

# WOMEN IN THE LEGAL JOB MARKET: IS IT A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD?

ALMOST HALF OF ALL LAWYERS IN HONG KONG ARE FEMALE AND THE NUMBERS ARE CONTINUING TO RISE. **ROB GREEN** AND **CLARA CHEUNG** EXPLORE WHAT IS DRIVING THE INFLUX.

In a city where everyone is fighting for success, and law firms in particular are battling for the best talent and the leading position in the market, female lawyers are certainly at the forefront of this battle. Over the past 10 years, Hong Kong's legal profession has seen a remarkable increase in the number of female lawyers. Where there were once only a handful of women in any position at all within law firms, female lawyers now constitute almost 50 percent of Hong Kong's 10,000 lawyers, and in fact, 24 per cent of local law firm partners are women, according to the Law Society of Hong Kong.

The supposed reasons behind the influx of female lawyers vary greatly, yet, whatever the reason, the resounding truth is that female lawyers are no longer a small minority in Hong Kong's legal market, and the already significant number is on the increase.

Many of the most well-respected firms in Hong Kong, whether local, U.S. or UK-based, are led by women; women who most likely started out as associates and have moved their way up through the ranks due to their sheer passion to succeed in the city's competitive workplace.

Stefania Lucchetti, partner at Howse Williams Bowers in Hong Kong, comments on the reasons why top level roles have traditionally been held by men as opposed to women, even though the majority of junior and mid-level roles tend to be successfully covered by women. "This sudden drop in numbers at top levels is not due to a lack of skill or ambition," says Lucchetti. "But is often a consequence of



the fact that – at least based on my personal experience and perception – the last leg of the journey to partnership often happens when professionals are in the early to mid thirties, and, therefore, it coincides with a time when many individuals are also building families and having children. For obvious reasons, this often leaves women behind, as the biological and emotional change of pace required during pregnancy and in the first months of taking care of a newborn will rarely be physically and logistically compatible with a bid for partnership.”

However, as time progresses, competition becomes greater and the fight for leadership goes on. Attitudes towards career progression are also changing, meaning women are rapidly seeking, and indeed succeeding in senior roles. “This is due in part to women becoming smarter about managing their career and not giving up their options,” says Lucchetti. “Also the higher flexibility in office face hours, enabled by technology, helps take care of some of the logistical issues. I, therefore, believe that in a short period of time, we will see a levelling in gender diversity in partnership roles.”

With increased competition inevitably comes an increase in opportunities for women in the legal job market. Female lawyers succeeding in senior roles create hope for other women, who will continue to work towards partnership, knowing it can be achieved.

Christine Chang, joint managing partner at Maples and Calder, reaffirms this positivity, as she has personally seen the change in female leadership in Hong Kong. “For quite a few years from when I started at Maples, I was the only female lawyer in the Hong Kong office,” she states. “Nowadays, we are almost at 50:50. I am also pleased to see that many of my female peers from the early days are now in senior positions in their respective firms.”

Chang believes that given the disproportionately high percentage of women graduating from law schools, the trend of women moving into senior positions in the legal job market will inevitably continue. “I understand that around 70 percent of Hong Kong law school graduates these days are women. This can only result, I hope, in the ratio of female to male partners in law firms increasing across the board. For one thing, at my firm we are certainly focusing more attention on women, as part of our overall diversity programme,” she says.

The obvious question is, aside from firms

appearing to be more in favour of diversity, what effect does having more women in senior positions have on the legal market? It is important to note that the number of women professionals has increased across the board, not just in law firms but also in financial services. Anne-Marie Godfrey, a partner at Bingham McCutchen, thinks that “law firms in Asia are relatively meritocratic when it comes to promoting women. We find that many of the general counsel and chief operating officers at hedge funds with whom we work are female... and across our firm, we have a higher proportion of female partners than our peers.” This suggests that as many of the law firms’ clients are women, it may make it easier to understand one another and work well together if the senior roles at law firms are also filled by women.

Godfrey goes on to say that she believes the reason for the increase in women in senior

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positions is due in part to the ease and lower cost of childcare in Asia: “It is true that gender balance at a senior management level in law firms should be more even, but I feel that the imbalance has arisen to a degree as a result of women exercising personal choices.” At Bingham, she comments there are a “number of firmwide initiatives to facilitate female partners and senior associates who have children, for example, by providing access to a life coach both before and after maternity leave”.

It is undeniable that the world in general has recently been pushed towards an increased awareness about gender and racial equality in the workplace. However, Kristi Swartz, the managing partner at Blank Rome’s Hong Kong office, argues that this shift in the gender dynamics of managerial structures, both in law firms and the corporate world, was a phenomenon waiting to happen. “With many governments worldwide currently debating the relevance of introducing mandates for women in the boardroom, it seems undeniable that the corporate world

is still predominantly a man’s world,” says Swartz. “For the most part, I don’t think that these mandates are necessary as the world’s view of women in business appears to be naturally evolving. In Hong Kong, we are witnessing an increasing presence of women in the corporate sphere, in senior managerial positions, serving on the board of directors and being appointed as CEOs.”

“Over recent years, the legal profession has seen a steady increase in the number of female partners, so it is to be expected we are now witnessing them reach senior legal positions,” she continues. “As the first woman ever to manage a Blank Rome office in the 65-year history of the firm, I must say that I hope to be the first of many more to come.”

Lucchetti agrees with this view, but also notes that a temporary regulation that would promote a higher degree of diversity in boards of directors for the benefit of good

corporate governance, such as what has been implemented in several European countries, could help create more opportunities and accelerate the process. “I am in any event optimistic that an increasing number of excellent women professionals will take on senior leadership roles in the near future,” concludes the successful HWB partner.

It is apparent, therefore, that times are changing in Hong Kong’s legal market, meaning that in comparison to 20 or even 10 years ago, women are adapting their career goals and are being given the opportunity to succeed in higher level positions. The demand for talent is ever-increasing, as it will across all professions in this fast-paced city, and women, quite rightly, are capitalising on these demands, giving themselves now-attainable targets and creating the hope of more opportunities for today’s female lawyers; a hope that can only continue to grow.

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