



Q&A

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What did your path into this field look like – was it intentional, or did you discover it along the way?

Before I studied law, I had initially wanted to go into journalism. I had ideals of becoming a successful journalist like Christiane Amanpour – travelling to war-torn countries and interviewing despots and revolutionaries. At the tender age of 18, I moved to London in my gap year, and all of the naivety was swiftly beaten out of me. Living the hard knock life, penniless in a foreign country, was the medicine that I needed to teach me that it's okay to be ambitious, but also important to be realistic. And that a good degree and a solid work ethic are invaluable. I came back to South Africa and signed up for a BCom Finance (Honours) and Law. It's been 19 years since then – I am now a Partner at a prestigious international law firm and, through DLA Piper, I have travelled the world; I have met incredibly interesting and successful people; I have climbed Machu Picchu; I have gone back to London as a strong, empowered professional with a career and experience; and I have never looked back.

Have you faced any gender-based challenges or biases in your career? If so, how did you navigate them?

Being an M&A lawyer requires a particular sensibility. One needs to be analytical, confident, eloquent, convincing, proactive – the list goes on. And one's clients need to feel that they are in the best possible hands on any given transaction. Unfortunately, despite all the progress that we've made with regards to equal rights and women in the workplace, inherent gender biases often remain. I have found that, as a woman, I often have to try twice as hard to prove myself in any work context. Sometimes I am undermined, sometimes I am underestimated – but every time, I conduct myself with grace, humility and courage. It can be hard, but I know that, given time, I will eventually prove myself. So, I am patient, I stay true to who I am, and I let my abilities shine.

What does self-care look like for you, and how do you prevent burnout?

I have experienced burnout. And I think it's important to talk about it, because mental health is still stigmatised. We should be having open conversations about it, because this modern, busy life can be so hard to navigate. And there is no handbook. As women, we tend to be the "yes" people. We push ourselves to the limit in order to make everyone else happy, at the expense of ourselves. We push, push push... until the bottom falls out. I learnt that lesson the hard way and it took some time to pick up the pieces, all while keeping my head above water at work and at home. Through therapy,

yoga, time in nature, breathwork, socialising, hobbies, setting boundaries – I have healed myself. I now try to remember that "you can't pour from an empty cup". I am now my biggest priority, and that has made all the difference.

Did you have any mentors or role models? How did they influence your journey?

Yes, Livia Dyer – a very brilliant lawyer and inspiring person – was briefly a colleague of mine. She taught me that one can be kind and compassionate, but strong and resilient at the same time. That, as women, we truly can do it all. That the most competent person in the room is often not the loudest. That I am worthy. That I deserve a seat at the table.

I hope to be that same person to the young women at my firm. I hope that I already am.

What barriers still need to be broken down in M&A or corporate finance industry for women?

I believe that we have made great progress with regards to equality in the legal field, and I see plenty of strong female leaders and role models at my firm and at many of the firms with which we work. But my clients are still predominantly male, and I don't think that we are seeing the same pace of change at the CEO level. We don't see enough women running private equity firms, venture capital companies, banks and listed companies. I don't know why that is. Women have proven that we can do it all – we can get married, have children and run multinationals with great success. And I think more of us need to be given the opportunity to do so.

What keeps you motivated on tough days?

On tough days, I try to remember that, irrespective of how I feel on any given day, I am a role model to other women. Not necessarily because of anything that I have done (although I do hope that I am a valued mentor to many of the young women with whom I work), but just because I am here. I have worked hard to be promoted to the partnership of an international law firm – it took over 12 years to get to this point. But now that I am here, I try to remind myself that this was, and is, not just for me – it is to show others that this is possible. I don't operate under the misapprehension that I am a trailblazer of my time, but if one young woman is inspired by my journey, then that is important, and it is very important to me. 🙌

