

ASIAN LEGAL BUSINESS

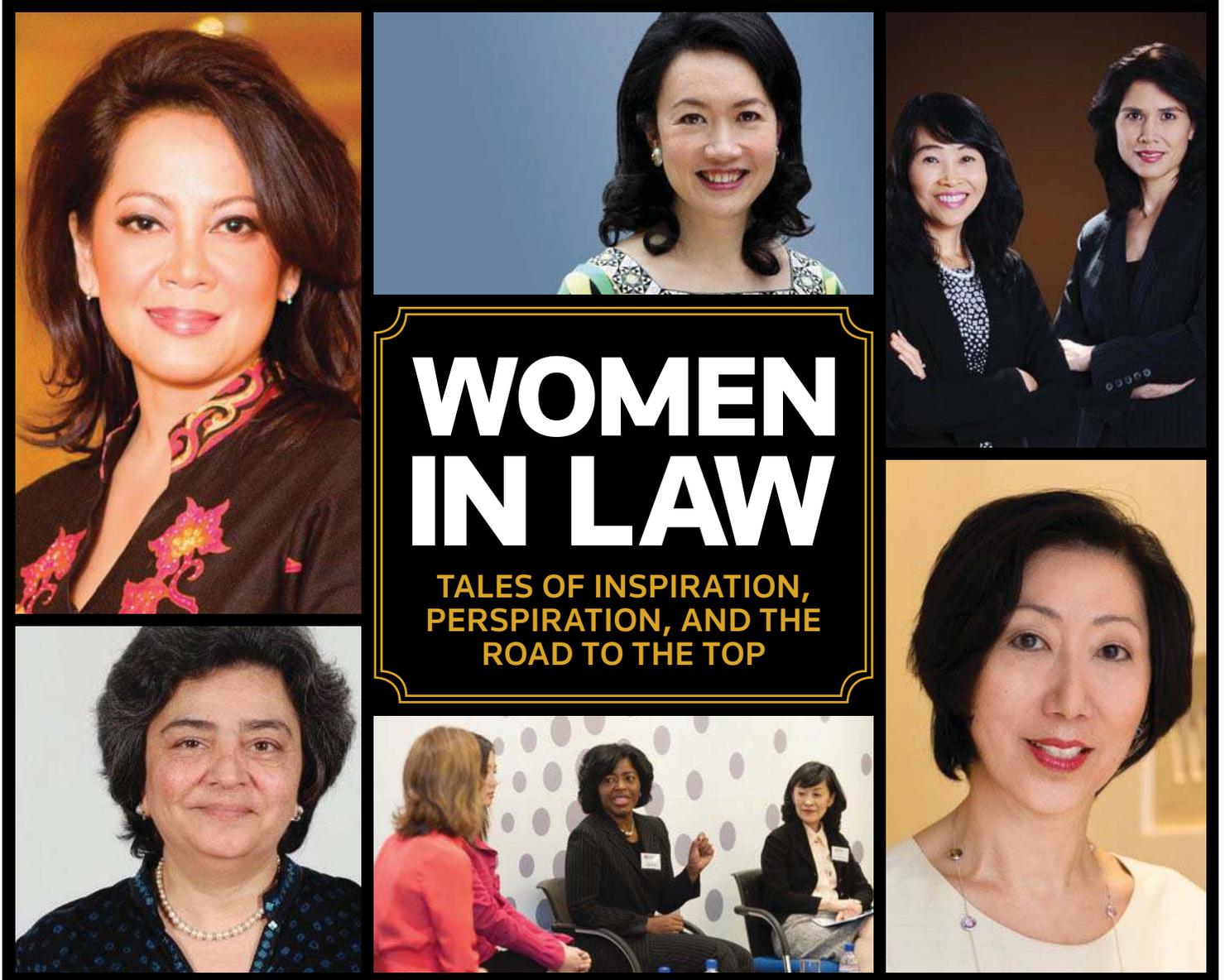


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ON THE COVER



(L-R Top) Melli Darsa, Zia Mody, Teresa Ko, Akiko Mikumo
(L-R Bottom) Darani Vachanavuttivong, Tiziana Sucharitkul, Women in Law Forum

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WOMEN IN LAW: AN ONGOING CONVERSATION

A chat with a female associate at a fairly well-regarded law firm a few months ago gave me an insight into an urgent issue facing the legal industry that many are aware of, but few acknowledge, and even fewer choose to act on. A graduate of a top law school, this associate was highly regarded by her peers, but was surprisingly less than optimistic about how her career would unfold. Her firm had a large number of male senior partners, and a resulting boys' club mentality; and even though no one mentioned it directly to her, she could sense she was not "one of them." "Male associates are able to go to late night drinks with partners, and talk about sports with them," she said to me. "I can feel bonds developing. There are few senior female figures in the firm, none of whom I can relate to, and I worry I will get left behind." Despite the considerable reputation of her firm, she was planning a move to a boutique operation, which she felt had a more supportive structure.

The statement, which echoed something similar that I heard at the ALB Women in Law Forum in May, was a bit of an eye-opener for two main reasons: firstly, because she was a 20-something in a more progressive, more inclusive world than it was a generation or two ago. Surprisingly, it was made in Asia, thought by many to be an engine of the world's growth. The region's rapid economic growth has led to a significant demand for highly specialised professionals in key posts, and the legal industry is no different. With labour participation rates of women extremely high in certain countries, and more women becoming more educated and qualified for higher positions, it seemed that we would see more women at partner level and above in law firms across the region. However, this has not been the case. The full numbers are not available, but anecdotal evidence shows us that there are few women in top positions in law firms. Barriers to their progress are varied: sometimes they are cultural, implied, and occasionally entrenched deep in the psyche. While much progress has been made, there is still much to be done.

Keeping this in mind, ALB kicks off its "Women in Law" initiative, which comprises a series of events, print and online features and other efforts to keep the conversation going. With regard to the magazine, this month's cover story on successful women is just the start; from August, we plan to have a monthly feature on issues faced by women in the workplace, and how these can be resolved. We plan to supplement these with events like the forum held in May, which brought together some of the most outstanding female achievers in Singapore's legal profession. The overall aim is to provide a platform for women in the legal industry across the Asia-Pacific region, and find practical solutions to problems by promoting connectivity, communication, and collaboration. Through face-to-face conversations and sharing of experiences, we hope to bring about a visible change for the better.

Regards,



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WOMEN IN LAW

ALMOST ONE OUT OF EVERY TWO PEOPLE IN THE WORLD IS A WOMAN. YET, WOMEN STILL FACE MYRIAD ISSUES WHEN IT COMES TO BUSINESS. HOW DO THEY MAKE IT TO THE TOP? WHAT OBSTACLES DO THEY FACE? HOW DO THEY JUGGLE THEIR FAMILY COMMITMENTS AND PROFESSIONAL OBLIGATIONS? HAS FEMALE PARTICIPATION AT SENIOR MANAGEMENT LEVELS INCREASED OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS IN ASIA? **SEHER HUSSAIN** INVESTIGATES



First, a quick overview of the state of play. A 2012 Grant Thornton report indicated that 32 percent of senior management roles were held by women in Southeast Asia, a significant increase over the EU (24 percent), Latin America (22 percent) and North America (18 percent). From ASEAN, the Philippines and Thailand easily swept the top spots with a resounding 39 percent female participation rate, while India with 14 percent and Japan with 5 percent lagged behind.

Several factors play into these statistics, the most notable being that of a built-in support system. The resounding refrain from marketplace sources was that female professionals in Asia have access to affordable childcare and an extended family network, lending them greater freedom than their Western counterparts.

However, the problems faced by female

lawyers in Asia are also unique to the region ranging from traditional-minded clients, who may prefer male partners on their accounts, to conservative societal pressure where ambition may be frowned upon.

From India to Indonesia, Hong Kong to Singapore, *ALB* takes a closer look at these pressing issues, presenting a snapshot of powerful and influential female lawyers in Asia; combining a Q&A with Tilleke & Gibbins' powerhouse duo Darani Vachanavuttivong and Tiziana Sucharitkul and profiles of Indian trailblazer Zia Mody, corporate M&A maven Akiko Mikumo, capital markets pundit Teresa Ko, and Indonesia's redoubtable Melli Darsa. Alongside is coverage of *ALB's* Women in Law forum, a recent event that brought together over 60 in-house counsel and private practice lawyers to frankly discuss today's hot button topics. **ALB**

Tending Tilleke

A formidable pair, Darani Vachanavuttivong and Tiziana Sucharitkul are co-managing partners of the Southeast Asian firm Tilleke & Gibbins. They chat about the challenges of being female lawyers, juggling their roles as mothers and managing partners, and the advantages of living in Asia

Women handle a variety of roles - acting as a mentor, a leader, a mother and a professional - all in one sometimes. How do you balance them all?

TS: It's certainly not easy to balance everything. Both Darani and I have families and young children and our lives are very full, especially with travel schedules to work with our international client base. You have to be organised and you have to prioritise, be systematic, but also flexible because once in a while things go wrong, and you need to be able to adapt quickly. You have to have a good support system, both at work as well as at home. We both find that if everything clicks, the rewards can be great. But it hasn't been easy.

We are also fortunate to live in a place like Thailand where cultural and structural factors come into play to our benefit. We have, and rely on, great family support. It's not unusual for in-laws or parents to live close by and help take care of the children. There is also affordable child care unlike some countries in the West, so we are very lucky. Technology is also a factor; being able to work remotely gives us the flexibility to leave the office early sometimes or to come in a little later, or just to get work done while sitting in Bangkok traffic.

DV: It's not easy to balance a working life and personal life but I'm quite lucky that I receive good support from my husband and my family so I can feel free to work. But I also balance time with my family whenever I have time to give to them. So I don't feel that I have any problem in balancing my working life and family life.

Top tier lawyers are well known for working long hours. Realistically speaking, is this going to change in the future?

TS: Providing legal services is a very personal thing. It is often based on the one-on-one relationships that you have developed with clients. So if you have managed to

build your career to become a top-tier lawyer, it's often you that the clients want. I don't think this will change; so in fact, the more reputable you become, the busier you will be.

DV: I do not think the long hours will change much. You can, however, reduce long hours by having a very strong supporting team.

Research continues to show that having women in senior management roles is beneficial for business, yet the path for many women to the top of the legal industry is difficult. What are some of the main factors that you would pick out as being major hurdles?

TS: The major hurdle that I think most women face – especially in this industry – is that the legal profession



(L-R) Darani Vachanavuttivong and Tiziana Sucharitkul

is a male-dominated field with many men in leadership positions.

We've been very lucky to work at Tilleke & Gibbins as our firm is a very supportive place for women. It's not easy to balance work and family, but we are in a place that has been as supportive as it could possibly be. The firm has always promoted women to leadership roles at all levels and being a woman at this firm is not an obstacle to climbing the ladder. Within our firm leadership, 40 percent of our partners are women and 75 percent of non-legal department heads are women. This essentially means that 92 percent of employees in the firm work in

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TIZIANA SUCHARITKUL

departments which are headed by women. So there’s a very strong feeling here that you are not going to be discriminated against for being a woman.

We have a strong family support system in place. Quite often people bring their children to work, if somehow their daycare falls through for the day. All our social activities, New Year parties, lawyers’ retreats and firm outings are for families, not just for the lawyers or staff members themselves. So we do have things in place that lead people to believe that this is a very family- and women-friendly environment.

In the market generally, however, it’s difficult to overcome the basic fact that women are primary family caregivers. In this male-dominated industry, some of the male leadership can be unforgiving in that they don’t take that into account and don’t allow flexibility for the way women must manage their work-life balance.

DV: This is part of the process and development of a culture changing and evolving. In the past families would only send their sons to study abroad, so it was men only who rose to become the top management. Now, however, things are changing. Sons and daughters are being given equal educational opportunities and hopefully this will result in more and more women being represented at the top management levels. One hurdle that remains is that women tend to devote themselves to the family more than men, and that will probably not change any time soon.

Do you think those obstacles will still be in place for the next generation of female lawyers, or are things improving?

TS: In countries which face greater problems of retention of female lawyers, there is a lot being done to improve the working environment for women. The workplace realises how valuable women are to the industry and are implementing various schemes and programmes to improve the retention problem; for example, allowing for part-time partners, implementing flexible working hours, organising day care at work, etc. So the situation is improving. However, simply because women are the ones who bear children and are usually the primary family caregiver, it will be very difficult to completely overcome all current obstacles.

DV: Thailand has improved a lot, as well as Malaysia, Hong Kong and the Philippines. There have been recent studies that show that Thailand is ranked in the top three in terms of having women in senior management positions, together with the Philippines. We have many

females in the top management level of the law firms and opportunities for female lawyers are open—just look at our female prime minister!

How well would you say Thai firms are performing when it comes to female participation?

TS: If you try to think of predominant women in other firms in Thailand, there are immediately five or six names that come to mind. To name a few firms, Weerawong C&P, Linklaters, Chandler & Thong-ek and Baker & McKenzie all have very senior women partners. The percentage of women lawyers in Thailand continues to increase every year. We see that in our own recruiting process, when students apply here as new graduates or even in internship programmes. Currently the numbers reflect that more than half of our applicants are women. This is a positive trend.

Do you think there is evidence of any direct discrimination against women in law firms in your region?

DV: Not within the law firm itself. However, we have experienced a small number of clients who have expressed a desire to be represented by male lawyers. This is thankfully rare, but it does happen.

Do you think effective networking is an integral skill for female lawyers?

TS: Absolutely, networking is a critical skill for all lawyers. Here in Asia, for cultural and other reasons, women may face more challenges when networking than in other places. However, there are challenges everywhere and we just have to learn to work around them.

How about mentoring? Is that something you place importance on?

DV: Mentoring is very important; at this firm, it’s one of the first priorities. We provide that to all lawyers whether they are male or female.

TS: Mentoring is an important aspect for any firm. For the growth and continuance of the firm, we have to make sure that it’s part of the culture. Of course, some people are better at mentoring than others but everyone is encouraged to do their best and we do have a system in place to acknowledge senior associates and partners who contribute in mentoring our more junior lawyers.

Do you have any advice for up-and-coming female lawyers?

DV: Work hard, have patience, learn new things and make a commitment to keep learning, even as you progress further in your career. Always be interested in learning more and more, because new legal and business developments are always happening, and you have to keep up with the changes.

TS: Work hard and practice in areas that are of interest to you and that you enjoy. I believe that if you enjoy the work that you do, you’re more likely to be successful and to find personal fulfillment in your career. That’s the most important thing. Have a goal and work towards it with the support of those around you.