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Unveiling authenticity: Empowering women to rewrite their narrative of self-worth

According to the Lexis Nexis Legal Tech Report for 2021/22, there has been a 7% increase in fully female-owned firms between 2016 and 2021, which is an undeniably positive step for the profession. However, only 20% of the 13,000 firms surveyed reported having an equal or majority representation of women in decision-making roles. Despite improvements in the last few years, the numbers are still misaligned to population figures, which place women in the majority over men in South Africa.

Before I delve into my thoughts on the matter of female representation and realities in the legal profession in South Africa, I feel it necessary to state the obvious – I do not have a PhD in Feminism. By this, I mean that while I respect and acknowledge the movement and the challenges that women in our industry have faced, I am not equipped to provide insights on gender equality from a socio-political perspective. However, I can share facts based on my own experiences as a woman in the legal profession, and as a managing director of a South African law firm – Malan Scholes Incorporated.

Women continue to be a minority in leadership positions. What could be the reason behind this disparity?

WE ARE (OFTEN) OUR OWN SABOTEURS

I am fully aware that many women in the field have experienced sexism, and that it has hampered their career trajectories. Based on my own observations and experiences through the years, I do have thoughts on other factors that contribute to the underappreciation of women in leadership positions within the legal profession.

A significant barrier for women is that we are hindered by our own negative internal dialogue. This includes feeling, either consciously or subconsciously, that we are not good enough, not confident enough, or that we lack the experience to be promoted into leadership roles.

These internalised notions and dialogues are almost certainly linked to unconscious biases that have disadvantaged women in the workplace. Women are traditionally seen as the primary caregivers in the home, and unable to dedicate the necessary time to the heightened responsibility that accompanies leadership roles.

Structures and interventions should be implemented by employers industry-wide to address the challenges that women face. However, it is also up to women to work on overcoming these barriers. Admitting to our own ‘imposter syndrome’ is a good first step, followed by taking action and seeking coaching and mentoring support.

It’s also important to acknowledge and address the fact that some women are simply doing too much. The parenting role, in particular, is a major source of contention in this regard, as the role should be shared fairly between partners.

Despite the women who juggle numerous personal and professional responsibilities and still manage to make it work, I don’t believe it is possible (or a good idea) to try to do and have it all, being a full-time parent and having a full-time career, especially in a demanding career like law. Ruth Bader Ginsburg said it best: “Women will only have true equality when men share with them the responsibility of bringing up the next generation”.

It is up to us to insist on this. If you want a

career and you want to be a parent, make sure your parenting duties are shared and your support structures are in place.

REWRITING THE NARRATIVE

In my experience as a leader, I have noticed that while women tend to struggle more with a lack of self-confidence in their careers, many men are also held back by this. It is vital that mentorship opportunities exist for all junior members of the legal profession, regardless of gender, to become successful lawyers and leaders. This can be achieved by, among other things, ensuring that there are appropriate programmes, initiatives and allowances in place to help them address these struggles; in the process, creating a professional environment that is conducive to growth and development.

When faced with challenges, it is important to be able to seek help or guidance from mentors. While I may not have personally experienced sexism in my career, it does not mean that I have not faced my share of career struggles. Certainly, I have encountered challenges along the way. However, with the assistance of the mentors, principals and coaches whom I have been fortunate to have throughout my career, and to whom I am deeply grateful, I have been better able to overcome and manage these challenges.

Our country has faced its fair share of challenges, but South Africa has made significant progress towards achieving gender equality and, subsequently, unlocked opportunities and untapped potential. We have the freedom to develop our talents and pursue our chosen careers as we desire. With this freedom comes the responsibility to take ownership, take advantage of, and manage them to the best of our abilities. 