her leadership demonstrates that innovation led by women often **focuses on inclusion, ensuring technology bridges gaps rather than deepening divides.**

The numbers validate this. A Boston Consulting Group study of 1,700 firms found that companies with above-average leadership diversity generated **19 percentage points more innovation revenue** and had **higher margins**. McKinsey's work echoes this: gender-diverse executive teams are far more likely to financially outperform.

The truth is this: when women innovate, organizations do not just evolve, they leapfrog.

Why This Matters (The Business Case)

Ladies and gentlemen, let me pause here to emphasize why all of this truly matters.

Elevating women beyond HR is not about charity. It is not about tokenism. It is about competitiveness and survival in a fast-changing world.

McKinsey's research is clear: companies in the top quartile for gender diversity are 25% more likely to outperform their peers on profitability. The Harvard Business Review also finds that women score higher than men in key leadership competencies such as resilience, integrity, and taking initiative, the very qualities organizations need in turbulent times.

But the case is not just corporate, it is also social. Across Africa, women reinvest up to 70% of their income back into families and communities, compared to about 40% for men. This means that when women rise, entire households rise, communities are strengthened, and economies become more resilient.

The truth is simple: when women thrive, economies thrive. And when women are allowed to lead not just in HR but in **culture, strategy, and innovation**, the impact multiplies for everyone.

What Must Change

So, what must we do practically and courageously to make this vision a reality?

For women:

We must begin by owning our leadership stories unapologetically. Too often, we wait for validation before claiming our place. But leadership is not given, it is taken. We must walk into spaces of power with confidence, not shrinking ourselves to fit in. And when the table is too small or the seats too few, we must have the audacity to build a bigger table and pull others alongside us.

For Boards:

Appointments must be intentional, not symbolic. Women cannot be confined to the so-called "soft committees." The future of organizations is shaped in audit, risk, finance, and innovation committees. If women are absent there, then half of society's

wisdom is absent where it matters most. True progress requires that women are not tokens in the room but equal voices at the decision-making table.

For Organizations:

We must move beyond mentorship into sponsorship. Advice is helpful, but advocacy is transformative. Women need leaders, both men and women who will say, "*She is ready, give her the chance,*" and then stand beside her when the challenge comes. Mentors give guidance; sponsors give access. And without access, talent remains unseen.

And for society as a whole:

We must understand that inclusivity is not about pushing men aside, it is about partnership. Men remain anchors in families and organizations, and policies that exclude them miss the point. But imagine this: if every woman in a man's life, his wife, his mother, his sister, his daughter earned equally and led equally, how different would our homes be? Families would be more secure, communities would be more resilient, and our economies would grow stronger. When women rise, men do not fall. Instead, everyone rises together.

That is the change we must commit to, not tomorrow, but today.

Closing Reflections

As I conclude, let us remind ourselves of this: leadership is not male or female, it is human. It is about balance, vision, courage, and empathy.

Women bring a unique blend of purpose and innovation to leadership. We build strategy with empathy, and we innovate with inclusivity. We do not just drive profits, we drive change. And that difference is our strength.

The future of leadership requires women at the tables of power, where culture is shaped, strategy is designed, and innovation is ignited.

Ghana's Affirmative Action (Gender Equity) Act, 2024 sets a clear, phased pathway toward achieving gender parity in leadership and decision-making roles.

30% by 2026, 35% by 2028, and 50% by 2030, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goal 5 targets.

But this future will not arrive by accident. It requires deliberate effort from women to claim their space, from boards to open doors, and from society to embrace inclusion as an imperative, not an option. The question is, woman, are you preparing to take advantage of this opportunity?

Let us leave here today committed to going *beyond HR*, to elevate our sisters, daughters, mothers and friends boldly, purposefully, and unapologetically into the spaces where the future is written.

Thank you and may we all continue to lead with courage and conviction.

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