

CAREER DEVELOPMENT

'The fact you are a woman should not be an obstacle' - Dechert's Miriam Gonzalez on male allies and management hopes

By Miriam Gonzalez

Did you ever doubt whether becoming a partner was something you wanted to do?

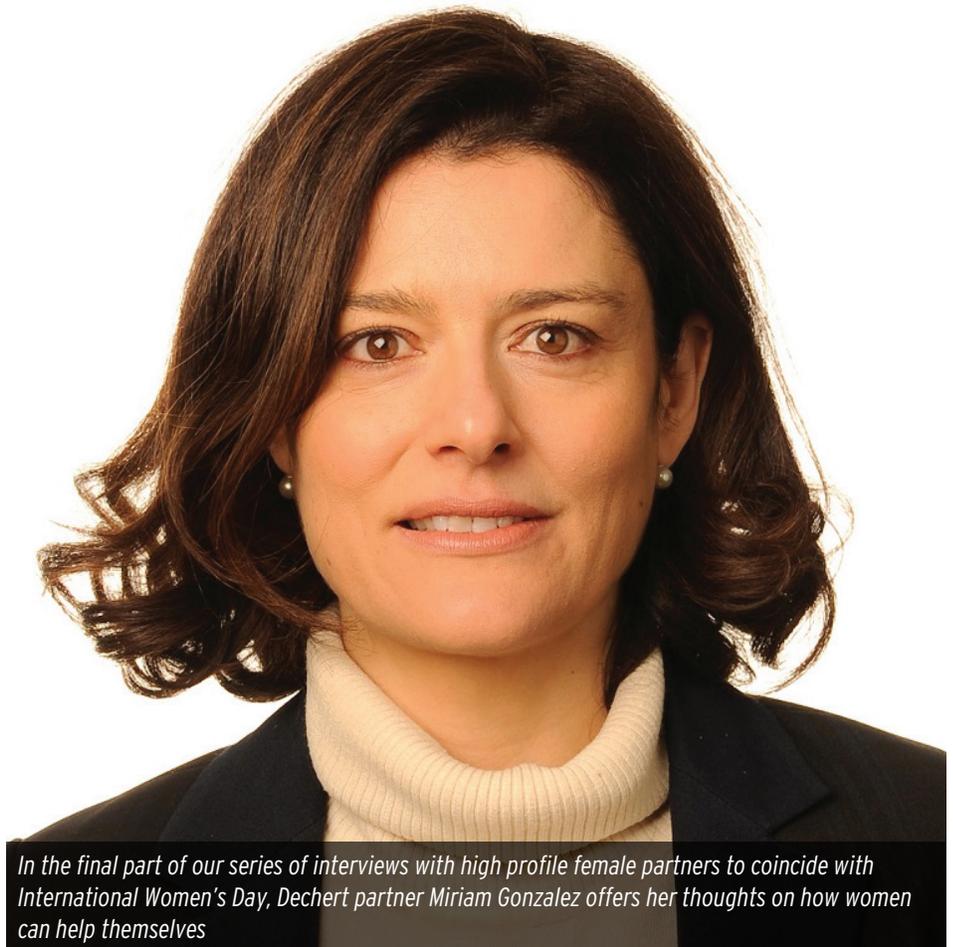
I never thought of becoming a partner or even of working in a law firm. I ended up in private practice by chance really. But once I was in the law, I wanted to be the owner of my decisions and my time, which is why I was attracted to becoming an equity partner.

Who encouraged you to do it and helped you through the process?

Neil Gerrard, co-chair of regulatory and litigation at Dechert. He played a similar role at DLA Piper when I joined the firm. For as long as I have known him he has encouraged me to go as far as I can with my career - he always sees the opportunities rather than the obstacles, which is a great asset in life.

Why do you think there are so few women in management at top law firms?

There are few women at the top of most economic sectors. The ratio in law firms is similar to the ratio in medicine, in the arts, in music, in engineering, in journalism... at the top of every sector women normally score less than 10%.



In the final part of our series of interviews with high profile female partners to coincide with International Women's Day, Dechert partner Miriam Gonzalez offers her thoughts on how women can help themselves

I think the explanation is related to the lack of a pipeline and also to the fact that women are still the primary carers in society, so they normally develop their careers while handling in parallel a caring burden that is much bigger than the caring burden handled by men.

How important do you think it is to have female role models at firms?

Role models are important everywhere. It is difficult for younger women to dream of becoming a leading partner if they do not see women already fulfilling those roles.

And how important a role do men need to play in changing the imbalance?

Unlocking female talent is a task for both women and men. I am glad that there are more and more men who feel this is also a task for them. I have been leading the Inspiring Girls campaign for more than three years now - at the beginning we only got women, now we have many men supporting us. And we have men leading the launch of the campaign in places like Washington, which is great.

Do you think there will ever be gender parity at both partner and law firm management level?

There will be - but unless we keep taking positive action to encourage such parity there is no way that myself, or my children, or the children of my children, or even their children, will see it. The issue is not whether there will ever be parity - it is to make it happen faster.

What are the most important things firms can do to increase the number of women becoming partners and then going on to become leaders?

We all engage in tonnes of activities to promote gender balance: networking, training, awareness-raising events... But at the end of the day, what counts is what is being done by the management of the firms.

When the promotion list is put together and it does not include enough women, managers need to ask 'why?' and 'are you sure there are not more women who deserve a promotion?'

And if the answer is genuinely 'no', then they should ask for a concrete plan to ensure that the next year that situation is not going to happen again. And make those responsible for the plan accountable for it. It is not too difficult - but it requires us to focus on actions and results, not just on empty words.

Do you think working in a City law firm (particularly in a transactional practice) can be compatible with men or women wanting to build a career as a partner and taking time out/on reduced hours to be with their family or for other work/life balance reasons?

The nature of corporate law makes it difficult to plan and therefore, yes, it is more challenging to have work/life balance if you are a corporate lawyer than if you are a trade and regulatory lawyer as I am.

What are your top three tips for female lawyers looking to become partners?

- Don't rule yourself out
- Speak openly about your ambition
- If after you examine the situation in a self-critical manner, you think you are not getting there only because you are a women, then quit your firm. There are tonnes of other places where you can have a better career.

And for female partners looking for a firmwide management post?

Exactly the same advice. But remember that being a good lawyer does not necessarily make you a good manager -

regardless of whether you are a woman or a man.

Why is it important that women go for such roles and what are the best bits of doing them?

I do not think the issue is whether going for those roles is important 'for women', it is whether it is important 'for you'. Not everybody (man or woman) wants to rise to the top of a particular profession - but if you do and you deserve it, the fact you are a woman should not be an obstacle.

Do you have any regrets about becoming a partner/taking on a leadership role?

I do not have regrets. But a partnership is not a company and therefore, unavoidably, decisions in every partnership are slow. I still hope that in the remaining years of my professional life I will find a chance to manage a properly innovative business.

Do you think there will ever be a female leader of a magic circle law firm?

I hope so - and I hope it happens soon. As I also hope that clients ask more often why there are so few women in those management teams.

To coincide with International Women's Day, Legal Week is publishing a series of interviews and profiles with high profile female law firm leaders and partners.

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