

YES, IT'S POSSIBLE

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In 2004, Carmo Sousa Machado was the first woman to become a managing partner of a Portuguese law firm. She is also chair of Multilaw, being the first Portuguese leading the recognized international association of independent law firms. As one of the most important names in the legal market, Carmo believes that women are paving the way to the top and everything is possible if you have the thrive to do it



In a career with 30 years, there was never a doubt about what Carmo Sousa Machado (pictured) was born to do. "I am ambitious since I remember. I always wanted to be a lawyer because I always had a problem with injustice and with the fact that people can be so mistreated". At 53 and a career of success as a lawyer and partner in Abreu Advogados, she still can't handle unfair situations. "I recognize now that it is an obsession for justice, overall. So becoming a lawyer was a natural thing, if I now look at it. It's a calling. My life did not happen like this because I had no other option or second choice, or anything. My path was always on my mind". Always knowing what she wanted may be part of the answer to her success but having the skills to look at the big picture and being able to manage it may also be as important. "Nowadays, I am not just a lawyer. I have other responsibilities that are more connected with management and I do it often, managing projects or teams. People rely on me to be fair and to deliver sometimes really bad news in a kind way. That is very important for me".

ABREU AS A FAMILY

At 23, Carmo started working as a lawyer and never looked back. It was in 1990, everything was very different and there was only one other firm before Abreu Advogados. "I worked in two places only. It's something you do not see today. I started working in a firm where I stayed for six years and I have a lot for gratitude for them". Then, in 1996 came the invitation that would change Carmo's life. Abreu was a small firm with 12 people and three years of practice. Carmo had already two kids, a stable life but the challenge looked unmissable. "When we look back, only the name and DNA remain the same. We were a small family of young people, partners included, with very clear objectives and ideas. A different approach to what was happening in the market at the time. The partners had experience with international markets so they brought a fresh mind into the market. It made such a difference", she says. Not long after, Carmo was doing more than being just a lawyer, interacting directly in the management of Abreu. "I never had in mind I would end up with managing tasks as well. I came to work as a lawyer, that didn't cross my mind. But you have certain qualities that end up being valued for those tasks. My profile fits in organizational tasks, I think". That's why, in 1999, Carmo became the first female partner of the firm. A position that made her the only woman in the room for a long time. "For a long time, I was the only female partner but I can not say I felt any different. Men

and women are complementary. We have different ways of doing things and that's not a bad thing, I suppose. My colleagues never made me feel less for being a woman but I guess that's the result of my job. I can say I was lucky but luck is a lot of work", she says. In 2004, she became managing partner of Abreu, being the first Portuguese woman to do it. Even if in her "house" Abreu, it seemed a normal transition, the market was suspicious of it. "I felt that 'big eye' looking at me becoming successful as a woman. The market was a 'male thing' and it still is. There are so many women but in the top chairs, there's still a deficit of female presence. Even though the number of women in the profession is larger than men. As a female leader, Carmo thinks women bring a lot to the table. "We can listen, bring things together and see things not as they are exactly like 2+2 can be 6, you understand? We are more resilient, no doubt." But sometimes prejudice comes in a lot of forms. "People are more condescending with you. Jokes without humor as well. When people underestimate you, It gives you more pleasure to prove them wrong. Sometimes, we feel that a certain person is not taking you so seriously as they should because they are talking to a woman. At the end of the meeting, that tone is different and that is what gives me pleasure".

FAMILY SUPPORT

As a leader, there's more work, more responsibility and more pressure to deliver. For Carmo, everything is a choice and a successful career can happen. As a mother of two since almost the beginning of her career, Carmo made that choice early on and for her, it worked. "We should do what we want, I do not criticize anyone. Women are not always up to run that 'extra mile'. Some people are just not available and I understand that because it is endless meetings, late-night phone calls, business trips, difficult schedules. It is fair if you don't want this life. With my children, I was only two months at home with them. This is maybe my biggest regret. But I wanted to go back to work. I love my personal life but I also like my job a lot. One without the other would not be me. I would not be happy if I were just a mom or a lawyer. It's a combination of both". That "extra mile" sometimes means missing out on things. "I never picked my kids from school. But my kids said to me that I wouldn't be their mother if I were any different, a stay at home mom, for example. It takes work but my family understands and supports me and that is what I want to say to other women. It is possible to have a successful career and a happy personal life and it does not have to bring any guilt". With new technology today, women can now have a more flexible life. "New technology helped so much. We can work from home. We can leave, be with the kids and go back to the computer. It's completely different now. Globalization helped as well. Portugal was so close. People travel more, open their minds faster and the conversation is has a different range", she says. As one of the top legal names in the market, Carmo points out some qualities that leaders should have if they want to be respected. "Organization, resilience, ambition, wanting justice. I am a good listener but I am also exigent, especially with myself but also with others. Transparency is important. The way you do things is what matters, sometimes more than the "thing" itself".

MULTILAW

Carmo started as a representative of Abreu in Multilaw, a leading global network of independent law firms. After a while, when the invitation arrived for the Chair position, Carmo thought "me, ¿why me?" but, at the same, it was impossible to deny. "I did not apply or anything. I am a low profile person, believe me". It's a very challenging job especially because she is dealing with people from all over the world. "We need to be careful about the cultures, from Africa to Asia. Something normal for us is not for a nordic and we can not forget that. We want to generate business of course. We try to integrate and keep firms from around the world. It's a big challenge".

Carmo Sousa Machado's CV

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