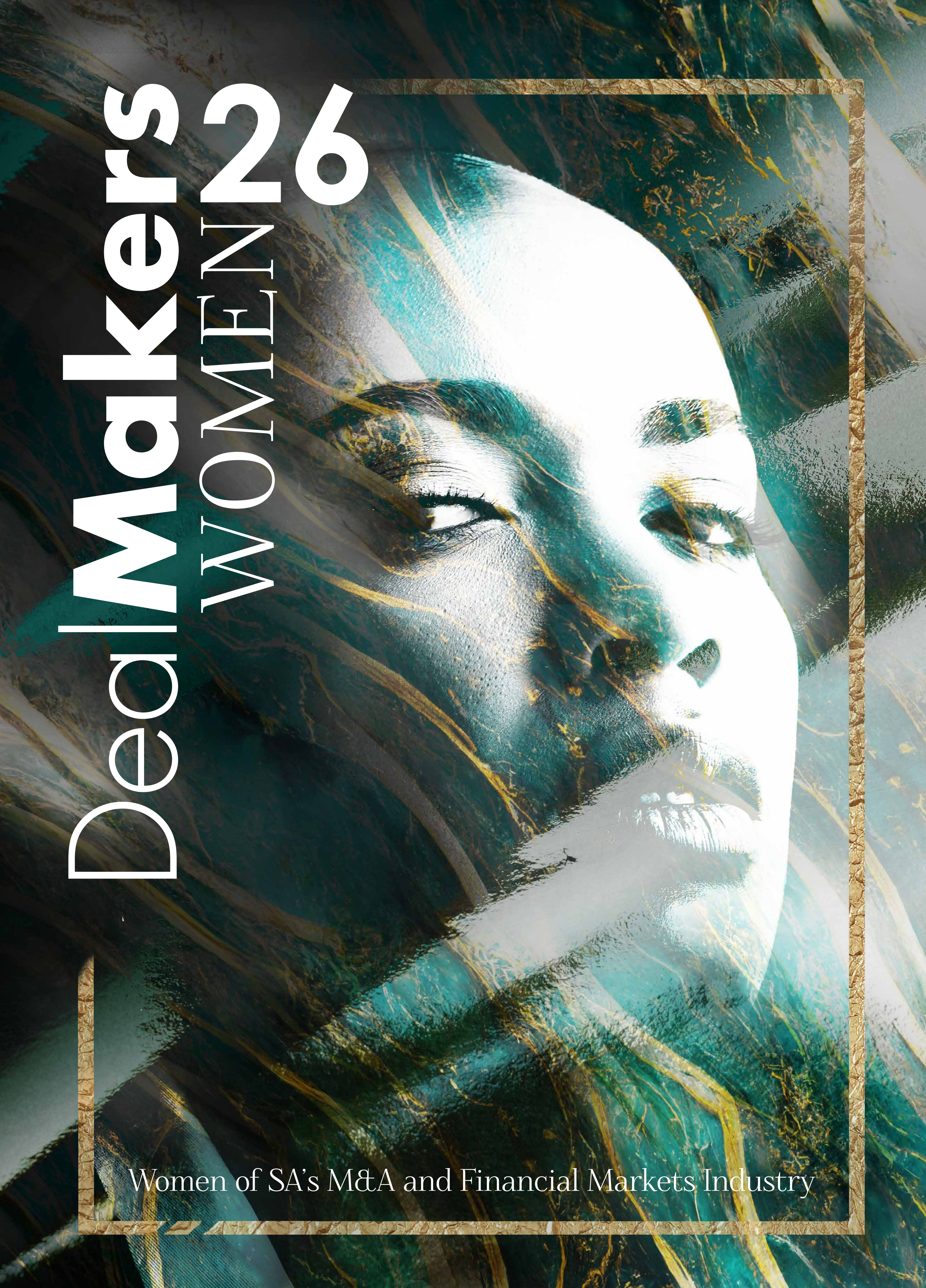

DealMakers WOMEN 26

Women of SA's M&A and Financial Markets Industry

FOREWORD

Marylou Greig
Editor

DealMakers WOMEN 2026
Women of SA's M&A and Financial Markets Industry

The idea of a just society is as old as time. In 375 BC, Plato was among the first to systematically explore the concept, one that has continued to be debated and developed throughout the centuries. More recently, in 1971, American philosopher John Rawls profoundly revived the discussion with the publication of *A Theory of Justice*, which set out his influential modern political theory of what constitutes a just society.

At its simplest, a just society is one in which everyone has equal rights, access to basic needs, and an equal opportunity to succeed. It is a society that treats all people with respect, rejects discrimination, and protects human rights. These principles may seem straightforward, yet achieving them remains a work in progress, particularly when it comes to equality for women.

Each year on Women's Day in South Africa, we pause to honour the courage, strength and resilience of women, past and present, who have broken barriers and paved the way for future generations. The day holds deep historical significance, rooted in the 1956 march of 20,000 women to the Union Buildings in protest against unjust laws. Seventy years later, that extraordinary demonstration remains both a tribute and a call to action: a reminder of how far we have come, and how much further we still must go.

The profiles filling the pages of this sixth edition offer words of courage, inspiration and wisdom. Each woman featured has a unique story to tell, and valuable advice to impart. There is immense power in women learning from and supporting other women who have worked hard, overcome obstacles, and gone on to achieve their goals. As American writer, professor, philosopher, poet and civil rights activist Audre Lorde observed: "It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognise, accept, and celebrate those differences."

What is increasingly clear is that deals are about far more than valuation, financial analysis and commercial negotiation. These technical skills matter enormously; they open the door and provide the foundation for a successful career. But it is often the skills beyond the numbers that determine how that career develops. Understanding people as much as understanding numbers; communicating effectively, building trusted relationships, showing empathy and resilience, and knowing how to navigate different personalities and perspectives are all essential. In an industry built on relationships, these so-called 'soft skills' are anything but soft – they are often what turns technical expertise into lasting professional success.

The feature will be launched at the fourth DealMakers Women's Day networking event, building on the success of the past three years and, once again, bringing together an inspiring group of women for conversation and connection. This year's panel comprises Logan Hufkie, a director at PSG Capital; Trishanta Dheepnarayan, a director at Metier Private Equity; Wairimu Karungu, Vice President, M&A Advisory East Africa at Stanbic Bank Kenya; and Nolu Mkhonza, Bephor co-creator and Hallyu co-founder.

My grateful thanks go to all those in the industry who continue to support and participate in this feature, and to my team: women who themselves juggle many roles, for their dedication, commitment and excellence in compiling this discourse. This feature is, ultimately, a collaboration and a testament to the talent, resilience and growing influence of women in the M&A and financial capital markets space.

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The feature is available for download - www.dealmakerssouthafrica.com

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Gleason Publications

DealMakers Women is published by the proprietor Gleason Publications (Pty) Ltd, reg no: 1996/010505/07 from its offices at 31 Tudor Park, 61 Hillcrest Avenue, Blairgowrie, Randburg 2194.
Tel: +27 (0) 11 886 6446
e-mail: reception@gleason.co.za
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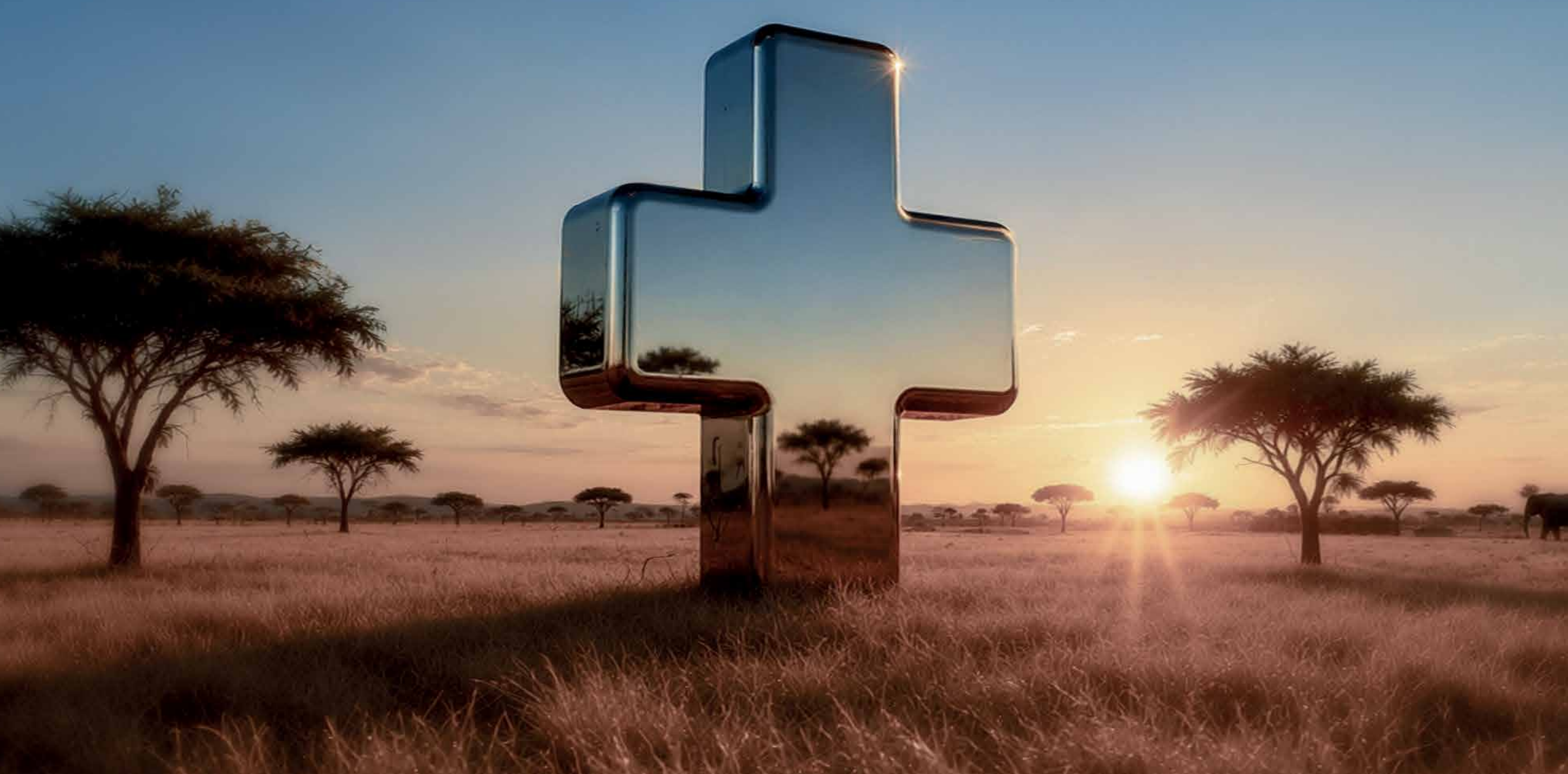

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Q&A

Melanie Elephant

Executive Vice President
Debt Financing Solutions
Standard Bank

Personal reflections and integration

Do you believe AI will act as an equaliser that lowers the barriers to entry for women looking to launch their own boutique advisory firms, or will it further consolidate power among the global hyperscale institutions that own the technology?

Whilst not a complete equaliser, I believe AI has the potential to lower some barriers for women building boutique advisory firms. Capabilities that once required significant investment, including research, data, analysis and support tools, are becoming more accessible. That helps narrow the gap between smaller firms and larger institutions.

Technology will change how advisory firms operate, but it will not replace the qualities clients value most. Clients are not paying for information, which is increasingly abundant. They value judgment, experience and the ability to apply both to navigate complexity, challenge assumptions, manage stakeholders and execute well when the stakes are high.

AI should therefore be leveraged to reduce time spent on routine work, such as first model drafts, information gathering and presentation formatting, so more time can be spent on critical thinking, strategic problem solving and relationship building. The firms that will succeed will be those that combine technology with human insight, trust, credibility and sound judgment.

The phrase 'work-life balance' can feel mythical in transactional finance. How do you personally define and manage the integration of a demanding career with your personal life?

I don't believe in the concept of work-life balance. Realistically, one will always demand more attention than the other at different points in time. What matters to me is being intentional with my time and fully present wherever I choose to be. When I commit to an important meeting, family time or catching up with friends, I try to give it my full attention. That means being honest about how far I can stretch myself and accepting that every commitment comes with a trade-off.

That sometimes means saying no. Earlier in my career, I found that difficult because I felt obliged to be everywhere and involved in everything. Over time, I have learnt that saying no to one thing is often what allows me to show up properly for something else. Being honest with myself, and with others, has freed me from much of the guilt that can accompany those choices.

The same principle applies at work. In a live transaction or with a client, that is where my attention belongs. Deal making is demanding because it is fast paced, complex and constantly evolving. It requires focus, resilience and comfort with uncertainty. For me, integration is not about dividing life into equal parts. It is about being fully present in the part of life that needs me most at that moment.

When the deal closes and the adrenaline drops, how do you intentionally disconnect, recharge, and protect your mental well-being?

Anything that does not require a digital device helps my mind slow down. We have access to endless information, but constant consumption has a cost. At some point, the brain needs space to process, not only absorb.

For me, recharging starts with simplicity. Silence, a good book, time outdoors and quality time with family and friends help me regain perspective and quiet the mental noise that builds during a busy transaction cycle. A walk in nature, a good book enjoyed out in the sunshine or an unhurried conversation reminds me there is a world beyond emails, meetings and deadlines.

Recovery is not a luxury in transactional finance. The profession relies on judgment, clear thinking and decision-making. Time away from the desk helps me reset, and some of my best ideas have come when I have stepped back rather than pushed harder. I usually return with more energy, more focus and greater clarity.

How has your definition of 'success' changed from when you were an ambitious graduate to who you are today?

My definition of success has changed from achievement to impact. Earlier in my career, success was often measured by titles, transactions completed and the recognition that came with professional achievement. Those milestones still matter, but they are no longer the main measure of a successful career.

Today, success means doing work that has meaning and contributes to something larger than myself. It is helping a client achieve an important objective, supporting a colleague through a difficult challenge, or seeing someone I have mentored grow into a confident professional in their own right.

Watching someone you have coached or mentored build confidence, take on bigger challenges and achieve goals of their own has become one of the most satisfying parts of a long career.

I have also learnt that success should not come at the expense of the things that matter most. Being present for family, maintaining meaningful friendships and protecting your sense of self are achievements too. Ultimately, I hope people remember me as someone who contributed meaningfully, supported others generously and built relationships that lasted beyond the deal.

Q&A

Mulalo Takaedza
Sector Head
TMT, Debt Financing Solutions
Standard Bank

South Africa's macroeconomic climate has thrown plenty of curveballs over the last few years. How has your approach to structuring deals evolved to mitigate these local risks?

South Africa's macroeconomic environment has certainly tested all of us. Between power constraints, higher interest rates, currency volatility and logistics challenges, there has rarely been the luxury of operating in a stable environment. As a dealmaker, I've learned that successful transactions are increasingly about anticipating risk and building enough flexibility into structures to withstand unexpected shocks.

My approach has evolved significantly. I spend more time understanding not only a company's financial performance, but also its operational vulnerabilities, key stakeholders, and ability to navigate disruption.

I've also found that partnerships matter more than ever. Whether it's internal experts, clients, other lenders or strategic stakeholders, the best outcomes come when everyone shares a common understanding of risk and a commitment to long-term value creation.

On a personal level, these conditions have reinforced the importance of staying calm and adaptable. Some of the most rewarding transactions of my career have been completed during periods of uncertainty. Volatility does not necessarily prevent opportunities from emerging; in many cases, it creates them. Success comes from thoughtful structuring, disciplined decision-making, and the resilience to keep moving forward when conditions are challenging.

Can you take us inside a high-stakes negotiation? How do you maintain composure and command authority when the tension in the room is palpable?

One of the things dealmaking teaches you very quickly is that the highest-stakes negotiations are rarely about numbers alone. Behind every valuation, covenant or commercial term are people with different priorities, pressures and expectations.

For me, maintaining calm starts long before the negotiation itself. Preparation builds confidence. When you understand the transaction, your client's priorities and your deal-breakers, you're far less likely to be unsettled by unexpected developments.

I've also learned that authority doesn't come from having the loudest voice in the room. It comes from being credible, thoughtful and consistent. Some of the most influential moments are spent listening. People often reveal what matters most when they feel heard.

You don't have to dominate a room to command it. Authenticity, composure and conviction are powerful. In high-pressure situations, my role is to bridge perspectives, maintain momentum, and keep sight of the bigger picture. When a difficult negotiation concludes successfully, it's incredibly rewarding, and a reminder of why I love what I do.

AI has significantly accelerated the pace of due diligence, compressing timelines that used to take months into weeks. How does this hyper-speed environment change your risk management strategy and pressure during a transaction?

AI has fundamentally changed the pace of transactions. Tasks that once required days of reviewing documents and identifying risks can now be completed far more efficiently.

However, speed and certainty are not the same thing. While AI helps us process information faster, it doesn't replace judgement, context or experience. In many ways, it has increased the importance of human decision-making because the challenge is no longer finding information, it's understanding what truly matters.

From a risk management perspective, my focus has shifted towards validation and critical thinking. AI can surface patterns and insights, but it remains our responsibility to challenge assumptions, ask difficult questions, and understand the commercial realities behind the data.

The pressure has also evolved. Clients expect answers faster, markets move rapidly, and opportunities can emerge or disappear within weeks. The expectation today is that you can process complexity at speed, while maintaining the same level of rigour and accuracy. However, though technology can accelerate analysis, accountability for decisions remains firmly human.

If you could go back to the very first week of your career, what is the single piece of technical or professional advice you wish someone had given you?

If I could go back to my first week, I'd tell myself to focus as much on people as you do on numbers. Technical skills are essential, but trust, relationships and integrity are what sustain a career.

I'd also remind myself that it's okay not to have all the answers. Stay curious, keep learning, and be patient with your growth. Careers are marathons, not sprints, and some of the most valuable lessons come from simply being willing to learn from those around you.

Q&A

Neha Bantha
Executive Vice President
Leveraged Finance | Structured Capital
Standard Bank

Personal reflections and integration

The phrase, 'work-life balance' can feel mythical in transactional finance. How do you personally define and manage the integration of a demanding career with your personal life?

For me, balance is less about equal time and more about intentional integration. During live transactions, work inevitably takes priority. Equally, there are moments with family that deserve complete attention.

When the deal closes and the adrenaline drops, how do you intentionally disconnect, recharge, and protect your mental wellbeing?

After an intense transaction, I believe it's important to create space for both reflection and recovery. I intentionally return to the routines that keep me grounded. Yoga remains one of the most effective ways for me to reset both physically and mentally. It allows me to slow down after weeks of sustained intensity, and regain perspective.

I also make a conscious effort to reflect on completed transactions – what worked well, where improvements can be made, and how those lessons can be applied to future transactions. Continuous improvement has always been central to my professional philosophy.

Protecting mental wellbeing is not about disconnecting from ambition. It's about ensuring that I consistently bring my best self to every client meeting and every transaction that I work on.

> I am also naturally future-focused, so I make time to think beyond the immediate needs of the day, anticipate what is ahead, and plan with intention.

How has your definition of success changed from when you were an ambitious graduate to who you are today?

As a graduate, success meant technical excellence, progression, and working on increasingly complex transactions. I was focused on building a strong foundation and earning credibility in a competitive industry.

Twelve years later, my definition of success has broadened. It now means being a trusted advisor whom clients turn to, not only for technical expertise, but for innovative financing solutions, sound judgement, and the ability to structure transactions that create value. It also means mentoring junior colleagues and creating opportunities for others to grow.

What is a daily ritual, habit, or boundary you protect fiercely that keeps you grounded amidst the chaos of deal flows?

Preparation is my anchor. I start each day by identifying the highest-impact priorities before emails and meetings dictate my agenda. That discipline keeps me proactive, rather than reactive.

I am also naturally future-focused, so I make time to think beyond the immediate needs of the day, anticipate what is ahead, and plan with intention. This balance helps me remain focused on the present while keeping sight of the bigger picture.

Outside of the financial press and market tickers, what books, podcasts, or philosophies shape how you lead and live?

I am drawn to ideas centred on mindfulness, discipline and resilience. James Clear's *Atomic Habits* reinforced my belief that consistent daily actions compound into exceptional long-term outcomes.

In addition, as a member of the Art of Living organisation, I have experienced its focus on breathwork and mindfulness as profoundly life changing. It has helped me stay grounded under pressure, and to approach both my career and personal life with far greater clarity and purpose.

What is a personal passion or hobby you pursue that has absolutely nothing to do with finance, but keeps your perspective sharp?

Yoga and meditation have become some of the most important constants in my life. They require patience, discipline and presence – qualities that translate naturally into my professional life but are cultivated away from the office.

In addition, motherhood has become my greatest source of perspective. Watching my child grow has reminded me to embrace uncertainty and to appreciate the importance of being fully present. Those lessons not only make me a better parent, but also a more thoughtful leader.

If your life story up to this point had a headline in a business newspaper, what would it be?

Discipline, resilience and purpose: Leveraging twelve years of Investment Banking experience while redefining success through growth, excellence and motherhood.

Standard Bank
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Q&A

Praveshni Sewmohan
Executive Vice President
Sustainable Finance
Standard Bank

What initially drew you to the fast-paced world of corporate finance, and how did you secure your first major breakthrough in the industry?

My career path differs from that of many traditional bankers. I studied engineering and later transitioned into the environmental sector, where I enjoyed a highly rewarding career for nearly two decades. By 2017, I felt I had reached a point where I was no longer learning and growing at the rate I wanted. I realised that career longevity is often less about staying within a single discipline and more about remaining curious and adaptable.

Through a chance reconnection with a former colleague at Standard Bank, what began as a coffee conversation unexpectedly evolved into a new career opportunity. It was a path I had never envisaged, given my background. Standard Bank took a chance on me, and I equally took a chance on the bank.

What drew me in was the opportunity to work at the intersection of finance, strategy and real-world impact. I quickly discovered that corporate finance is ultimately about solving complex problems, creating opportunities, and helping clients navigate important decisions. The experience has been immensely rewarding, allowing me to work alongside talented professionals who are committed not only to commercial outcomes, but also to broader socio-economic impact across Africa.

Looking back at your career, what do you consider your 'defining deal' – the one that tested you the most or reshaped how you view your capabilities?

Shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic, I was managing a significant workload, including a high-profile transaction that attracted substantial public attention. The experience tested my resilience, judgement and ability to balance competing priorities under considerable scrutiny.

There were differing stakeholder perspectives, challenging timelines, and a need to ensure the integrity of the assessment process at every stage. Navigating these dynamics required both technical expertise and relationship management. I learned that credibility is built not only through technical competence, but also through consistency, transparency, and the ability to engage constructively when views differ.

The experience reinforced the value of my earlier consulting career, and demonstrated that many leadership challenges transcend industry boundaries. It also gave me confidence in my ability to operate outside my comfort zone and showed me the importance of remaining anchored in principles, particularly when decisions are complex and highly visible.

South Africa's macroeconomic climate has thrown plenty of curveballs over the last few years. How has your approach to structuring deals evolved to mitigate these local risks?

I have learned that understanding a client's challenges is as important as recognising their potential. Rather than applying rigid requirements, I seek to work with clients within the context of their existing systems, capabilities and data.

South African businesses operate in an environment characterised by uncertainty, whether that relates to regulation, infrastructure constraints, energy challenges or broader economic pressures. In this context, advisors need to be practical and solution-oriented.

This collaborative approach supports clients on their development journey while fostering trusted advisory relationships. Although it often requires greater effort upfront, it delivers more sustainable outcomes for clients and the bank alike. Some of the most successful engagements I've been involved in have come from investing the time to understand where a client is today, rather than focusing solely on where we would like them to be.

AI has significantly accelerated the pace of due diligence, compressing timelines that used to take months into weeks. How does this hyper-speed environment change your risk management strategy and pressure during a transaction?

In my experience, AI has enhanced productivity and responsiveness, enabling better outcomes within shorter timeframes. It allows professionals to process information faster, identify patterns more efficiently, and focus attention on the issues that matter most.

However, technology cannot replace human judgement, intuition and relationship-building capabilities developed through years of experience. Transactions ultimately involve people, and people rarely make decisions based solely on data.

Rather than increasing pressure, AI allows professionals to spend less time on routine tasks and more time interpreting information, exercising judgement and developing creative solutions. The greatest value of AI is not simply speed; it is the opportunity it creates for advisors to spend more time engaging deeply with clients, understanding context, and delivering insights that technology alone cannot provide.

If you could go back to the very first week of your career, what is the single piece of technical or professional advice you wish someone had given you?

Trust your sense of purpose. Early in my career, I expected engineering to provide constant intellectual challenge. Instead, I discovered that technology solved many of the problems I had anticipated solving myself. What ultimately mattered was impact. Each career transition felt risky, particularly after investing years developing expertise in a specific field. Yet every time I followed a sense of purpose, it opened opportunities for growth, learning and meaningful contribution.

Looking back, I would encourage my younger self to embrace change more confidently, and to worry less about having the perfect plan. Some of the most rewarding opportunities emerge unexpectedly and require a willingness to learn, adapt, and trust your capabilities. The transferable skills we gain throughout our careers often become our greatest advantage in ways we cannot foresee at the time.

Q&A

Rentse Tembo
Executive Vice President
Energy & Infrastructure
Standard Bank

Personal reflections and integration

Do you believe AI will act as an equaliser that lowers the barriers to entry for women looking to launch their own boutique advisory firms, or will it further consolidate power among the global hyperscale institutions that own the technology?

I don't think it's an either/or situation. AI gives smaller firms the ability to do more with less, which is incredibly powerful. It allows entrepreneurs to access tools and insights that would previously have required a much larger team and budget.

From my own experience, the biggest barrier has never been technology. It's been getting the opportunity to step into the room, contribute, and prove what you're capable of. AI can help you perform at a high level, but someone still needs to give you the chance to perform. That's where I think the real opportunity lies: using technology to amplify talent, while continuing to create pathways for more women to participate, lead and succeed.

The phrase, 'work-life balance' can feel mythical in transactional finance. How do you personally define and manage the integration of a demanding career with your personal life?

To be completely honest, I don't think I've mastered work-life balance, and I'm not sure that I ever will. On the days where it looks like I have it all together, it's usually because of the incredible support system around me. Help at work, help at home, help from my son's school, help from family and friends.

There are only 24 hours in a day, and being a working mother means trying to fit a great many important things into those same 24 hours. The reality is that, most days, something has to take a back seat. I've learned to make peace with that.

My approach is to focus on what's most important in that moment. One day, it might be a critical credit submission or client meeting. Another day, it might be a cake sale at my son's school, or being present for something that matters to him or my nephews and nieces. I try not to chase perfection in every area at once because that's an impossible standard. Instead, I focus on being intentional about where I need to show up most on any given day, and do the best I can with the time I have.

When the deal closes and the adrenaline drops, how do you intentionally disconnect, recharge, and protect your mental well-being?

My answer is probably not the one people expect. When a deal closes and I finally have a moment to breathe, I recharge by watching 'trash TV'.

In a job where the stakes are high and you're constantly analysing, negotiating, problem-solving and making decisions, the last thing I want to do when a deal closes is consume something serious. I have always loved reading, but after a particularly intense period at work, I've found that I need something completely different, something that asks absolutely nothing of me.

I actually got into reality TV during COVID. There was so much uncertainty and sadness around us that I reached a point where I simply couldn't absorb any more heavy information. Watching people navigate entirely inconsequential problems on television became a surprisingly effective form of escapism.

I've learned that disconnecting doesn't have to look impressive to be effective. For me, recharging is less about doing something productive and more about giving my brain permission to switch off for a while. Sometimes that means a good book, but more often than not, it means a couch, a blanket, and a completely mindless TV show that I don't have to think too hard about.

How has your definition of success changed from when you were an ambitious graduate to who you are today?

When I was younger, success looked exactly like the movies told me it should: big deals, a fancy title, a packed diary, and all the outward signs that you'd 'made it'.

Today, I think success is a lot quieter than that. It's having work that challenges and excites me, earning the trust of clients and colleagues, and knowing that I've built a career through consistency and hard work, rather than shortcuts.

It's also recognising that life happens alongside your career. Success isn't just what happens in the boardroom. It's being able to show up for the people you love, maintaining friendships, raising a good human, and still finding joy in the process.

The older I've become, the less interested I am in looking successful, and the more interested I am in feeling fulfilled. For me, that's a much better measure of whether I've done well.

What is a personal passion or hobby you pursue that has absolutely nothing to do with finance, but keeps your perspective sharp?

Running is probably the hobby that has the least to do with finance but does the most for my wellbeing. I'm not particularly fast, and I'll never be the person standing on a podium collecting medals, but I absolutely love it and I'm fiercely committed to it.

Part of the appeal is simply being outdoors. So much of my day is spent behind a laptop, in meetings, on calls, or travelling between commitments that getting outside feels like a reset button.

What keeps me coming back, though, is seeing the progress over time. Running has taught me that improvement doesn't happen overnight. It comes from showing up consistently, even on the days you don't feel like it. There's something incredibly satisfying about looking back and realising that a distance or pace that once felt impossible now feels completely manageable.

It also gives me something that can be surprisingly hard to find as a working mother and banker: uninterrupted time to myself. Some of my best thinking happens on a run. I've solved work problems, made important decisions, and gained perspective on things that felt overwhelming when I first set out. And sometimes I don't think about anything at all, which can be just as valuable.

For me, running isn't really about fitness. It's about creating space. Space to think, to reflect, to reset, and occasionally to remind myself that progress, whether in a career or on a running route, usually comes one step at a time.

Q&A

Rochelle Chetty

Senior Vice President
Sustainable Finance
Standard Bank

Mentorship, sponsorship and 'lifting as you rise'

Who was the first person in the industry to take a genuine bet on you, and how did that sponsorship change the trajectory of your career?

Before moving into the financial services industry, I worked in environmental and social consulting. Many years ago, a social specialist consultant offered me an opportunity to work on a fixed-term contract, in-country, on a natural gas project in the Middle East.

It was a unique opportunity to apply my technical skills on a complex project, gain international experience, work with professionals from diverse backgrounds, and experience a new culture. While I recognised the potential of the opportunity, I initially questioned whether I was ready for it. Relocating to a different country and leaving behind my family, friends and familiar surroundings felt quite uncomfortable.

Looking back, accepting that opportunity was one of the most defining decisions of my career. Immersing myself in such a different culture forced me out of my comfort zone in ways I could never have anticipated. I had to adapt quickly, learn at a rapid pace, and apply my science skills to an entirely new context. The project came with demanding timelines and high expectations, which taught me resilience, adaptability, and how to perform under pressure. Working alongside colleagues from different countries and professions broadened my perspective and helped me recognise strengths in myself that I had never fully appreciated.

What began as a short-term contract evolved into a two-year experience after I extended my contract – twice. It ultimately shaped my move into environmental and social risk in financial services, where I could combine my technical expertise with financial structures and project construction timeframes in a meaningful and impactful way.

'Growth rarely comes from staying within our comfort zones. Sometimes all it takes is one person willing to back your potential before you fully see it yourself.'

What is the most rewarding piece of advice you've ever given to a younger colleague that you watched them successfully put into practice?

The advice I've often given younger colleagues is: 'trust your instincts, be your authentic self, and don't be afraid to voice your opinion'.

Early in our careers, it's easy to assume that the more experienced people have all the answers. I've seen many technically capable colleagues hold back from sharing their perspectives, especially where they're concerned about differing views from their own.

My advice has always been that your opinions are valid, and you deserve to be heard. You don't need to be the loudest voice in the room, and even if others disagree, there is value in contributing and just having the courage to speak up. Technical expertise is important, but having the right attitude and the confidence to share your opinion is what accelerates professional growth.

I've seen this advice have a meaningful impact on a few colleagues (and friends). One of the most rewarding parts of my career has been watching colleagues find their voice. I've seen individuals, who were initially hesitant to speak up, trust themselves and become confident contributors. Seeing someone realise that their own opinions are valued, and then watching their confidence grow as a result, is incredibly fulfilling for me. I've also realised that encouraging people to speak up requires more than instilling confidence. It means creating an environment where they feel safe to participate, where questions are welcomed, and where different perspectives are valued and respected.

'The thought you're most hesitant to share is sometimes exactly the one that needs to be heard.'

How can corporate finance institutions move beyond 'diversity checkboxes' to create environments where young women actually want to stay long-term?

Corporate institutions need to move beyond measuring success by how many women are hired, and instead focus on whether the women hired are progressing, succeeding and choosing to stay.

I feel this requires investing in leadership and development much earlier in career journeys, rather than waiting until women reach senior management levels. Opportunities such as secondments, mentorship and increased client-facing exposure can help build confidence and visibility from an early stage, enabling young women to speak up without being afraid to share their perspectives (this links with my response to the advice question above).

Creating an environment where women feel respected, valued and heard has a positive knock-on effect on retention. Visible female role models are important as they create an environment where ambitious young women want to stay, as it demonstrates that leadership is attainable.

I have been especially encouraged by the Bank's emphasis on physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. Work-life integration is actively promoted, and wellbeing is viewed as a necessity, rather than a luxury.

In addition, the Bank's leadership and development programmes for women recognise the unique challenges we may face, while also valuing the different perspectives women bring to financial institutions. Such development programmes are not limited to women-focused initiatives; the Bank also offers programmes tailored to men, reinforcing my belief that building an inclusive culture and supportive workplace is a collective effort and shared responsibility that requires everyone to play a role.

Q&A

Simone-Louise Hutchings
Executive Vice President
Sustainable Finance
Standard Bank

Personal reflections and integration

When the deal closes and the adrenaline drops, how do you intentionally disconnect, recharge, and protect your mental wellbeing?

I make a conscious effort to create a clear boundary between work and home. I try to switch off for at least an hour, put work aside, and focus fully on my children and family. Sharing a meal, reconnecting at home, and allowing the day to slow down helps me move out of deal mode and gives me back some perspective.

My approach is influenced by a memory of my father, who covered live sporting events. After a broadcast, he would spend an hour quietly in the kitchen with a coffee and a cigarette, allowing the adrenaline to subside and his mind to settle. I do not replicate the cigarette, but I have adopted the value of that deliberate pause.

That transition requires discipline. The mind does not automatically switch off when the work is done, so I am intentional about creating practices that help me reset. Meditation helps me quiet the noise, while my interest in design and fashion gives me a creative outlet and a different source of energy.

I also recharge through people. Time with family, friends and meaningful conversation helps me re-energise, rebalance and maintain perspective. For me, protecting mental wellbeing is not separate from performance; it is crucial to sustained performance.

The real discipline is being mindfully aware of when to push and when to pause!

How has your definition of success changed from when you were an ambitious graduate to who you are today?

When I was an ambitious graduate, success looked glamorous and highly visible. It meant building an impressive career: the right title, the right company, and recognition for what I could achieve. In many ways, success was centred on me: how far I could go and what I could accomplish.

Over time, I realised that reaching the table is only the beginning. Success is not simply about occupying a position of influence, but about how you use it; the perspectives you bring into the conversation, the decisions you help shape, and the space you create for others to contribute.

My pivot into Sustainable Finance over the past year has given my career a deeper sense of purpose. It has allowed me to move from pursuing visible achievement to contributing to meaningful and lasting change, using finance as a catalyst for true impact.

My ambition has shifted from personal advancement to shared progress. I am now more acutely aware of my responsibility to create opportunities for young women to strengthen their capabilities, contribute with confidence, and pursue careers aligned with their ambitions. Their perspectives are essential to balanced decision-making and effective solutions.

I once measured success by how far I could go; I measure it vastly differently today! A meaningful legacy creates the courage and space for women to stay, rise and lead.

What is a personal passion or hobby you pursue that has absolutely nothing to do with finance, but keeps your perspective sharp?

My passion outside finance is design in its many forms. I enjoy visiting galleries, discovering South African artists, exploring Italian design, and wandering through gardens and nature, preferably with a good flat white in hand.

What I enjoy most about design is that it asks different questions. It encourages me to slow down, observe more carefully, and appreciate how differently people can experience the same idea, object or space. It challenges assumptions, and reminds me that there is rarely only one way to see the world.

I recently had the opportunity to meet a local South African artist and gain insight into his creative process. What struck me was the balance between intuition and intentionality. He had a natural ability to see possibilities that others might overlook, yet every decision was made with careful thought. Materials, scale, colour and form were all considered in relation to their surroundings. The objective was to create something that could exist in that specific context, as though it had always belonged there.

Watching the process unfold reinforced why design continues to inspire me. Creativity is both deeply personal and inherently collaborative. An artist brings a unique vision to life, yet every person experiences the finished work differently. That interplay is what I find fascinating – reinforcing the value of approaching any challenge with a willingness to see beyond the obvious.

I enjoy art, appreciate design, and take the flat white very seriously!

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