

# EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH WORK

Generation equality – realising women’s right for an equal future.  
A Q&A with Webber Wentzel managing partner **SALLY HUTTON**

## HOW CAN ORGANISATIONS ENSURE THAT THEIR POLICIES AND PRACTICES GENUINELY MEET THE NEEDS OF FEMALE STAFF DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

Many women, particularly those with young children and/or ageing parents, have borne the brunt of working through the COVID-19 pandemic. This is no surprise – women have traditionally borne more than their fair share of caregiving responsibilities and the pandemic has just highlighted this. Societal norms need to change to enable a more equal world – a much bigger challenge. All organisations can play an important part in this shift though, by actively making workplaces more inclusive and flexible and adopting policies to allow all their people (including working parents) to balance competing demands in a more gender-neutral way. This may include adopting flexible working practices (and a hybrid working model), instilling values of collaboration and teamwork, and ensuring teams are properly resourced and work is evenly allocated. This is also important generally for enabling good mental health through better work-life balance and allowing people the time and space to recharge.

## WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO ENSURE ACCOUNTABILITY ON A GENDER STRATEGY?

Buy-in and commitment of time and resources from the most senior levels are vital. The Gender Strategy Working Group (GSWG), which I chair, oversees our formal, multipronged gender strategy, adopted in 2015, so it receives attention at the highest level. Structure and process are also important. Each year, we set targets and initiatives in various focus areas and regularly map and report back on our progress. A dedicated talent manager and transformation manager support us with the day-to-day operational work necessary to meet our objectives. These structures and processes facilitate accountability and ensure we are action-oriented and keep things moving forward.

## WHAT PROGRESS HAS BEEN MADE IN RETAINING AND PROMOTING WOMEN LAWYERS?

For some time, we have been a South African “Big Five” law firm with the highest proportion



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of women partners. We aim for a 50/50 split of our total partner body by 2025 and have made significant progress already. Currently, 43 per cent of all our partners are women – a 23 per cent increase since 2015 – and 41 per cent of our equity partners are women – a 32 per cent increase since 2015. We have a strong pipeline too: 57 per cent of our legal services team are women. We have deliberately increased diversity in all our leadership structures over several years and women now comprise more than 40 per cent of our senior leadership team. We can see the positive impact of this in our decision-making and in the firm’s success – diverse teams find more robust and creative solutions.

## HOW IMPORTANT IS ROLE MODELLING?

Role modelling is critical to organisational change – and we all need role models at all stages of our careers. As Sonia Sotomayor, the

first Hispanic woman to become a US Supreme Court Justice, said “a role model ... provides more than inspiration; [their] very existence is confirmation of possibilities one may have every reason to doubt, saying ‘Yes, someone like me can do this’.” As the first woman elected to a senior leadership role in a major South African law firm in 2015, I felt the absence of female role models in leadership roles keenly. This is all changing – several large South African law firms now have senior women leaders, and in only six months, four major global firms (Ashurst, Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, Herbert Smith Freehills and, most recently, our alliance partner Linklaters) have appointed women to senior partner or chair roles for the first time.

## CAN YOU OUTLINE SOME OTHER AREAS OF PROGRESS?

We were the first South African firm to introduce parental transitional coaching in 2016 (for which we were awarded the African Legal Awards Diversity Award) – this has been very successful. We introduced a flexible working policy three years ago and are currently workshopping a hybrid working policy for the post-COVID-19 world. We conduct regular pay analyses and have reviewed all the firm’s policies (including our parental leave and bonus policies) to eliminate any gender biases. Every quarter, the GSWG compiles a transformation profiling report, focusing on the business development and profiling of women fee-earners. We are making a deliberate effort to be more inclusive in the way we pitch for work and profile our lawyers. We regularly conduct unconscious bias workshops and awareness sessions, including on race, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation and related issues. Most importantly, we have a values-based culture, which forms the backdrop for everything we do. Respect, transformation and diversity, collaboration and teamwork are all core firm values, which we insist are lived by all of our people. ■



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