



Nili Sangani Of Ignite Investments On How We Should Increase Female Representation in Investment Decision-Making

An interview with Vanessa Ogle



Vanessa Ogle · Follow

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Despite progress in many industries, women remain significantly underrepresented in investment decision making roles. This lack of diversity can lead to missed opportunities and less inclusive financial strategies. How can we increase female representation in these critical positions? What impact would this have on the investment landscape? I had the pleasure of interviewing Nili Sangani.

Nili Sangani is the managing principal at Ignite Investments, and board member and SVP of operations at Dallas-based Encore Enterprises, a vertically integrated, global alternative investment firm. Nili is attracting attention for her commitment to changing the landscape for women in investments — both professionally and personally — recently named a 2024 GlobeSt. “Woman of Influence” as a Diversity Champion and Connect CRE Next Generation Award winner for her work driving parity and equity for women in the alternative investment space.

Nili Sangani is a Registered Representative with Signet Securities, Executive Director of Encore Enterprises and Managing Principal with Ignite Investments. For more information, please go to <https://brokercheck.finra.org/individual/summary/5931049>

Thank you so much for doing this with us! Before we dig in, our readers would like to get to know you a bit more. Can you tell us a bit about your “backstory”? What led you to this particular career path?

I grew up with the spirit of entrepreneurialism all around me. My father is a cardiologist whose first venture was his medical practice, which grew to over 70,000 patients within 10 years. Next, he built Encore Enterprises, a commercial real estate investment firm with a distinct culture that stands apart from any other, and for which I'm very proud. As you can imagine, growing up in an entrepreneurial household meant that life and business were completely intertwined. It gave me a first-row seat to watch the business grow — I was constantly observing and taking notes. At a young age, I realized my own passion for the art of real estate development. A raw piece of dirt is the canvass, and the possibilities of what to design and build are infinite. It's exhilarating. Commercial real estate also is an industry where the income you earn is not directly correlated to the hours you work... and that spoke to me at my core. I knew I'd want a family one day, and real estate investing could afford me the ability to have more control of my schedule later in life.

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you began your career?

I've got a good one about Encore's investment in a major burger franchise. We were the largest franchisee within this burger business, and we'd raised significant capital for it through our investor relations platform, Ignite Investments. I watched the evolution of this business and the speed at which we were opening new restaurants across the nation. It was truly remarkable. Until it wasn't. Labor and food costs continually rose and consumer demand for the product stagnated. I began feeling very concerned about the business — particularly about how we'd recoup our and our investors' equity in the deal. At one point, I even started advocating with the Board of Directors that we cut our losses and move on. Fortunately, wiser heads prevailed, advocating we play the long game. I witnessed our leadership block-and-tackle the challenges. I observed their resilience, determination and grit. We looked inward and found ways to be better operators...better managers. The challenges were viewed as an opportunity to evolve into a fundamentally better business. When COVID hit, our brand was strong and demand spiked to unprecedented levels. We ended up selling the business for a nine-figure profit... and I learned a vital lesson in perseverance that I'll carry for the rest of my life.

Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?

I can tell you this wasn't funny at the time, but it certainly feels comical now. An investor had asked if he could pull his money out of a deal early for personal reasons. In my haste to accommodate him, I agreed on the spot. Here's the funny part — turns out I had no right to make this decision on my own. More, it was a request we were unable to grant at all. The team quickly corrected my mistake, and the investor was graciously understanding. But I learned a hard lesson that day — slow down, measure twice and cut once. It also was a hard lesson in realizing mistakes are part of life — no one is immune. That lightbulb moment reframed my attitude about managing others. I became a better leader that day, from there-on supporting the team through their mistakes, assuring them it's okay so long as we fix them together. We will recover and we will carry on, wiser.

None of us are able to achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person who you are grateful towards who helped get you to where you are? Can you share a story about that?

My longtime therapist and life coach has played a significant role in my personal and professional development. Working in a family enterprise, I really don't have any separation between my personal life and work life — they blur together. This reality hit me at a very early age, and I needed to learn who I was as an individual independently of social constructs, whether in the workplace or my personal life. My therapist has steadfastly supported and guided me without judgement. She understands who I am at my core and she challenges me to realize my greatest potential. She's taught me how to self-reflect and accept who I am while simultaneously building toward who I want to be, which is a fine needle to thread. Our relationship has also provided me with the mental space to take risks in relationships, both at work and outside of it. I am incredibly grateful she is in my life.

Is there a particular book that made a significant impact on you? Can you share a story or explain why it resonated with you so much?

Growing Yourself Back Up by John Lee is a book I've dogeared and highlighted so many times, they've become useless markers. Normally, I find self-help books to be rather...

unhelpful. The lessons seem superficial and while advice may resonate for a moment, I soon find myself questioning whether the ROI was worth investing the time to read 400 pages. *Growing Yourself Back Up* struck me profoundly and I drank in every page with rapt interest. It's a lesson in understanding that our actions and reactions aren't about the present; they're a byproduct of past events. Mind blown. This powerful concept has helped me right-size anxiety during times of high stress. I also am more aware of moments when I'm in a regressed mindset, and I have the tools to talk myself out of it and get back to functioning as my adult self. This skill has helped immeasurably in both my personal and professional life.

How have you used your success to make the world a better place?

I try my best every day to lead with integrity and create an environment that allows those with superstar skills to excel and become leaders in their own right. I feel particularly passionate about creating opportunities for those who must fight harder to ascend in an industry dominated by men. There's no question I inherited professional privilege, and with it, comes a deep sense of responsibility to do my part serving as a force of change for women in real estate investing. I was raised believing women can thrive and excel in this space just as men. And, I want to see this belief system embraced at scale... by men and women alike. No, I won't transform the world's third-largest capital market singlehandedly, but I can foster an equitable environment at Encore and touch the lives of 1,600 people. So that's my purpose — my 'why' — it's what drives me to wake up every morning and tackle the day ahead.

In your opinion, what are the key benefits of having a more gender-diverse team making investment decisions?

Women's engagement has the power to move markets. Women are the world's most powerful consumers with a vast network of influence that multiplies their buying power further yet. They also control wealth — U.S. women control approximately \$11 trillion in assets, a number that's expected to grow to \$30 trillion in the next six years according to [McKinsey](#). Women also are increasingly becoming the family breadwinner. According to research from the [Council of Contemporary Families](#), about 70% of U.S. mothers can expect to be the primary financial providers for families with children under 18.

Yet, per McKinsey's 2023 "State of Diversity in Global Private Markets" report, only 15% of women hold managing director-level investing roles, 25% hold operating roles, and 12% sit on investment committees where the investment decisions happen. This incongruence is a critical blind spot in the investment industry, given those who hold such significant spending power and resources do not have a voice in ruddering investment strategies. One could almost argue that this lack of representation is dangerous, if not just egregiously tunnel-visioned and shortsighted.

What barriers do women typically face when trying to enter and advance in investment roles, and how can these be overcome?

Over the years, I've come to observe a trend among women in the workplace: overwhelmingly, most lack the same level of "natural" self-confidence as men. Yet self-confidence is the single-most important attribute a person needs to excel in their career. I believe most women develop this confidence through repetition... that women need a certain level of experience under their belt in order to overcome self-doubt. For women to advance in investments, we must create space in the workflow for women to get these reps in to build this confidence.

What strategies or initiatives have you found effective in increasing female representation in investment decision-making roles?

Personalized mentorship. I know it's not the fastest path to scale, but it's the most actionable and high-impact solution to steadily advance change. For example, the sales team at Encore stands to earn the greatest annual compensation of any employee in the organization — possibly even among the highest-earning professionals in the country. I know that money changes the equation for people, so I started with this group as my beta initiative.

We're now sharing sales leads with first-year associates and I personally coach them to develop the self-confidence and skill set required to close deals. Everyone receives this customized support for their first 12 months — some need more, some need less. But in all cases, new associates still earn the full commission on deals in year-one, regardless of how much wrap-around support they received to get there. It's the company's way of truly investing in confidence-building through time, treasure and

talent. As more women gain more professional confidence and earning power, we'll see this representation reshape the industry composition at large.



Can you please share your “5 Things We Must Do To Have More Women Direct Investment Dollars”?

- 1. We must build a professional peer-to-peer mentorship infrastructure... at scale.** It needs to be a low-barrier, high-value and high-engagement proposition where women are transferring knowledge and wisdom to other women and also supporting/assisting them directly, personally and regularly in their journey. A “buddy” that all first-year women professionals get. Perhaps it’s like a matching app? There’d also be a companion mentorship resource center — an open-platform, crowd-sourced data library of information, tools, resources, etc. that community members think will add value to the group.

2. **We must forge new pathways for young women to discover this profession — fall in love with it — and flood the talent pipeline.** We must charter a student organization at the university level. A student governed and student-led pre-professional organization with chapters across the country. Certainly, it needs to incubate internships and networking opportunities for women. Perhaps it ties in with the peer-to-peer mentorship idea to bring professional oversight and presence.
3. **Operationally, the industry must undergo systems change to level the playing field for women leaders.** All the data indicate that there is strong gender parity at the junior and mid-management levels, but back to the McKinsey study — less than 12% are represented at the top. This reality is the outcome of systemic barriers. Research must be conducted that identifies their root causes, designs the root solutions and trains the incoming class of leadership to integrate and deploy. Perhaps the research is commissioned in affiliation with the peer-to-peer mentorship initiative.
4. **We must be generous with our time and lead by example.** I'm in the midst of coining the concept of a "Menternship" in partnership with a local university in Dallas. Part paid summer internship, part 8-week mentorship intensive, this competitive application will hire one college junior or senior woman to shadow 'a day in my life' for eight weeks, learning alongside me as board member and head of operations at a 1,600-employee global alternative investment firm.

This hands-on exposure will be meshed with structured weekly modules comprising work assignments, training opportunities, executive meet-ups and other career-enriching activities. One by one, I aim to inspire as many future women leaders in investment finance as I can in my lifetime. And I intend to provide them with my continued mentorship support, indefinitely. I can only hope this endeavor multiplies as my "menterns" carry on the tradition.

5. **Pop culture must normalize the idea of women in investments.** I'm craving more role models that normalize women in investments. More toys and dolls, more online games, more streaming content, more TikTok creators, more influencers, more overall telling of stories with women in these roles. So optically, gender parity evolves past

some 'goal' we need to achieve by carrying a banner, and simply becomes an understated, basic ordinary thing.

How can companies and investment firms create a more inclusive culture that supports and encourages women in leadership positions?

I directly recruit the company's executive talent, and also oversee enterprise-wide talent recruitment endeavors. Womens' parity is top priority for me; and with this empowerment, I'm able to affect systemic change within the organization. Examples include:

- Overhauled our HR department, including establishing diversity hiring targets and standardized salary bands for all employees.
- Conducted enterprise-wide compensation audit; corrected/adjusted compensation for women executives to ensure parity with industry standards and close any gaps with their male peers.
- Revised and standardized performance evaluation process to eliminate bias or favoritism.
- Changed the sales commission structure from tiered commissions — either 1%, 3% or 5% determined by past performance track record, annual evaluations, tenure and title — to a flat 3% for all. This leveling of the playing field ensures that the more money a person brings in, the more they earn, plain and simple.

You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good for the greatest number of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger.

I've got two 'moonshots' in mind and neither have to do with commercial real estate investing. First, I'd strive to overhaul health insurance, starting with self-insured employers. The system is so tragically flawed, and costs so grossly inflated, it's failing everyone. But it hits the employee's pocketbook the hardest. We've witnessed Mark Cuban absolutely shatter the prescription drug paradigm with Cost Plus Drugs, so I know where there's a will, there's a way — and I'm intent to champion a similar transformation with health insurance. My other dream is to transform charitable

giving by applying the core private market fundraising principles to a nonprofit model. There's a relatively new SEC regulation called Regulation A which allows companies to raise money from the public in securities offerings — relieving firms of their previous restrictions to exclusively fundraise from high-net-worth investors. We haven't even begun to scratch the surface on Regulation A, and I believe somehow, there must be a way to build a novel system that transforms how charities fundraise every year.

We are very blessed that some very prominent names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this if we tag them.

I recently learned about Chief — the women's leadership network. I'd love to have a private breakfast or lunch with its co-founder and CEO, Carolyn Childers, to brainstorm how we can bring to life the peer-to-peer mentorship idea. From what I'm reading, Chief has already cracked the code on building a community of women change-agents. If we could expand on this core purpose with a tertiary proposition that exists to foster peer-to-peer mentorship for women in investing and wealth management.... well... the possibility to affect systems change genuinely feels within reach. It's a viable path to scale. I should probably start by applying for membership!

How can our readers further follow your work online?

Readers can follow me on LinkedIn at [Ignite Investments](#) and [Encore Enterprises](#).

Thank you for these fantastic insights. We greatly appreciate the time you spent on this.

Required Disclosure: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the speakers and do not reflect the view or positions of any entities referenced, should not be construed as advice or an offer or solicitation of any offer to buy any security.

A *bout The Interviewer: Vanessa Ogle is a mom, entrepreneur, inventor, writer, and singer/songwriter. Vanessa's talent in building world-class leadership teams focused on*

diversity, a culture of service, and innovation through inclusion allowed her to be one of the most acclaimed Latina CEO's in the last 30 years. She collaborated with the world's leading technology and content companies such as Netflix, Amazon, HBO, and Broadcom to bring innovative solutions to travelers and hotels around the world. Vanessa is the lead inventor on 120+ U.S. Patents. Accolades include: FAST 100, Entrepreneur 360 Best Companies, Inc. 500 and then another six times on the Inc. 5000. Vanessa was personally honored with Inc. 100 Female Founder's Award, Ernst and Young's Entrepreneur of the Year Award, and Enterprising Women of the Year among others. Vanessa now spends her time sharing stories to inspire and give hope through articles, speaking engagements and music. In her spare time she writes and plays music in the Amazon best selling new band HigherHill, teaches surfing clinics, trains dogs, and cheers on her children.

Please connect with Vanessa here on linkedin and subscribe to her newsletter Unplugged as well as follow her on Substack, Instagram, Facebook, and X and of course on her website VanessaOgle.

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Vanessa Ogle is an entrepreneur, inventor, writer, and singer/songwriter. She is best known as the founder of Enseo

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