



Communication and Marketing Department  
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso  
Kommunikasie en Bemerkingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa  
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town  
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

[www.uct.ac.za](http://www.uct.ac.za)

**6 March 2024**

## **Women perpetually marginalised in South African law firms – study shows**

A new study by the University of Cape Town (UCT) researcher Dr Tamlynn Meyer has revealed that women are perpetually marginalised in the law profession. The study also showed that there was lack of women in the senior ranks of the profession despite a robust legal and policy framework promoting equality.

The study, which set out to determine the impact motherhood has on women attorneys in South African law firms, showed that when becoming mothers, many women attorneys experienced a disjuncture between their mothering and professional role, which is attributed to the hyper-competitive culture of the profession.

Meyer said this disjuncture leads to many women having less successful legal careers, which is manifested in different ways. The findings are published in [\*Gender, Work & Organization\*](#) journal.

“This study has provided an insight into the challenges experienced by women attorneys who are mothers in South African corporate law firms as they navigate their dual responsibilities as career woman and mother,” said Meyer, who is based in UCT’s Department of Sociology.

The study employed Edgar Schein’s concept of organisational culture and Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of field, habitus and culture to understand how women continue to experience unequal outcomes in their careers, despite removing formal barriers and enacting laws and policies. The concepts further illuminate how and why the male-dominant culture of the profession embeds itself and remains one of the hardest elements to change. The study was furthermore underpinned by a feminist standpoint epistemology, interviewing 27 attorneys across three corporate law firms in South Africa.

One of the respondents said: “Because we know we’ve got two roles to fulfil, we need to bring in money, but we need to be mothers”. According to Meyer, this response provided a window into the experiences of working mothers and highlighted their strategic importance in a global capitalist system where they have a dual role as income earners and carers. Most working women, she said, are confronted with this double load and must find ways to balance the two.

Meyer said that the legal profession was a historically male-dominant profession, where a hyper-competitive masculinised professional culture operates. "While there is much to celebrate in women's advancement in the workplace, it is undeniable that many women in historically male-dominant professions such as the legal profession continue to experience myriad challenges as they pursue both a legal career and motherhood."

According to Meyer's research, most law graduates are women, who also constitute the majority of new entrants admitted into the profession. However, at the most senior levels of the profession, notably the partnership level, women comprise only 28% of partners compared to their male counterparts.

She said there were at least two male partners for every female partner. "This reaffirms extant literature that the legal profession continues to be a male-dominated profession with women having very little prospects of a successful legal career," she added.

Meyer lauded South Africa's (and the profession's) robust legal and policy framework addressing gender equality and transformation in the workplace at large. However, despite the removal of formal barriers and the enactment of various legal and policy frameworks to spearhead the transformation process, she said women continue to experience inequality and marginalisation in the profession.

Citing similar research, Meyer noted that the odds of women accomplishing partnership status was less than one-third of men. "Women also have a higher probability of exiting legal practice before reaching partnership status," she said.

The women who participated in Meyer's study were unequivocal about the fact that pregnancy and motherhood delayed a woman's progress in attaining partnership and presented them with career challenges. They all agreed that, in one way or another, their careers were stunted.

Another participant in Meyer's study commented that "a woman has a limit, and that limit is reached when she falls pregnant." Similarly, another said that "women that have had children before they become directors will take longer than the others to become a partner".

The biggest milestone in an attorney's career is being promoted to partnership. On average, it takes approximately seven years to reach a partnership. Still, motherhood significantly delays this by a few years, with some never achieving partnership, as they cannot keep abreast with the hyper-competitive culture of the profession. "Those women, who consciously decided to remain childless or delay motherhood, did so because they were cognisant that it would result in their chances of attaining partnership being delayed," said Meyer.

Meyer said there was a dissonance and incompatibility in the practices, ideas, and discourses of motherhood and the hypercompetitive masculinised culture of the legal field, which makes no concessions for women with care responsibilities. "Each time a woman leaves the workplace on maternity leave, she must re-enter the field at a disadvantage."

She concluded: "It is hoped that through this study and by documenting the voices of women attorneys which would otherwise remain silent, this will provide a platform for greater cognisance into their lived reality and provide the opportunity for more meaningful dialogue within the profession to understand why, what, and how inequality is maintained and reproduced despite the removal of formal barriers and the enactment of laws and

policies. In this way, the profession may better understand how to support women as they navigate motherhood and a professional career.”

***ENDS***

***Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department***

**Ridovhona Mbulaheni**

Media Liaison and Monitoring Officer  
Communication and Marketing Department  
University of Cape Town  
Rondebosch  
Tel: (021) 650 2333  
Cell: (064) 905 3807  
Email: [ridovhona.mbulaheni@uct.ac.za](mailto:ridovhona.mbulaheni@uct.ac.za)  
Website: [www.uct.ac.za](http://www.uct.ac.za)