

Women rise to the top

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Hong Kong has always been a city driven by competition. Law firms are constantly looking for the best talent and a leading position in the market. It has recently come to our attention that female lawyers are key players in this battle for success.

The structure of law firms has changed over the past decade. According to the Law Society of Hong Kong, 46% of Hong Kong's legal profession are female and 24% of local law firm partners are women. These are remarkable statistics considering the few women that held lower-level positions two decades ago.

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Several of the leading firms today in Hong Kong, local, UK or US-based, are led by driven female partners. Will these figures increase and create more opportunities for female lawyers at all levels? Or do other factors such as motherhood mean the law will always be a man's world?

Although female lawyers held a large portion of junior and mid-level roles, there was a significant drop when it came to senior roles, maybe because women who reached a certain age were ready to start a family. Partnership and motherhood do not always go together, traditionally leaving women behind.

However, changing times have created different attitudes. The ease of hiring domestic help and technology allowing lawyers to work remotely means women

are now thriving in senior roles. Success inevitably leads to competition and if female lawyers see their peers succeeding in senior roles it will drive them to be just as, if not more successful themselves.

Frances Woo, managing partner at Appleby in Hong Kong thinks that the growing number of women taking up leadership positions is a natural progression that has come because of the increasing number of women entering the legal profession. "I do not believe that the need to maintain a family would necessarily discourage women from aspiring and reaching senior roles," states Woo. "Many would prefer to have a successful career and a family, with the assistance of good domestic help. Indeed, that desire to balance both means that women are often disciplined, organised and have the necessary stamina to reach the upper echelons," she added.

Harriet Unger, partner at Thorp Alberga, has personally seen the increase in women occupying high-level roles in Hong Kong over the past decade. "Thorp Alberga now

has a 50:50 female to male partner ratio across the firm," comments Unger. "I think that firms are becoming more focused on the diversity issue in order to retain a higher proportion of female associates and the development of professional associations such as Women in Finance and Women in Law in Hong Kong reflects this focus."

Considering the bigger picture, as the number of female lawyers increases so too has female professionals in the corporate world. This means that many of the clients firms deal with are women. Competitive law firms will create greater opportunities for women in senior roles, because women working together are likely to understand each other better and achieve greater results. "Particularly in Hong Kong, many women possess strong Chinese language skills and

an understanding of both Asian and western cultures to bridge the divide, all of which are critical to the legal industry. These strengths and the more collaborative way in which women work, establish relationships and listen, are assisting them to achieve greater success than in the past," adds Woo.

Freshfields' China chairman and founding partner of the firm's renowned equity capital markets practice, Teresa Ko, sees the increase in women in senior positions within the legal profession as a "positive development" that will "only continue as more women come into the law and are then promoted within it". However, she has never seen gender as a barrier to success and has always felt encouraged within her firm.

"Quite simply," according to Ko, "in order to provide the best quality of legal advice, we need lawyers who are not only technically at the top of their field in terms of their legal skills, but are also able to communicate effectively with the client teams. This requires a combination of cultural and language capabilities as well as international experience and a close understanding of local practices from an energetic and committed group of individuals – regardless of their gender."

Perhaps the increase in female partners is a response to the growing change in women's attitudes, facilitated by today's technology and domestic help. Or perhaps it was an inevitable change resulting from Hong Kong's competitive drive across all professions. Whatever the reason, women are succeeding in senior roles across the legal world. This creates hope that the number of female partners will continue to grow as firms search for the best possible talent.

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