

MORE WOMEN JOIN PROFESSION AS CORPORATE LAW GAINS CURRENCY

Legal firms court women, offer flexi work options

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AT 33, BIJAL Ajinkya is a partner at Mumbai-based legal firm Nishith Desai & Associates (NDA), where two of the seven partners are women. Ajinkya, who became a partner at 30, doesn't belong to a rare breed anymore.

Women lawyers are carving out a niche for themselves and in many firms outnumbering men as globalisation and a booming economy fuel the need for specialised legal practices and the expansion of existing law firms.

Women constitute 45-50% of the total number of lawyers in some legal firms. While women comprise half of NDAs top team, they make up 45% of the staff strength in legal firm Desai & Diwanji. In firms like Manilal Kher Ambalal & Co, the proportion is 80%.

"While there has been no conscious preference to hire women lawyers, over the past few years, we have seen a steady rise in the number of women lawyers in the firm," says Toral Desai, partner, Desai & Diwanji. "Over the past four to five years, we have encountered an increasing number of women lawyers acting opposite us on transactions."

Apart from achieving a work-life balance, women bring with them the mastery of soft skills like multi-tasking, cross-functionality, social responsibility, teamwork and communication, crucial to the functioning of multi-cultural organisations in a rapidly globalising world. Courtroom dramas and punishing work schedules have thus made way for flexi hours and more paper work.

"These days, legal work stresses soft skills like drafting papers. At the most, it can go up to arbitration but there's no running around, which helps the cause of more women coming in," says Rohini Dandekar, advocate, Supreme Court.

While the legal industry has always had successful women — Zia Mody of AZB & Partners and Indira Jaisingh, the first woman additional solicitor general of India, to name a few — the trend of women flocking to the profession began nearly six years ago, when Indian corporates began to scout

abroad and locally for targets.

Issues related to mergers and acquisitions (M&As), competition law, patents, ADRs-GDRs and FCCBs required in-depth knowledge of global legal practices, and corporate lawyers were, and continue to be, greatly in demand. This is especially true in new economy sectors like information technology, the IT-enabled sector and media and entertainment, where specific skill sets are called for.

Globalisation also brought with it opportunities and access to quality education. Fresh law graduates from new-age campuses like National Law School earn anywhere between Rs 30,000 and Rs 1 lakh a month.

Technology is also helping more women enter the profession, which has always entailed long and exhausting working hours. Legal firms are providing flexi hours and daycare facilities. The Delhi office of the Mumbai-based Amarchand Mangaldas & Suresh Shroff & Co recently unveiled a day-care facility for the children of its working mothers.

Communication devices too have helped a great deal. "Being a lawyer is very demanding; one needs to put in at least 12 to 14 hours a day. However, with the help of devices like the BlackBerry and laptop, our company is giving us the option to work from home or outside the office, which is making life much simpler," says Ajinkya.

The number of women wanting to enter the profession is also rising. Says Vikram Trivedi, managing partner, Manilal Kher Ambalal & Co: "Out of 10 CVs we get, at least seven of them are from women."

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