

Even though women today occupy a significant proportion of senior in-house roles, they are less represented in law firm leadership ranks. Female law firm leaders talk about why this is the case, as well as what can be done to address it.

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LEADERSHIP LESSONS



Women are increasingly making their presence felt in the legal field in Asia, even as climbing up the ranks remains something of a challenge due to social expectations and perceptions in the region.

Recent studies have shown that women make up approximately half of in-house roles in Asia and the Middle East, and this proportion does not vary greatly at the general counsel level.

While this is encouraging, it also serves to highlight the fact that many women prefer in-house opportunities to private practice. UK-based legal recruiter Taylor Root says that only 25 percent of partners in law firms are women.

"While there has been a definite shift in the right direction since my joining the legal profession in the late 1990s, there are still too few women represented amongst the leadership teams of many law firms," says Stephanie Keen, Singapore office managing partner at Hogan Lovells Lee & Lee.

MALE-DOMINATED

Even though law firms frequently trumpet their initiatives when it comes to gender equality in the workplace, practicing it is a different matter. Women are still placed at a disadvantage in workplace, with many norms that favour men.

"In Asia, when the international firms entered the market, the work was more project-based and infrastructure-driven, which have typically been male-dominated areas," Keen says.

"As the market developed, more women were attracted to the region but the more senior people tended to be men, and hence the leadership teams reflected the same. The simple presence of women in leadership positions questions and challenges the traditional perception of who should lead law firms," she adds.

Unconscious bias has also made things difficult.

"The legal profession is steeped in

tradition and the tradition for law firms has been to hire white males. People find it comfortable to hire or gravitate towards those who remind them of themselves,” Keen says.

Hanim Hamzah, regional managing partner at ZICO Law, echoes Keen’s view.

“Business development is key to our profession; we need to keep attracting clients,” Hamzah says. “However, lawyering is male-oriented, and clients are mostly men, so entertaining them becomes a men-to-men thing. Women can find it hard to take part in activities to maintain relationships with the clients, especially when those require staying out late night, like at a bar or karaoke parlour. It is not natural for women to go out and stay late at the bar.”

PRESET ROLES

Hamzah has worked in five countries so far, including in Japan, which she says offers an example of how most Asian societies tend to look at women.

Kanji Kato, a senior member from Japan’s governing party Liberal Democratic Party, recently made a remark that women should have multiple children and that single women would become a burden to the state.

“In Japan, sending children to day-care is expensive,” Hamzah explains. “When childcare becomes more expensive than staying in the job, women tend to choose family over career.”

This attitude is common in many societies with deep-rooted family values, in which women are supposed to marry, give birth and play the role of a caretaker. This sets female practitioners back in their career path, and results in insufficient female representation in law firm leadership.

“There are still a lot of women who have to choose between work and other commitments such as taking care of ageing parents or sick family members, if not their children. When women lack financial security or resources, they choose to give up their careers,” Hamzah says.

This frustration is shared by other female leaders.



LISA MATHER

Vice President, Chief International Counsel, **Paypal**

Mather began her legal career as a corporate lawyer specialising in mergers and acquisitions. About a year ago, she joined PayPal to take up a newly created role as Vice President and Chief International Counsel. Now Mather works with an in-house global legal team consisting of lawyers based in various locations worldwide.

When asked about challenges women face in the legal space, Mather thinks unconscious bias is one of the issues presenting challenges across many contexts.

“Unconscious bias, which is now widely recognised, happens through our brains making incredibly quick judgments and assessments of people and situations without us realizing, including in relation to gender stereotypes,” she explains.

Mather points out that if left unchecked in the workplace, unconscious biases can hurt good diversity and inclusion.

“There are many great tools available to companies today to overcome unconscious biases,” Mather

says. “These include awareness raising programs, training, and setting diversity targets.”

Mather was given the opportunity a decade ago to move offshore in her previous company, which gave her the means to develop a keen ability to work as an in-house counsel across many jurisdictions.

“Instead of assuming that it would be too hard for me to move offshore with young children and a spouse with his own busy legal career, my then-manager asked me if I was interested and able to take the opportunity... I am extremely grateful that it was done for me,” Mather shares. “I am now passionate about making sure I create and offer those opportunities for lawyers working in my teams today, regardless of their background.”

“My number one piece of advice is to always be prepared to ‘have a go’ and don’t be afraid to get out of your comfort zone,” says Mather to female legal professionals starting their careers. “You will be amazed at what you can achieve.”



JASMINE KARIMI

Head of Legal, Senior Director & Counsel, Asia, **Illumina**

Jasmine Karimi has been a legal professional for over 20 years in various industries with both law firms and MNCs. Currently, she leads the legal and compliance teams for Asia Pacific-Japan and Greater China for Illumina, a U.S.-listed biotech company focusing on genetics.

Karimi says she and her team strive to balance the growth and risk appetite of the company.

"The role of an in-house legal professional has evolved tremendously in the nearly 20 years since I embraced that path, and today we are a trusted adviser and business partner," Karimi says. "At Illumina, this also requires for me to be the moral compass and risk assessor, bring the ability to look at issues from a different angle, and most importantly, be a leader in the organization."

Karimi notes that staying up-to-date with the ever-changing legal, regulatory and political landscape while proactively thinking about how these changes could impact the business is critical for any in-house counsel.

"This challenge is universal and not restricted to female in-house professionals," Karimi says. "Companies can play an important part by sponsoring and supporting the career development of in-house counsel by exposing them to not just black-letter law training courses but also to various facets of the business, providing them with a seat at the table and enabling them to learn from the business."

"There is no short-cut to growth - it's only by doing that one can truly learn and grow," she adds.

Karimi also encourages younger lawyers to be curious, believe in themselves, and get out of their comfort zones to take risks.

"Try out or learn about different industries until you find one that makes you excited about the cause or business. You will be amazed at what you discover along that journey, and marvel at your own strength to survive and thrive," Karimi says. "Surround yourself with people who inspire you but also are able to give you honest feedback, which is critical for continuous progression."

"A number of women are unable to stay the course and reach positions of senior leadership in law firms even though they have the capability," says Zia Mody, founding partner of India's AZB & Partners.

"Many of them experience a constant conflict between their more traditional role, and that of being a working professional. To train them, invest in them and subsequently lose them is frustrating," says Mody.

Margaret Robertson, chief executive officer at Withers, agrees, stating that starting a family, often at the very same point as a lawyer's career is really taking off, is both personally important and professionally challenging.

"Most law firms put people who have built large practices in management roles as that gives them credibility to lead their peers," Robertson says. "Those with family responsibilities may find the additional strain of a leadership role too much to add to their load."

Women almost always find themselves caught between career and family. In societies where women are encouraged to take on the full-time caretaker's role, there is little societal support for career women.

FLEXIBLE WORKING

To help female lawyers stay the course, law firms can take the lead in making life easier for women by offering flexible working arrangements and other female-friendly policies.

"An important element for helping many women to progress in their careers is to offer flexibility and support in their working practices," Robertson says.

"Taking an open approach to working from home, part-time arrangements and other ways of accommodating employees when they are trying to balance the demands of work and caring for young children or other dependents can make a huge difference," she adds.

Her suggestions are broadly similar to those of Hamzah, who says firms should provide day-care in the office, flexible working hours and conditions, and longer maternity leave. And these arrangements

should not only be limited to women, but also extended to men.

“We need equal benefits for men and women, so men can take care of the child too. Women are now entitled to maternity leave of three months, while men only have seven days. How can we have a balance if the husbands are not allowed to stay home?” says Hamzah. “We need equal rights and benefits to get women back to work quicker, so they won’t lose out on their careers due to personal life choices.”

One advantage for working mothers in Southeast Asia, Hamzah says, is the affordability of help when it comes to caring for children.

“You can hire a nanny who will help you with a large part of your family role,” Hamzah says. “As a result, Southeast Asia has more women who are partners of law firms, as well as in leadership positions. This is because women don’t have to choose between work and life.”

Keen adds that women need to proactively find a balance. “All too many women, when trying to juggle between having a family and having a career, subconsciously or otherwise don’t put themselves in positions from where they can advance their careers. As a result, they don’t get the promotions they deserve, and the opportunities eventually dry up. They need to recognise that life doesn’t need to be put on hold, and that they can find the balance,” she says.

THE RIGHT CULTURE

Other than flexible working arrangements, law firms should also recognise that inclusiveness and diversity are key to helping female lawyers advance. By creating an open and friendly environment that embraces differences and new ideas, people are encouraged to unleash their potential and thus help the law firms grow.

“Today law firms recognise the importance of diversity, which in leadership positions can set businesses apart,” Keen says. “Innovation among businesses, including law firms, is a critical component

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of remaining successful in an increasingly competitive and globalized world. To be innovative, you have to look at things differently and with different lenses in order to get a variety of perspectives. This is where diversity comes into play.”

“Senior partners really have to believe in diversity for the benefit of the business, and once they are committed, they need to lead by example. We have many examples of that at Hogan Lovells with both our CEO and senior practice leaders all strong advocates of diversity,” she adds.

“Management needs this mindset to truly build a culture of inclusiveness. As leaders, it is our responsibility to actively participate in mentoring and bringing new talent into business,” says Keen.

This is what Robertson is advocating as well. “Management needs to spot talent and encourage women with potential to put their hands up for roles they might not have thought they were qualified for,” she says.

Robertson also points out that giving people autonomy encourages more to get done. “Lawyers value autonomy. Although we have a clear direction, we create an environment where people can come up with

STEPHANIE KEEN
Hogan Lovells

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**HANIM
HAMZAH**
ZICO Law

new ideas, e.g. regarding recruiting a certain person, moving to a location or creating a new service. If you give people autonomy and encourage them to do more, on the whole they do,” she says.

BRIGHTENING OUTLOOK

Although hurdles remain, things have improved tremendously and have been looking brighter in recent years, say the women leaders. Law firms are embracing gender equality and ensuring women are given equal opportunities.

“As the number of female partners has grown, so has the number of women in leadership roles in law firms. There are now many instances of law firms of all sizes, and all specialisms that are managed by women, or have women heading practices, offices and departments,” Robertson says.

Hamzah also says female lawyers are facing fewer barriers in developing relationships with clients.

“Now there are more women in the boardroom, and female partners at the law firms can relate to them. It’s easier to be involved in activities now as they now come in many different forms, such as having lunch

or joining charity events,” she says. “At ZICO Law, we are proud to have leadership that is 54 percent female and a total workforce that is 52 percent female.”

As the younger generation grows up gender fluid and advocating gender equality, it encourages women to stand up to unfair treatment and fight for equal rights. This opens opportunities for dialogue and boosts women’s confidence in pursuing their ambitions just like men.

“Nowadays, people are not afraid to talk about taboo subjects such as equal pay and sexual harassment. For example, we had the ‘me too’ movement,” Hamzah says.

Keen agrees, calling on women to be brave, have the difficult conversations and challenge the status quo.

“Silence simply leaves the issues undressed and likely to fester,” she says.

LEADERSHIP TRACK

While a friendly working environment can offer a tailwind for women who aim higher in their careers, much of the onus rests on them. Their attitude to work plays a big role in advancing their causes, the female leaders say. They offer a few pieces of advice on how women should approach their careers.

First of all, raise your hand.

“Women systematically underestimate their capabilities and fail to attribute their success to themselves,” says Keen. “They need to have a voice and be brave. Women often expect their work to speak for them, instead of having the conversation themselves. Let people know you are interested in taking on a position. There may be initial setbacks but you need to accept these and learn from them.”

Robertson advises the same: when the opportunity presents itself, make sure you leave an impression.

“Volunteer solutions to problems early on and take responsibility for fixing things you can fix. That gets you noticed, and making people’s lives easier wins you influence,” she says. “Say ‘yes’ to as many opportunities as you can early on in your career even

if they make you feel uncomfortable,” says Robertson.

Second, be yourself.

“Act like yourself. Don’t try to be someone you are not,” Keen says. “Understand your particular strengths and focus on them. Diversity is about the differences we bring to the table and so don’t feel the need to try to be strong at what has traditionally been the accepted norm,” she says.

Mody has similar views. “Do not try to be more like a man. Get the respect of the team around you. Always send the right, honest messages,” she says.

Third, find your passion and the right people.

“Find your passion, dedicate your effort to be really good at it, and then find a team. That’s very important,” says Hamzah. “Nobody can do well alone. It’s hard in a world where we are all related. Therefore, find a firm that you connect with, colleagues who respect each other and collaborate, and make the environment more fun to work in.”

Robertson feels the same way. “Find somebody who backs you and tells you to ‘just get on with it’ and congratulates you when you do a good job; it does wonders for your confidence. Make sure your life partner, if you have one, is really supportive of your career in really practical ways so that you have the time you need to grow,” she says.

Fourth, be determined and resilient.

“Women simply have to be mature, set the course, keep up the passion and understand the inexorable path of nature,” Mody says. “There will be hiccups in the journey. That is not the end of the world. The ability to get back up, move forward and assert positions of both intellectual and moral authority is key.”

“It’s very important that people develop resilience and the ability to move on,” Robertson says. “Although a particular transaction or management intervention didn’t go as well as it could, you learn from it, move on and look at it objectively to see ‘what could I have improved?’ You also have to recognise that there may be external, objective reasons



DEBORAH BARKER SC

Managing Partner, SG,
Withers KhattarWong

SHARON SER

Senior Regional Partner and
Managing Partner, HK, **Withers**

Could you share a bit more about the diversity within Withers, as well as the diversity initiatives in Asia?

Barker: In Asia, one barrier which women do face is an unspoken and invisible one of attitude. There are some in positions of power with a deep-seated belief that women are not as driven as men and thus, not as capable. The founders of KhattarWong, however, had no such prejudices and there are I believe no such prejudices at present in Withers KhattarWong.

Ser: Two thirds of our total workforce (including partners) is female, 40 percent of our partners and over 50 percent of our entire senior leadership team are women, and over the past three years, the percentage of new partner promotions who are female have been 57 percent in 2016, 62.5 percent in 2017 and 62.5 percent in 2018. The business has been led by a female CEO since 2002.

Any advice for younger female legal professionals?

Barker: My advice to younger female legal professionals is that no matter what area of law you are working in, you are not the only woman who has chosen this path and there is a history in Singapore and elsewhere of women who have made their mark in the law. In Singapore there are many women who head law firms, the bench of the Supreme Court now has a historic number of women members and we have for the first time a female judge – Judith Prakash JA in the Court of Appeal. You can take comfort from this and be assured that succeeding in the law is something that for women is entirely doable.

To women litigators, I say: do not be intimidated, be brave and patient and persevere. You must always put your clients’ interests in the forefront but do not let this overwhelm you.

Ser: Stay with the law as it remains a great career for a woman. It is important to build your internal profile at your firm at the same time as building your practice. Essentially, internal business development is about finding ways of demonstrating your skills, your interests and your personality to your colleagues to ensure you receive internal referrals, preferably from an existing client base. There are many ways of doing this, and different methods will be suited to different people. Internal committees, sector groups, pro bono activities, CSR and diversity initiatives are all avenues that can be utilised, whilst simultaneously achieving constructive ends.

Of course, your competence as a good lawyer is a fundamental consideration, but if you want to stand out, you need to think beyond your day-to-day work and responsibilities.



MAREE MYERSCOUGH

General Counsel, **Conergy**

Maree is the General Counsel of renewable energy company Conergy, managing Conergy's legal affairs in the Asia Pacific region and participating in the full spectrum of business issues.

Interestingly, Maree names stress as one of the factors that have gotten her where she is today.

"I believe women are natural multi-taskers and relationship builders – and, like most women, I tend to excel in times of high pressure," Maree says. "It was during the most challenging and stressful times of our group's corporate restructurings that I was able to really step up and actively contribute to resolving the complex issues our group was facing, which consequently allowed me to build rapport with and gain the trust of our senior management."

Maree believes that it is essential for workplaces to embrace flexible working practices to allow employees to manage their family and personal commitments that suits their individual circumstances.

"I do not believe this challenge is unique to women, particularly in

this modern day where fathers are embracing the opportunity to play a more hands-on role in their children's upbringing," she says.

Maree had her first son while working in private practice Latham & Watkins and took advantage of a longer maternity leave and the opportunity to work on a reduced workload during her son's first year.

"I still work very long hours but I try to manage my work schedule so that I can be at home to spend time playing with my active little boys before their bedtime, which is really important for me," Maree says.

She suggests young female lawyers seek out organisations that are aligned with their own interests and values and mentors within their peer groups while at the same time, embrace the chance to act as a mentor, particularly for other women.

"As women, we need to have more confidence in our own abilities and encourage one another by championing each other's successes and achievements," she says.

why things didn't go so well. It's not so much the outcome, but what you do with that outcome that matters," she adds.

Fifth, be versatile in your style.

"Often in the legal profession, women can be allowed greater latitude in behaving in a less conventional way," Robertson says. "People sometimes accept observations and can be moved along by women who use humour in a different way than men. On the whole, women tend to use a wider range of social styles in terms of dealing with clients and others."

AT THE TOP

Once women reach the leadership positions, there are also things they should keep in mind.

Robertson says there are ways for female leaders to maintain good relationships with their staff and manage their team. "It is still common for authoritative women to be characterised as 'bossy' which turns people off," says Robertson. "Sometimes you need to adopt a coaching style and get people to think things are their idea."

"In addition, people who succeed in the long term, are people who can accept feedback and change aspects of their behaviour," she says. "People are very different and you have to be careful not to stereotype them. You have to give people the opportunity to do a wide range of things early in their careers and see what they are good at in practice."

Meanwhile, Hamzah reminds women leaders to think about their obligations. "If a lawyer lands a prestigious position to lead the firm, think about giving back. It is what people forget sometimes when they're in position of authority and influence," she says. "Use your influence for a good cause. If you have more, then you should give back more. It's part of social responsibility."

"Purpose before profit – that's what I believe in. Do the work well, do it sincerely, and the money will come. It will give you real happiness, a true sense of satisfaction that you are changing lives," Hamzah says. 