

Women's best enemy in Law firms: themselves

Sabine Sardou
Bird & Bird
Paris

In France, like in many other countries, women lawyers have walked a long way before being accepted in the world of lawyers as equal to men. Obviously 1907, date when a woman was allowed to plead for the first time in France, seems a distant memory.

Since 2009, women are more likely to exercise as a lawyer than their male colleagues, in all disciplines. This trend is accentuated since among 3.000 graduates in law every year in France, 2/3 are women. However, it is not the case when we look at the highest levels of the legal profession.

Indeed, 40% of women lawyers prematurely leave their job in France. Main reason: a salary on average 10% lower than the one of their male colleagues. Specifically, they fear to unsuccessfully manage to reconcile work and family lives, and to face discrimination when they become mothers. This pressure is stressed by continuous too sexist hierarchies.

Far from minimizing the leading role of the glass ceiling for women in law firms, there are other reasons that explain the current situation and these reasons are not evolving. They are mainly due to women, themselves. Below are some illustrations and associated recommendations to limit the effects:

Lack of self-confidence and too much idealistic:

It is usually said that women are deemed to be more reliable and more rigorous than their male colleagues, particularly with respect to commitments vis-a-vis their clients. It is also said that women are more loyal to their structure, better organized and better in managing their young colleagues.

However, it is common that women have a lack of self-confidence in the work environment.

Their professional evolution depends more and more on annual evaluations systems; this process exists in the world of English Law firms but also increasingly in traditional French Law firms.

In this context, women tend to undervalue them or, for the more daring, to be satisfied with their assessments without claiming anything more than what is offered by their Partners or hierarchical superiors. However, in today's world of Law firms, like in companies, facts speak from themselves: only those who claim are heard and rewarded. Consequently, women who naturally tend to trust their hierarchy, consider that if promotion or bonus are not offered to them, it is because they do not deserve it.

Another revealing example: in case of ex-



ceptional events within their law firm (e.g. disorganization in their firm or their team), a woman will tend to naturally adapt its behavior, manage changes to her best and wait for a potential reward while a man will proactively ask for a compensation due to these exceptional circumstances, and could even threaten of leaving the firm. The result is obvious. Managerial authorities who are used to managing most urgent issues, will tend to satisfy men's requests to avoid a bigger disorganization.

Another example of this gender gap: in case of personal issues, a woman will tend to miss working days to manage these issues or to immediately seek for her hierarchy. This latter will tend to be more conciliatory with a woman, but on the other side, will include the

fact that it is difficult for her to manage both her personal and professional lives. A man, more concerned by his image within the Law firm and generally more assisted in his personal life, will tend to find a solution by himself.

Final example : periods before and after maternity leave. It is or at least it should be fully understood and agreed by firms and especially lawyers firms that the maternity leave is a off period for women.

What is more complicated, and it explains a significant period where women definitively leave lawyers firms, is both periods : before and after maternity leave.

**ANOTHER MORE
IMMEDIATE AND
REALISTIC SOLUTION
WOULD BE FOR WOMEN
TO COPY AS MUCH AS
POSSIBLE MEN'S
BEHAVIORS, EVEN THOSE
THAT MAY SEEM
SPINELESS OR INTERESTED**

Whereas for men who expect babies, this period before the maternity leave is generally completely neutral, for women, it is different : For the most courageous ones and those who physically can, they will generally work double, getting their targets quicker than their male colleagues but accepting as granted that their bonus be reduced in proportion of their presence in the firm. The period after the maternity leave is equally complex. Many women cannot take over their initial client portfolio, due to business running. For some of them then starts a long way to get back in. Some of them never succeed and definitively give up the lawyer's firm environment to the benefit of the apparently more comfortable inhouse lawyers environment.

Based on these factual cases, how to improve women's situation in law firm environment?

Even though the solution would be to change minds and managerial behaviors in Law firms, another more immediate and realistic solution would be for women to copy as much as possible men's behaviors, even those that may seem spineless or interested.

It is our duty as women Partners to encourage, support women lawyers. We must go over our comfort, sometimes hypocritical, to use obedient women colleagues and push them to claim more. They must overcome their natural passivity to be more proactive in law firm organizations. They also have to find themselves practical solutions to the complex equation including personal and professional successes.