

IFLR1000 Women Leaders - Q&A with Tanja Luginbühl

Head of insolvency and restructuring at Lenz & Staehelin in Switzerland, Tanja Luginbühl, evaluates how the Swiss legal market and her firm are addressing gender diversity, and where the market could do more.

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PEOPLE

Tanja Luginbühl

Partner, Head of Restructuring and Insolvency, Banking and Finance, Commercial and Contracts, Restructuring and Insolvency, Private Clients

What steps has the firm taken to support clients and employees through the recent pandemic?

Our first priority is the health of our staff. Furthermore, we remain dedicated to serving our clients and their businesses. We are continually monitoring guidelines and ordinances provided by Swiss Federal Health Department (BAG) and the Federal Council and are adjusting our COVID-19 contingency plans as necessary to continue providing the same high level of service as always. Moreover, during lockdown we have enabled our staff to work remotely on a permanent basis and have held regular videoconferences and webinars to ensure communication throughout the teams and practice groups.

From the perspective of gender equality how does the environment which you work in now compare to the one you began your career in?

We see change starting to take root. Larger firms in Switzerland have introduced family services, childcare facilities and assistance in finding childcare offsite. Others are allowing for more flexible and part-time work. All this has led to an increased number of women who work in executive and board positions.

In general do you feel the legal profession within your jurisdiction treats women and men equally?

Yes, but there is still room for improvement. In Switzerland, there are actually more

women in law than ever before. In many law firms, the number of practising female lawyers now outnumbers men. This is a true change in the journey towards full gender equality in law. The challenge for law firms, however, is retaining those women into the senior management and partnership.

In addition, our clients are themselves facing pressure to be more gender diverse. A number of clients would not hire a team of a law firm unless a minimum quota of women would work on a specific project. This goes in line with more women taking up senior in-house roles. Clients would expect to work with external teams that also reflect the same diversity.

If law firms want to be successful and fit for the future, they will not be able to ignore the issues of gender diversity and equality.

Do you feel women are well represented at partner level and in management positions in firms within your jurisdiction?

No, we are not yet at an appropriate level. There are still some issues with unconscious bias that limits the retention of female talents in senior positions or restrict the development of women's careers at firms.

More generous parental leaves should be introduced, thereby allowing an increased paternal involvement and sharing of caregiving responsibilities, as well as greater flexibility and support for women during their legal career. Furthermore, there should be more flexibility that enables part-time partnership or two lawyers to job-share a partner role.

Are there any initiatives to promote gender equality in the legal profession in your jurisdiction?

At the university level, more than half of the law students are female. While many law firms maintain that ratio for first and second year levels, the figures at partner level fall dramatically. Many firms have not yet implemented appropriate career models, but we see an increased awareness and the perception of working moms in our society is about to change.

What advice would you give to women in junior positions to encourage them to work towards attaining senior positions?

They should be proud of their female skill sets and have more self-confidence. We often see young women to underestimate their capabilities and to be afraid of making mistakes. To choose a role model or to get mentoring support may be helpful for them to develop and to find their own way to practice law and grow into senior positions.

What initiatives does your firm have to promote gender equality?

We consider it an intrinsic value of our firm to invest in and to promote our female staff ever since the firm was established. We have been consistently providing an equality of opportunities in recruitment and advancement to everyone who works at L&S. A true diversity is an essential ingredient to our firm's success.

The firm currently has over 40% female fee earners. At associate level, they account for 49.5 %. We successfully attract young female talents from the universities in Switzerland and abroad. We compensate our associates based on their skills, not on their gender. Efforts to attract and develop a pipeline of successful women lawyers are made at all levels. In addition, women partners hold leadership positions as practice heads and as chairs or members of our compensation, hiring and partner screening committees. They serve as a role model for the firm's junior women.

Do you think your firm compares well to others in your jurisdiction when considering gender equality?

Yes, with room for improvement.

Some law firms in Switzerland perform better on gender diversity than others. This may hold true due to the fact that data is being shown without making a differentiation between salaried partner status and full equity partnership. Some firms have a higher proportion of female partners in employment and dispute resolution, where it appears easier to provide for some level of workplace flexibility, and where work rates are more predictable.

If you could introduce one policy related to gender equality in the legal profession what would it be?

I would intensify efforts to help women returning from childbirth facilitating their return onto the career track by flexible and remote working, job sharing and providing opportunities for network and cross-selling.

What do you feel are the biggest obstacles for women in your jurisdiction joining the legal profession now?

The biggest obstacle from my experience is balancing family and work. Law firms in Switzerland still have a journey to make in terms of catching up with the global players, and, as a rule, are not yet providing great examples of innovative thinking in improving gender diversity.

I am convinced this will naturally change in time, as younger female lawyers rise up through the ranks. Law firms will increasingly need to come up with solutions to meet the needs of this new generation of talent.

What do you consider to be the greatest achievements of your career?

To become a partner of one of the top firms in Switzerland was certainly an important step in my career. What is even more rewarding, though, is each single transaction or mandate that I could successfully complete together with the support of my team for clients to their full satisfaction.

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