

Women in law: A reply to my daughter's sincere question

On International Women's Day 2021, Catarina Brito Ferreira of Morais Leitão explains her views on gender equality in the workplace and society.



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By Catarina Brito Ferreira

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As these long days of confinement go by, among the many questions from my kids that I am forced to respond to, one particular query from my 10-year-old daughter has been the hardest to answer.

She asked me ‘why’ women were ever limited in their rights when compared to men, and ‘when’ this would no longer be the case in society.

This question – which develops into two – has the simplicity inherent to all the hardest questions.

On the one hand, the reasons for discrimination against women existing have deep sociological roots. On the other hand, the ‘when’ element requires the ability to predict the future, which of course, children assume their parents possess together with all their other special superpowers. I therefore struggled to convey my views on the matter to my daughter without destroying her hope, while teaching a few lessons along the way to my 13-year-old son.

This parenting challenge led me to consider the journey that I have personally taken on women's rights issues. Brought up by a fairly liberal father and mother in a closed family, where most figures of authority were women, and with a female teacher as a reference, I do not recall having any specific concerns during childhood.

As a teen and a young adult, I became more attentive to issues such as the ‘pay gap’ and the ‘glass ceiling’, although perhaps with different labels. However, a significant part, if not the majority, of the higher performers in my high school classes were female and that continued to be the case at law school. I was then under the impression that despite all doubts around the ‘why’ element, the ‘when’ had a clear-cut answer: it was just a matter of time. It was just a matter of time for all those successful girls and young women to reach the peak of their careers and assume the leadership roles that would have been consistent with their education and performance. My perception was that by having equal rights legally established for men and women, education and talent would do the rest.

Unfortunately, today I take a different view.

Almost two decades have passed since I entered college and, [according to the European Commission](#), the gender pay gap in the EU today stands at 14.1% and has only changed minimally over the last decade.

As of June 2019, out of the [500 chief executive officers](#) leading the highest-grossing firms (Fortune 500), just under 7% were women and, as of January 2020, only 1 in 4 [parliamentary seats](#) worldwide were held by women.

Further to that, there is already relevant data that anticipates that the COVID-19 pandemic will hit women harder as they continue to account for the majority of caregivers, at home and in communities, and [domestic violence](#) appears to have increased as result of the confinements.

Hence, equal rights and time by themselves do not have transformative power that I anticipated.

The ‘when’ and the ‘why’ cannot be separated in discussions. A simple root cause analysis tells us that culture and social roles play a big part in gender equality. For this reason, education is key but, personally, I am convinced that gender-sensitive policies are the most effective short to medium term tool necessary to promote gender equality in the workplace and in society.

These can be put in place to instil a desired behaviour and be removed when the goal has been achieved. A good example of gender-sensitive policies are parental leaves structured as equitable family leaves with ‘daddy quotas’ exclusively reserved for fathers. These have the effect of increasing the level of engagement of fathers in childcare, while contributing to [increase women's labour-market participation, reduce gender pay gaps and increase male participation inhousehold work](#).

In companies and firms, diversity and inclusion policies can also play a relevant role. At Morais Leitão, there is an assumed commitment in defining and adopting such policies. Besides a comprehensive package of work-life balance measures (which includes parental leave for fathers), an internal mentoring programme – ‘Mentoring for Leadership’ – allows any trainee or associate of the firm to have a senior lawyer or partner as a mentor.

Today, I believe that the overall answer to my daughter's confinement question lies therefore not in time but in action. It is action that can protect the girls' hope for equality.

This piece was written to mark International Women's Day 2021.

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