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LEGAL SEARCH

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Why women lawyers *leave* global law firms

Findings from doctoral research in Hong Kong, and what they mean for law firms and for women lawyers

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LONDON · HONG KONG · SINGAPORE

IN BRIEF

Women do not leave global law firms to step back. They leave to grow.

In Hong Kong, around 70% of law school entrants are women, yet women hold only three in ten partnerships, up from about one in five twenty years ago. This research asked why so many women leave global law firms before reaching partnership. Its answer: workplace culture and lack of control drive them out far more than childcare does. Most build demanding, successful legal careers elsewhere, often as general counsel.

THE HEADLINE FOR FIRMS

Attrition is not a failure of individual resilience. It is a signal about how the traditional law firm model works, and a leadership challenge firms can act on.

63%	30%	13 of 14	7
of Hong Kong trainee solicitors were women	of Hong Kong partners were women	women who left moved to in-house roles	of them are now general counsel

Hong Kong figures at December 2022, the study baseline. By the end of 2025, women were 52% of practising solicitors (Law Society of Hong Kong Annual Report 2025).

THE STUDY This study spoke to those who left

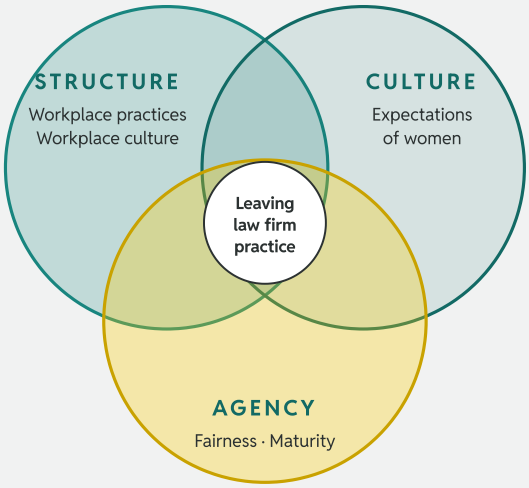
QUESTION	Why are there so few women partners in global law firms in Hong Kong?
METHOD	In-depth, semi-structured interviews of 60–90 minutes
PARTICIPANTS	15 women: 14 who left global firm practice (3 of them partners when they left) and 1 who remains an equity partner
FIRMS	Global UK, US and Australian law firms with Hong Kong offices
RANGE	Early 30s to mid-50s; all left at 3+ years' PQE, from associate to partner level

Most research on women in law asks those who stay. The study is qualitative: it does not claim statistical representativeness, but explores in depth how lawyers experienced firm life and made the decision to leave. Including a woman who stayed on as an equity partner made it possible to compare how leavers and a stayer made sense of the same environment.

KEY FINDINGS

Three spheres of influence

The research looks at why participants left through three lenses. All the women cited not one reason but several, overlapping ones. Workplace factors weighed far more heavily than pressures from home.



STRUCTURE

How work is organised: long, unpredictable hours, poor people and client management, hyper-competitiveness, bullying and "clubbable" networks.

CULTURE

Socio-cultural expectations of women's roles at work and at home, shaped in Hong Kong by traditional Confucian and post-colonial values.

AGENCY

How the women reflected on their situation: whether they questioned its fairness at the time or only later, and how that shaped when they left.

Adapted from Figure 1 of the thesis, which applies Margaret Archer's structure, culture and agency framework.

1 Culture, not childcare, is the main driver.

Long and unpredictable hours, hyper-competitiveness, bullying and poor people management made firm life feel, in participants' words, "alienating" and ultimately "untenable". Hong Kong offices were described as working longer hours with fewer resources than head offices.

2 Lack of control matters as much as hours.

Many moved to in-house roles that were just as demanding, but where they had more control over their work and were treated with more respect.

> *"Being in corporate, you know, the hours are long ... the schedules are tough, but ... I don't think it was that that was a tipping point. ... I think it was a combination of, first of all, being in a very toxic work environment, and secondly ... a lot of these deadlines, I felt like was just poor management of clients."*
>
> FORMER ASSOCIATE, NOW GENERAL COUNSEL AT A MULTINATIONAL

3 Exclusion shapes who reaches partnership.

Women who made or stayed partner typically did so with sponsorship from influential senior male partners, a "thick skin", and by fitting the model of the "unencumbered" worker, either single or with a partner at home and full-time help. Overt sexism and male-oriented networking were more openly tolerated in Hong Kong than participants had seen in Western offices, and traditional expectations of women weighed especially on Chinese women lawyers.

4 Domestic help is a double-edged sword.

Affordable live-in help removes much of the practical burden of childcare in Hong Kong. But it led some partners to assume women could work as if they had no family commitments, and made flexible working harder to obtain. It did not remove the wish to "be there" for their children.

5 Women leave to grow, not to step back.

Of the 14 women who left, 13 moved in-house and 7 are now general counsel. All still work full-time, and all described leaving as an overwhelmingly positive experience. Many found in-house work more commercial, varied and strategic, with better career support than they had experienced in their firms.

6 It is not only women, and it is starting earlier.

Participants saw male peers struggling with the same culture but less able to step off the "treadmill" of status, earnings and breadwinner expectations. They also saw women leaving for in-house roles much earlier in their careers, creating a leak in the pipeline at junior associate level, well before partnership.

> *"What worries me is, there's actually a gap between the huge pool of junior women lawyers, to the senior ... we are losing a lot of people in the mid-level to senior. So you don't have that same pipeline. ... In the big law firms, it's just harder to make partner, period."*
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> EQUITY PARTNER, GLOBAL LAW FIRM

THE THESIS CONCLUSION

There is no silver bullet. Firms that want to keep women should treat this as an adaptive leadership challenge, not a "women's issue", looking together at how the firm works, the local culture it operates in, and the different ways individuals respond.

FOR LAW FIRMS

There is no single fix, but the findings show where firms can act, both to keep talented lawyers and to make lateral hires stick.

> *"It's the hours that got me, the volume of the work, and it's a bit of a thankless task ... There wasn't much career development, coaching of any sorts, you're just left to get on with a huge amount of work. ... If that was addressed, then I think women lawyers would probably stay longer within a law firm setting."*
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> FORMER ASSOCIATE, NOW IN A SENIOR REGULATORY ROLE

1 Treat attrition as data, not individual failure.

Ask why good people leave, and listen, especially to those who go in-house. Exit patterns are a leadership issue, not only an HR one.

2 Give lawyers more control over their work.

Predictability, workload planning and genuine autonomy matter as much as total hours.

3 Make flexibility real.

Formal policies are not enough if partners treat requests as a lack of commitment, or assume that help at home means unlimited availability.

4 Develop partners as people managers.

Address hyper-competitiveness, bullying and poor management directly; they were among the strongest reasons for leaving.

5 Open up sponsorship.

If progression depends on informal sponsorship and "clubbable" networks, make sponsorship deliberate and the route to partnership transparent, so it does not rest on revenue alone.

6 Invest in career support.

Participants found better coaching and career conversations in industry than in their firms. Retaining lawyers means competing on development, not just pay.

7 Watch the junior pipeline.

Women far outnumber men at trainee and junior associate level in Hong Kong, and many of the Mandarin speakers firms depend on for China work are women. Losing them early hits leverage and client capability, not just diversity numbers.

8 Hire laterals for fit, and support them after they join.

Understand what made a candidate leave their last firm, and help them settle in their first months, so the same pressures do not follow them.

9 Stay close to those who leave.

Seven of the fourteen women became general counsel. Today's leavers are tomorrow's clients.

> *"I think women lead in a very different way ... less about command and control. And it's more about bringing people together as a team ... That's what good leadership is about. It's not about frightening people."*
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> FORMER ASSOCIATE, NOW GENERAL COUNSEL AT AN INVESTMENT BANK

FOR WOMEN LAWYERS What it means if you are weighing a move

- **Leaving is not failure.** The women in this study used their agency, and most built careers they found more fulfilling, often at the most senior levels.
- **Know what you need.** Control, growth, respect and values mattered as much as pay or hours. Being clear about these makes for better decisions, whether you stay or go.
- **Have the conversation first.** Before deciding to leave, it can be worth asking your firm clearly for what would make you stay.
- **Look for sponsors, not only mentors.** Those who reached partnership usually had senior advocates willing to back them.
- **See in-house as a career move, not a retreat.** For many participants, it offered broader, more commercial and more strategic work.

> *As one male lawyer who had left the profession put it, women may simply ask themselves better questions about what they need.*

ABOUT THE RESEARCH Dr Farzana Aslam



Dr Farzana Aslam's Doctorate in Social Science (University of Leicester, awarded February 2024) examined why women lawyers in Hong Kong leave global law firms.

Farzana is Director of Kintillo, which runs legal searches in London, Hong Kong and Singapore and advises law firms on culture, retention and leadership. A former barrister, she was previously Head of Employment Law, Asia Pacific at Goldman Sachs, and has coached partners and senior lawyers since 2009.

Full thesis: Aslam, Farzana (2024). *Why do Women Lawyers in Hong Kong Leave Global Law Firms? An investigation into the factors that affect and influence women lawyers in Hong Kong to leave global law firm practice.* University of Leicester. Thesis. doi.org/10.25392/leicester.data.25638519.v1

To discuss the findings, or how they apply to your firm

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