

WOMEN TWICE AS WELL REPRESENTED AT FIRMS IN PORTUGAL THAN IN SPAIN

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As research shows one in four partners at top firms in Portugal are women, compared to around one in seven in Spain, experts say outdated views are 'hard to shift'

The proportion of women partners at leading firms in Portugal is currently almost twice that at top firms in Spain, new research shows.

Data compiled by Iberian Lawyer reveals that 26 per cent of partners at major law firms in Portugal are women, compared to only 14 per cent of female lawyers at the leading firms in Spain.

The research covered the 21 biggest firms in Spain by revenue and the 10 largest firms in Portugal by headcount (Portuguese law firms do not, in general, disclose revenue figures). In total, of the 1,192 partners at the 21 biggest firms in Spain, 167 are women. Of the 249 partners at the 10 major firms in Portugal, 65 are female.

The firms in Spain with the biggest proportion of women partners are Baker & McKenzie, Freshfields

Bruckhaus Deringer and Hogan Lovells, which each have partnerships that are 27 per cent female. In Portugal, AVM has the biggest proportion of women partners – seven out of 10 (or 70 per cent) of its partners are female.

According to the European Commission's 'Gender balance on corporate boards' report, published in September this year, both Spain and Portugal are below the European average of 18.6 per cent with regard to female representation at board level.

Cuatrecasas Gonçalves Pereira recently decided to deal with the issue head on when it entered into agreements with the Spanish Minister for Health, Social Services and Equality aimed at creating an "equal opportunity environment" in its offices. Cuatrecasas partner and head of corporate social responsibility, Elisabeth de Nadal, says the agreement amounts to a public commitment to increase the number of women in management positions – and at board level – and represents an upgrade on the firm's existing equality plan. "We have made valuable progress, but there is more to achieve, particularly at partnership and management levels," she says. "Collaboration and engagement are powerful tools for cultural change".

As part of the agreement, Cuatrecasas has committed to increase the number of women in 'pre-management' and management positions to at least 25 per cent, and to increase female participation at board level to at least 25 per cent in 2020 and 33 per cent in 2024. Currently, 28 per cent of the firm's partners in Portugal, and 12 per cent of its partners in Spain, are women. The firm has a female co-managing partner in Portugal, Maria João Ricou.

Increasing flexible working

Cuatrecasas is not the first firm to show such a commitment to gender equality in Spain. Hogan Lovells was one of the first companies to sign a similar agreement with the Ministry in January 2014. Prior to this, in 2013, the firm also implemented a 'Plan for Equal Opportunities' for men and women, which included measures to increase flexible working, as well as part-time options for women in the last weeks of pregnancy, in addition to non-discriminatory hiring and promotion measures.

Hogan Lovells' partner Ana Castedo, who also acts as the firm's 'Diversity Champion' in Madrid, explains that the firm is "committed to gender diversity". She adds: "Everyone favours an employer that has a flexible and adaptable mentality – if we want to hire and retain the best people, we have to adapt." However, both Castedo and de Nadal acknowledge that real change will take time to happen, and that a cultural change is needed in addition to regulatory and legislative changes.

Men promoting men

Raquel Flórez is one of three female partners, and head of diversity, at Freshfields' 11-partner operation in Spain. As an organisation of fewer than 250 employees, the firm's Madrid office is not required to have an equality policy, which is in accordance with Spanish legislation. It does however have a global diversity action plan, as well as mentoring schemes for mid-level female lawyers. "Male lawyers have, unconsciously, been promoting other male lawyers," says Flórez. "This is human nature – we tend to favour those who are similar to ourselves. It's something that we are now consciously addressing with our mentoring programmes."

A total of 11 per cent of the partners working for DLA Piper in Spain are women, one of which is Pilar Menor, who was appointed managing partner of the firm's Spanish operation in 2013. However, this ratio is less than the firm-wide average – globally, approximately 19 per cent of the firm's partners are women. DLA Piper diversity and inclusion manager Mitra Janes says the figure for Spain is one the firm is "not happy about", although a decision has been made by the firm not to set percentage targets. "One could argue for and against such targets", Janes explains. "Having a specific number doesn't always drive the right behaviour or deal with the root issues".

Tatiana Canas, author of the book "Female Leadership: the urge for new standards in Portuguese Law Firms" and a former lawyer, says she is sceptical about whether collaboration agreements involving law firms will bring about change. "If law firms want to adopt equality measures, they will have to redesign the current career path," she says. "Traditional methods of promotion do not work

in favour of anyone who takes an active role in family life." She adds that, in Mediterranean countries in particular, outdated perceptions of the role women play in society – as homemaker – will be hard to shift.

