

Nigeria Promotes Women's Leadership in the Banking Sector

Market Illustration

Challenge

In 2012, the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) recognized a persistent gender imbalance in the leadership of the banking sector. Despite women making up a significant portion of the overall workforce, their representation at senior decision-making levels remained disproportionately low.

For instance, as of 2006, only 15% of board seats in commercial banks were held by women (ILO, 2015), and there had been limited progress since then. The underrepresentation of women in executive and board roles raised concerns about inclusivity, equitable talent

development, and long-term institutional performance. From the CBN's perspective, this imbalance signaled a systemic issue requiring regulatory intervention to promote diversity, strengthen corporate governance, and ensure the financial sector reflected the broader demographics of Nigerian society.

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Approach

As part of the "Implementation of Sustainable Banking Principles by Banks, Discount Houses and Development Finance Institutions in Nigeria," the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) Circular from 2012. The CBN's Principle 4: Women's Economic Empowerment outlined the goal:

"We will promote women's economic empowerment through a gender inclusive workplace culture in our Business Operations and seek to provide products and services designed specifically for women through our Business Activities."

It outlined several requirements to Banks, including a goal of a "minimum of 40% female representation at management and board." It also required a set of reporting requirements to better understand a bank's standing on a) improving and reaching the required representation metrics; and b) improving the bank culture to "promote gender equality and empowering women in the workplace"; "programs to support the development of a strong female talent pipeline"; and showcase and focus on women as banking clients.

Guidance Topic		Guidance Approach in CBN Circular
✓	Gender Representation Targets	The CBN mandate called for increased women's representation in leadership and on boards within the banking sector
✓	Mentorship and Sponsorship	Connecting with senior role models is specifically referenced in the mandate
✓	Career Flexibility Programs	Provisions to allow for flexibility around childcare are specifically referenced in the mandate
✓	Leadership Development Programs	Leadership development is specifically referenced in the mandate
✓	Work-Life Balance	Leave programs are specifically referenced in the mandate
✓	Diversity Reporting	The CBN mandate required regular reporting on women representation in leadership, investment in female staff, and other women's empowerment initiatives
-	Succession Plan Redesign	Not explicitly mentioned in CBN Circular, but a useful tool used by several Nigerian financial institutions to support increased diversity in Board and Management teams.

Results

Efforts by the Central Bank of Nigeria demonstrate direct mechanisms and supportive policies in action. Taken together, they have transformed the gender composition of the banking sector in the country.

Motivated by the 2012 CBN Circular, the Nigeria banking ecosystem successfully implemented all but one of the direct and environmental methods to increase the overall pipeline and percentage of women in Board and Leadership positions of Banks.

According to Women's World Banking, as of 2022, among Nigeria's ten leading banks, women held an average of 28% of board positions. For the seven leading banks that reported on the composition of their executive management teams, women constitute an average of 24%.

The significant gains in gender representation observed in Nigeria's banking sector can be directly traced to the 2012 Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) Circular, which mandated a minimum of 30% female representation at board and senior management levels within banks. This policy created clear expectations and accountability mechanisms, prompting banks to actively recruit, promote, and support women into leadership positions.

In contrast, no equivalent directive was issued for adjacent sectors such as pensions and insurance. As a result, these industries have seen far less progress in gender equity, with leadership in these sectors still overwhelmingly male-dominated. This disparity underscores the powerful influence of a top-down regulatory mandate in driving systemic change—where it exists, progress follows; where it does not, inertia persists.

“In its first years, the 2012 mandate catalyzed an increase in women leading from the top [in the banking sector], with an increase from 19% to 25% within four years.”

[Women's World Banking Report: Advancing Women as Leaders in Nigeria's Finance Industry](#)