

How the legal industry can redress gender inequality

In 2015, there were 15,004 practicing male attorneys compared to 8,708 female attorneys, according to a report published in De Rebus. With less than 6% of women in leadership roles within the industry, how can women change the game in a disproportionately male-dominated industry?



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Three of Centurion Law Group's female lawyers from across Africa share their views of inequality, the unique challenges they have faced and how the profession needs to move forward to become more gender inclusive.

■ *Are there enough women in law?*

Keseena Chengadu, senior associate and executive director: International figures indicate the number of women enrolling in law studies outnumbers men, and we often hear that women perform higher than men. But there are many companies out there that will give you the chance to develop yourself and your career – and this is how we will change the industry. We encourage and value the quality of work of our colleagues without prejudice and have many female employees at the top positions of the company.

Onyeka Cindy Ojogbo, associate attorney: The number of female lawyers, fortunately, does increase every year. For me, the big representation issue in the profession is that there are so few female lawyers at the top. These statistics are not very encouraging for younger female lawyers.

Yet women are now breaking out of the traditional path by starting their own bespoke law firms and taking charge of the narrative in the industry. Together, they encourage us all to get behind them and show us that women can and will have a seat at the table.

Shantel Mufandaizda, associate attorney: We still have a long way to go in terms of women occupying top legal positions or being considered the go-to person in a certain field of law. There is still a “boys club” mentality in the legal field that needs to be dismantled.

▣ ***What challenges within the law industry are unique to women?***

Chengadu: We are often faced with the default assumption that we are incapable until proven otherwise. We must work double to get the same recognition as men. Looking back to when I was managing a company at 25 (and being a female), attending first meetings with reputed male CEOs and well-known architects was much more of a challenge than meeting females in similar positions. But it’s a delight to work with such accomplished women. They know where they are heading and are clear about what they want. For me, that’s so admirable and empowering.

Ojogbo: My biggest challenge is the assumption that, as a group, we are weaker, the more domestic breed of lawyers or just always a little less in everything compared to men. It is simply not true. We must consciously assert this every day. We are required to fit into this social construction of womanhood at work and we are judged harshly when we do not conform to their standards.

Mufandaizda: As a woman in the law industry - and I think in every industry - we are still judged by the way we dress, our personalities; and I find we are perceived as the secretary or receptionist - especially in meetings. If you are unfortunate there, you will be asked to serve tea or get water!

There is also still the inequality of pay, and how we are penalised for having a family, as women are in general the primary caregiver. The industry is not designed for working mothers. If you have to leave to attend to your child’s needs, you need to work twice as hard to cover your billable hours - because you need to meet your target. Pregnant women will work right up until term to try and cover the wage gap for when they go on maternity leave. There is a lot of transformation that needs to happen within the industry to adjust that balance.

▣ ***How does it feel to be part of projects that are shaping and driving the oil and gas narrative?***

Chengadu: My company has given me the opportunity to work in many male-dominated law fields – from commercial, OHADA, Oil and Gas, Energy Law, securitization, Contract Law, to taxation. I was given the opportunity to go beyond my boundaries and find what works best. An opportunity like this allows you to look back and see how much you have grown as a professional; you can be proud. This myriad of exposure forms you into the lawyer you want to be, into the business figure that you are looking to be.

Ojogbo: I have been very fortunate to be involved in these big-ticket projects that affect the industry locally and internationally. It has been a great opportunity for growth both in my career and personally. I am particularly excited about our pipeline projects and the future of oil and gas, and energy as a whole.

Mufandaizda: To be a young black woman in an industry that is male-dominated and where there aren’t a lot of women doing the kind of work that we get exposed to can feel surreal. It’s an empowering position.

▣ ***What are the advantages can women bring to the industry?***

Chengadu: Women are the leaders of the future. They have the hearts of warriors. It is marvelous to see how our powerful women during the apartheid allowed us to be able to express ourselves, to build a career and the kind of life we want. They

did not have the freedom we have today, but there is still a long way to go to bring about true equality in the business world.

Mufandaizda: I think women are tenacious. We know that many doors have not opened for us yet, but we still push forward and break down those barriers despite the odds against us. This hunger to get to the top and be recognised makes women hardworking and meticulous. We are an asset to the industry.

▣ ***What is the final piece of advice you can give to women thinking of joining the profession?***

Chengadu: The challenges keep coming and they keep getting more intense. So many times, you want to pack your luggage and run, but it's also very empowering. You learn triple more than having a regular job. Almost every day is like a walk on fire. You must be very present, ready with your shield and sword (metaphorically) to ensure your companies are represented. There is no success without risk.

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