



WEBBER WENTZEL

in alliance with > **Linklaters**

By Masetuka Ntsoereng

About 50 years ago, the only visible women in law firm offices and the courts were secretaries and stenographers. Today it is very different.

Women are moving into the senior legal ranks in all areas – from in-house general counsel all the way to the judiciary. In the last decade, they have also started to emerge as the leaders of South Africa’s biggest corporate law firms.

This is partly because the women who were the first to break through the “glass ceiling” of senior law firm leadership, like Sally Hutton, managing partner of Webber Wentzel, are making deliberate efforts to redress the balance. In 2015, Webber Wentzel was the first South African law firm to appoint a woman leader when it appointed Sally as managing partner (alongside Christo Els as senior partner).

Sally graduated with a BA LLB (magna cum laude) from the University of Cape Town. She won The Patrick and Margaret Flanagan scholarship to Oxford University, where she read for an MSt in legal research. She also holds an LLM in taxation (cum laude) from the University of the Witwatersrand.

When Sally first joined Webber Wentzel as a candidate attorney in 1995, there were only four women partners in the firm. Twenty years later, in 2015, she became the first woman to be appointed to a senior role in the firm. Under Sally’s leadership, the firm has accelerated its progress towards gender diversity.

Today, 49% of the Webber Wentzel partnership are women and 45% of Webber Wentzel’s senior leadership team (Board and Executive Committee) are women and 47% of pitches to key clients in the last year were led by women. The firm’s biggest and highest

revenue generating Business Unit (Corporate), which has the most ranked lawyers in the country, has been led by a woman for the last 10 years.

“We have been deliberate in ensuring diversity in all our leadership structures and we can see the results in our decision-making and in the firm’s success,” Sally says. “

Webber Wentzel has been a first mover on a number of innovative initiatives to drive gender equity and inclusivity within the firm. It was the first South African law firm to introduce parental

Of all the women lawyers profiled in Chambers South Africa for 2022, 37% are from Webber Wentzel. (Chambers recognises lawyers and law firms based on research from market commentators, competitors and clients. It is the directory most used by international in-house counsel to identify law firms and individuals to use for their legal work.)

transitional coaching in 2016 – an initiative that won the Diversity Initiative of the Year at the African Legal Awards in 2016.

The firm adopted a flexible working policy long before this became the norm during the pandemic. More recently, the firm adopted a gender inclusion policy and celebrated its first Webber Wentzel Pride Day – which will become an annual event. The firm conducts regular gender pay analyses and makes a deliberate effort to be more inclusive in the way it pitches for work and profiles its lawyers, tracking all related data. Unconscious bias workshops and awareness sessions are held regularly – including on race, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation and related issues.

Sally believes one of the most important aspects of the firm’s success in achieving greater gender equity is that it cultivates a values-based culture.

“Respect, transformation and diversity, collaboration and teamwork are all core firm values which are expected to be lived by everyone who works here.”

Retaining women into the senior ranks is still a challenge, Sally says. “Talented women are still exiting the profession because it becomes too difficult to balance their work and family responsibilities. Women often still bear a disproportionate burden of responsibility for caregiving.”

Flexibility, teamwork and a clear focus on mental wellness and the full person and their needs are essential focus areas for corporate law firms to ensure that they are able to offer a sustainable people value proposition.

“I have been very lucky to have had a long and sustainable career at Webber Wentzel that has constantly afforded me new challenges and opportunities for growth throughout my career life cycle, but that also allowed me to dial back when I needed to while I had three young children,” Sally says. “I would like all our women to benefit from the same flexibility and support I received and this sits at the heart of many of our formal gender initiatives at the firm.”

“Organisations can play an important part in changing attitudes, by actively making workplaces more inclusive, 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 and ensuring teams are properly resourced and work is evenly allocated,” Sally says.