



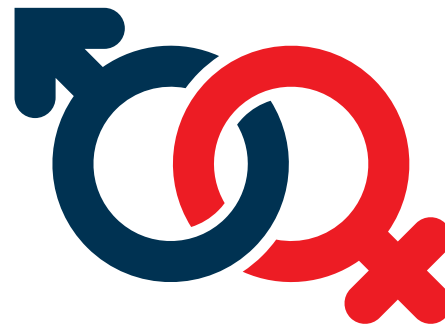
**Author: Josephine Chee, Partner,  
Rajah & Tann (Singapore)**

**1.** Pursuing a career in law is undoubtedly tough, gruelling and not one for the faint hearted. Long hours, demanding deadlines and high expectations of partners, clients and even the courts are all reasons often cited by lawyers who leave the profession midway. With the advent of technology and emails being the norm for correspondence, lawyers are expected to be “on call” 24-7, with an expectation to respond swiftly and to operate at a far more intense pace. In January 2022, Singapore’s then Law Society President highlighted the loss of 310 junior lawyers (defined as those who have been in practice for less than 5 years) from the profession in 2021.<sup>(1)</sup> This represents one in seven junior lawyers stopped practising in 2021.

**2.** Undoubtedly, the challenges in the legal profession affect any lawyer regardless of gender. Do women in the legal profession however face more challenges than men in an industry that is often described as a “boy’s club”? In particular, do female lawyers in specific practice areas which are recognised to be dominated by more male lawyers, such as in litigation or disputes work, face unique challenges? In Singapore, as with many other countries, the ratio of male lawyers who stay on in practice in contentious work outnumbers women lawyers. This article posits two main challenges that female lawyers face.



**3.** First, gender stereotypes in an Asian society. Female lawyers (or women in general) are often perceived to be less aggressive, sensitive and more emotional. These perceptions are even more entrenched when we grow up in an Asian society with cultural norms<sup>(1)</sup> that value modesty, to be deferential to authority, to be observant and less “pushy”. In litigation or contentious disputes practice groups which ostensibly place a premium on aggressive posturing in a combative environment, female practitioners may thus be seen as less suitable or effective. This tends to lend itself to a situation where some female practitioners deliberately portray themselves as ultra-assertive and tough, such that it leads to the other end of the spectrum where females who stay on in litigation practice are described as “the alpha female”. There is therefore a tendency to perceive assertive behaviour in male lawyers as confidence, while the same behaviour in female lawyers is viewed more negatively.



**4.** It may not be a coincidence that most female lawyers choose to practice in non-contentious fields.<sup>(2)</sup> While this in some way further feeds the gender stereotypes, there is growing awareness that more must be done within the industry to encourage women lawyers to stay the course and enjoy a life-long career in litigation practice. Over the recent years, female lawyers are also specifically recognised in their respective fields (including contentious disputes or litigation work) which is symptomatic of more effort given to celebrate gender diversity in the legal profession. The author suggests that this also helps to counter perceptions of clients that female lawyers may be less effective or less suited to take on litigation roles.

**(1)** <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/young-lawyers-cite-long-hours-stress-for-quitting-amid-calls-for-more-support-from-legal-fraternity>

**(1)** See for example, cultural or societal challenges highlighted in

: <https://www.mlaw.gov.sg/news/speeches/speech-by-sms-indranee-law-society-women-in-practice-launch-event/>

**(1)** <https://www.legalbusinessonline.com/features/briefs-female-litigators-press-change-gender-equality-lags-practice-area>

5. Second, the reality that women often take on the role of primary caregivers in most families. It is a fact of life that childbirth affects mothers more significantly as compared to fathers. Taking an extended period of time away from work in the months following the birth of a child would thus fall on female lawyers as compared to male lawyers. Female lawyers generally face the difficult call of having to make a “trade-off” between work and family, as compared to men. This explains why the attrition rate for female lawyers at the mid to senior levels of the profession is usually higher.



6. There is no easy solution to this. Each lawyer (male or female) would have to decide what is best for his/her family whilst juggling their careers. The author suggests that the culture and environment of the law firm can play a major part in ensuring a more conducive workplace for female lawyers to meet the demands of both family and practice. Flexible work hours or work-days; an open environment where female lawyers are able to sound out, without fear of repercussion or judgment, to their reporting supervisors or managements the option of having a reduced workload during specific crunch-times on the family front (for instance, in the week leading up to a major school examination) are all hallmarks of an inclusive work culture. Importantly, a clear demonstration by management, in the form of open and fair performance reviews and promotion guidelines, that female lawyers who have taken time off from work due to maternity leave or to deal with the exigencies of family would not be unfairly set back in terms of progression within the firm.

7. In conclusion, there is no one-size fits all solution. As the legal profession faces challenges across all fronts, regardless of gender, we should as a profession move forward to embrace diversity. The goal is to achieve equity, not equality. This explains the theme for International Women’s Day 2023, namely - #EmbraceEquity. Working towards true inclusion requires an acute awareness that we all need to walk-the-talk. All stakeholders in the legal profession, including law schools, law firms, the industry support groups, should strive to providing all genders with equal opportunities and to promote gender equity.



**#IWD2024**

**#InspireInclusion**

