



Designing Influence

Two Approaches to Building
Strategic Partnerships

Most organisations working to advance women's leadership already have partnerships. The hard question is whether those partnerships are designed to shift the systems that sustain inequality.

Partnerships for visibility are easy to recognise: a roster of advisors with impressive titles, a row of logos on a website, a vague memorandum of understanding. They are also easy to form. They require goodwill and mutual interest, but not much else. What they rarely produce is systemic change. The organisations in this case study are building something different.

Ask Wangari Kebuchi about any one of Expertise Global's partnerships to increase women's representation in Kenya's commercial banking sector, and she will tell you about all the others. Not because they are all equally active, but because she thinks of them as a portfolio: each one with a purpose, all of them oriented toward the same barrier.

RED ALAS, a Latin American network of feminist legal academics working to embed a gender perspective in the region's legal education and justice systems, has taken a different path: rather than building a coalition around a specific initiative, it has spent twenty years building a network that has itself become a platform for strategic partnerships.

Together, the two cases show what strategic partnerships look like when they are designed to shift systems rather than merely to accompany the effort.





Expertise Global: Mapping the System

Expertise Global has spent a decade working at the intersection of economic development and institutional change in Kenya. Its current initiative on women's leadership in Kenya's commercial banking sector is among its most ambitious. The thesis is grounded in research: when the people deciding which businesses receive financing are not diverse, the businesses that receive financing are not diverse either. A banking sector with more women in leadership means broader access to capital, including for the majority of small, informal enterprises across Kenya that are run by women.

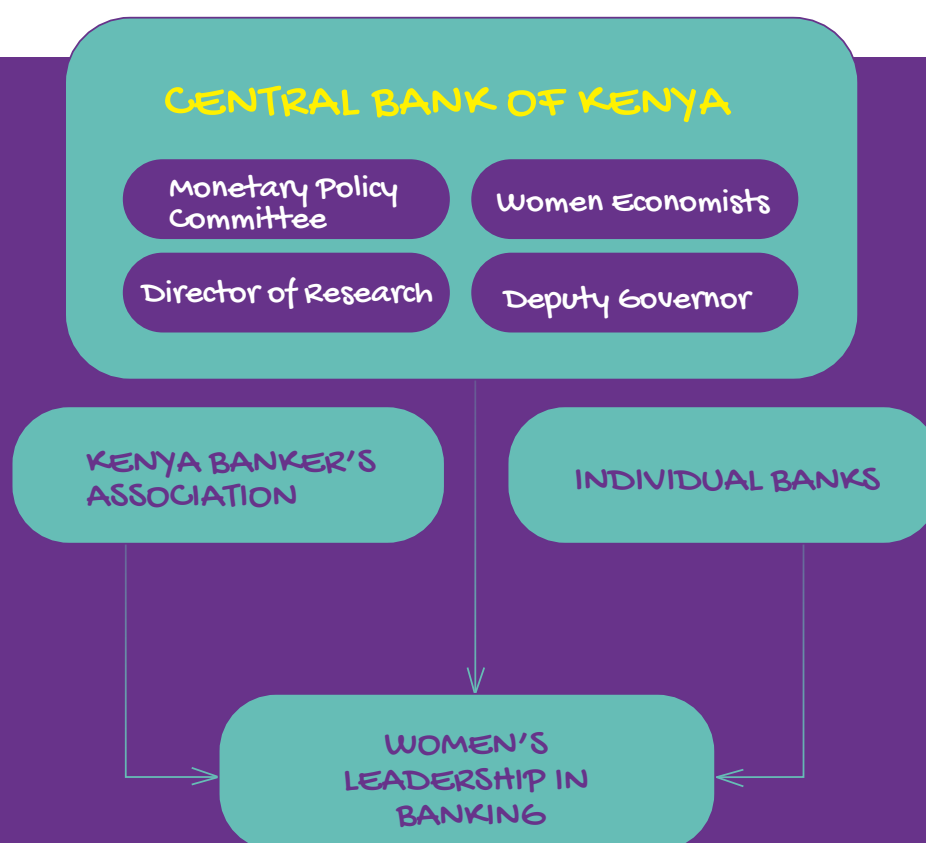
Identifying the barrier, however, was only the beginning. The harder question was who held the authority to move it, and how best to reach them. That question led Expertise Global's Managing Director, Wangari Kebuchi, and her team to the Central Bank of Kenya. As the country's banking regulator, the institution has enormous influence over the sector. Its support would signal that women's leadership in banking was a strategic priority.

As the team engaged the Central Bank, they came to appreciate that institutional change rarely depends on a single relationship, however senior. Rather than concentrating their efforts on one office, they broadened their engagement across the institution. They met members of the Monetary Policy Committee, trusted economists, and senior leaders already invested in women's economic inclusion. One conversation led to an informal lunch with ten women economists inside the Central Bank. Another opened the door to the Director of Research. They discovered the Deputy Governor was already championing women's economic inclusion through her own initiatives. Over time, support began to build across different parts of the institution.

“Institutional change rarely happens in one conversation,” Kebuchi said. The team’s goal was not simply to secure a meeting, but to ensure that when decisions reached senior leadership, the initiative was already familiar, credible, and supported by people whose judgment the institution trusted. Strategic partnerships, in this sense, are less about cultivating individual relationships than about understanding how institutions build consensus.

That same approach shaped Expertise Global’s relationship with the Kenya Bankers Association. Early in the initiative, the Association played an important role in refining the proposal, providing feedback, and helping the team understand the sector. As organizational priorities evolved, however, the Association adjusted the level of time and resources it could dedicate to the initiative.

Rather than interpreting this as a partnership lost, Expertise Global treated it as a partnership entering a different phase. The Kenya Bankers Association remained an important voice for the sector, even if its role changed. The team continued engaging individual banks while maintaining an open and constructive relationship with the Association. When banks asked about the initiative, Expertise Global could point to that ongoing relationship, preserving the sector recognition that the Association provided while continuing to build momentum elsewhere.



ONE INSTITUTION, MANY ENTRY POINTS

That kind of strategic assessment is not occasional. It is built into Expertise Global's weekly rhythm. Every Monday, the Expertise Global team reviews its portfolio of partnerships, asking what is moving, what is paused, and what new opportunities are emerging. "None of these are static," Kebuchi said. "The work is knowing where each one stands, and why it still matters."

The Expertise Global case offers two complementary lessons. The Central Bank story shows that institutional influence is often built across an organization rather than through a single relationship. The Kenya Bankers Association story reminds us that strategic partnerships are not binary. Relationships evolve. They become more or less active as institutional priorities change. What matters is not maintaining every partnership at the same level of intensity, but understanding the role each continues to play in moving a shared objective.



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With support from Co-Impact, Expertise Global convened a briefing to share findings from a survey of 51 women in banking, highlighting barriers to career progression and opportunities to strengthen women's leadership.





RED ALAS: Collective Knowledge, Collective Power

The same logic—start with the barrier, not the partner—looks different when the vehicle for change is not an organization but a network. Legal education in Latin America continues to reproduce gender inequality in its curricula and, ultimately, in the justice systems its graduates go on to staff. Founded in 2004, RED ALAS brings together more than 90 feminist legal scholars across 10 countries committed to transforming legal education, feminist legal scholarship, and access to justice. Unlike Expertise Global, which builds partnerships around specific initiatives, RED ALAS is itself the partnership. Rather than assembling coalitions for particular projects, the network has spent two decades building relationships of trust, shared knowledge, and long-term collaboration. Over time, external institutions began seeking partnerships with the network because of the relationships it had built.

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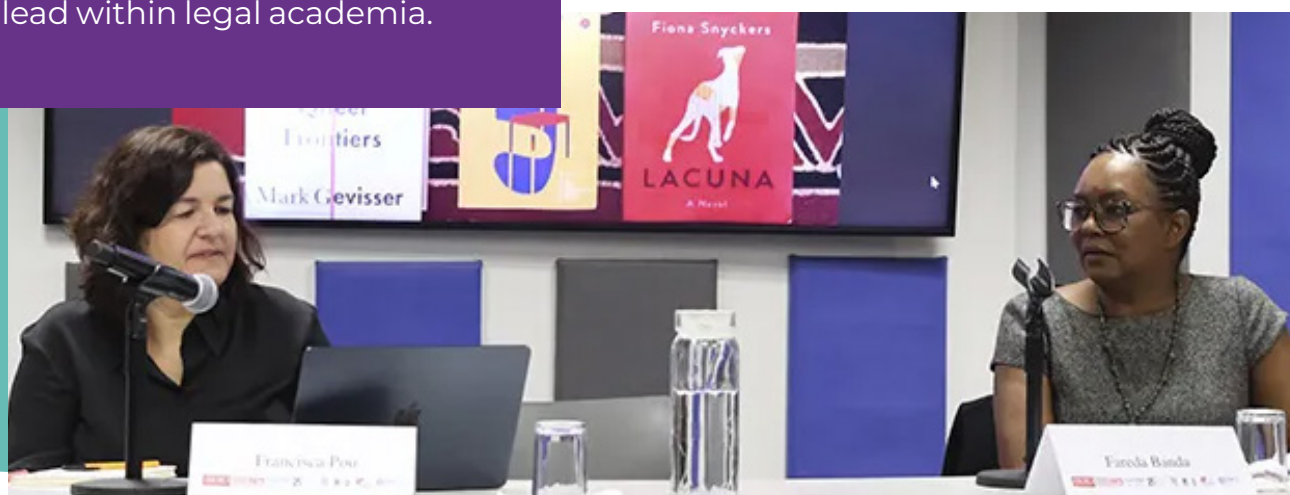
“Our strategic alliances are fundamentally among ourselves, supporting one another,” explained Carmen Hein de Campos, RED ALAS’s General Coordinator. Members join individually, but what they gain is something no single scholar or university could build alone: collaborative research across countries; biennial congresses where new projects emerge; regional publications; legal clinics in Peru, Colombia, and Mexico; mentoring; financial support for initiatives led by members; and a community capable of responding collectively when one of its members encounters institutional barriers.

Collective Capacity

One episode illustrates how that collective capacity operates. When a RED ALAS member publicly denounced sexual harassment by a senior professor at her university and subsequently faced institutional retaliation, the network mobilized. Members identified funding that allowed her to spend time abroad, activated regional solidarity, maintained international attention on the case, and supported her academic work until she could safely return. She eventually resumed her position and was promoted. Similar forms of collective support occur when members seek funding for feminist legal clinics, apply for leadership positions within universities, or are nominated to regional and international human rights bodies. Rather than offering only professional networking, RED ALAS provides institutional backing that enables feminist scholars to remain, advance, and lead within legal academia.

Knowledge production has been the engine behind RED ALAS's collective influence. Through comparative research, collaborative publications, feminist legal methodologies, and academic exchanges, members have built a body of work that no single institution in the region could have produced alone. In the process, they have done more than generate scholarship. They have created a shared language, strengthened relationships across the network, and established RED ALAS as a regional reference in feminist legal scholarship.

RED ALAS's legal clinics show how this works in practice. In Peru, Colombia, and Mexico, students and legal scholars apply the feminist legal approaches developed within the network to represent clients, support strategic litigation, and tackle real legal problems. Those experiences don't simply put research into practice. They also generate new knowledge, allowing ideas to be tested, refined, and brought back into the classroom and the network's scholarship. Rather than treating research and legal practice as separate worlds, RED ALAS deliberately connects them.



Throughout its history, RED ALAS has maintained partnerships with universities, civil society organizations, and public institutions across Latin America. What has changed over time is not the existence of these relationships, but the level of institutional recognition the network has accumulated. After two decades of collaborative research, publications, congresses, and legal clinics, judicial bodies and other public institutions have increasingly approached RED ALAS seeking its expertise in feminist legal education and gender-sensitive legal interpretation. As Hein de Campos observed, “In general, the invitation comes from the institution to the network, not from the network to the institution.”



If Expertise Global shows how strategic partnerships can help change institutions, RED ALAS shows that building a strong network can become a strategy in itself. Over more than two decades, the network has earned the trust and recognition that now leads universities, courts, and other public institutions to seek its expertise. Those external partnerships are not where RED ALAS’s influence begins. They are the result of feminist legal scholars across Latin America spending more than two decades building relationships, producing knowledge, and supporting one another.

Building a strong network can become a strategy in itself.

The fourth ALAS Congress brought together 84 academics from 11 countries in Mexico City. Gatherings like this strengthen the relationships that allow Red ALAS members to share knowledge, develop joint projects, and build collective influence across Latin American legal academia.





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