



the global voice of
the legal profession®

Inspirational legal women podcast series two

Episode 7

01 October 2026

Darien Leung



Sara Carnegie (SC): Welcome to *Inspirational Women in Law*, a podcast series from the International Bar Association's Legal Policy & Research Unit, where we speak with remarkable women from across the global legal profession about their careers, leadership experiences and the changes they have seen for women in law.

I'm delighted to welcome Darien Leung today. Darien is the Managing Partner of the New York office of Torys, an international law firm with a strong cross-border practice. She is specialised in debt and finance and advises financial institutions, pension funds, private equity sponsors and others in domestic and international transactions and capital raising.

In terms of her IBA activity, she currently serves as an officer of the Women Lawyers' Committee, where she is closely involved in its *Mentoring Moments* initiative, supporting the development

London

São Paulo

Seoul

The Hague

Washington DC

of women at earlier stages of their careers.

Darien, it's a real pleasure to have you with us. Thanks so much for joining us.

Darien Leung (DL): Thanks very much, Sara. I'm really pleased to be a part of this.

SC: Well, let's start with you. And as we do with all guests, it's great to understand what first drew you to the legal profession and how you then found your way into your current role, so perhaps you can talk us through that.

DL: Sure thing. Before I get into that, since we're talking about origin stories here, I thought it would be helpful to give you a little bit of background of who I am and what motivates me. I was raised by my mother, who is an extremely driven woman, fiercely independent, and so I learned a lot from that. My grandmother was also very, very important to me. We were quite close. So, women have been very strong presences in my life and I went to a women's college, so it just really reinforced it.

The other piece that's important to note is that I am half Chinese. Growing up here in New York City, you know, it's quite diverse but being in a corporate environment, it's different. And I always have felt, or did feel, a bit like the 'other' in the room as a consequence. So that really taught me compassion, I think, for people on the fringes in a certain way. So those things have really impacted how I think about the world and my place in it.

But back to your original question, which is, what about the law? I think very simply, it's the intellectual aspect of it and the fact that it's a corporate environment. I always knew I wanted to achieve and to be successful financially, but I wanted it to be fulfilling.

SC: Did you start off studying law at college or did it come to you at a slightly later point?

DL: It did. And actually, I was an art history major, so definitely not something you would think of as a pathway to the law. Your work is analysis and that has really helped me in my path towards the law. And I came upon it quite randomly. Someone, a friend, was working as a paralegal, and said, 'Hey, you should apply here. You'll make some good money,' and I thought, okay, this could be my future. So, I kind of fell into it, I'd say.

SC: And perhaps you can tell us a bit about your area of practice and whether there was a particular reason that you moved into that, particularly also working in a busy corporate international firm. Was that your immediate direction once you decided to do law? Or was there any other impetus that drove you there?

DL: So right now, I do debt finance. That is my practice and I like it very much. But I didn't start out doing that at all. I think, different from what young people do today, or at least what my experience is now in how we grow our younger lawyers is, we ask them to focus pretty early on.

But, when I was a baby lawyer, you did general corporate, you did all different kinds of things, and so, I got a taste of funds work. We didn't call it funds work back then, but yes, that's what it was: M&A, securities, and bankruptcy. I did a fair amount of bankruptcy. I split my time between bankruptcy and corporate. And I hated doing the lending work, hated it, ironically. Those documents are just so long. But I think the theme here is I fell into debt finance, just like I fell into law. But the point was to stay open and you have expectations about something and you don't really know where you're going to go and that's okay. So, I came to really like it.

SC: Yeah, I mean, I think that's certainly true from many of the guests I've spoken with where they may have started out doing one thing. Your path isn't always linear. Different opportunities arise. You may even change quite radically, certainly as I did in my career and I think it's important for younger professionals to understand it's not all concrete. There are different possibilities out there and there's always time to try different things.

Your firm operates across jurisdictions, so it's an international firm. And I wonder, when it comes to law firm culture and issues around progression and support for women, whether you have any comments to make around the differences or similarities between what you've experienced and what you've seen elsewhere?

DL: Yeah, I do think that there's a lot of commonality for women in the law. I'm going to speak in broad brush terms, but I do think the IBA report really does a great job of pointing all these things out, which is there are fundamental shared experiences: a desire for an intellectual challenge and development of skills. A need to recognise for many, not all, but for many women, they want to have a family and how do they balance that? And even if they don't have children, maybe they have elderly parents. I am right now dealing with that. And I guess we call it the sandwich generation, children on the one side, parents on the other. We all have these shared experiences. So, that's a baseline.

How they're dealt with across the spectrum is very different, but I do think that fundamentally, flexibility in terms of work-life balance and or support for alternative working arrangements, I think that's very, very important. And we can get into that. I mean, it's not as simple as just saying this applies. And I guess that's the point. It's different. It's different culture by culture, market by market, but there are those fundamental issues that we're dealing with.

SC: Yeah, I mean, that's absolutely spot on in terms of the findings that the study has revealed, both in the jurisdiction specific studies – we've done a number of countries so far with more to come – and also the main report that was published earlier this year, where we've seen flexible working is the number one initiative that makes a difference to women, both being in their work, but also wanting to stay and progress. And I think that is common to almost all sectors in all countries, notwithstanding different cultural concerns or issues. So, that absolutely aligns with what we've seen.

I wonder whether you see in the years that you've been practising in a corporate environment, whether you feel that things have improved genuinely, or whether those challenges remain

entrenched and are still a difficult thing to tackle meaningfully.

DL: Without a doubt, things have improved dramatically, over at least what I've seen; I started practising in '96, so it's been 30 years. I remember being scolded for wearing pants to court. So, that's one very small – but amusing now in retrospect – example. I think Covid really, really helped us to make some advances in the flexible working arrangements. I think that there is, definitely from a cultural perspective, a drive to support women, women supporting women, men supporting women. Mentoring, we know that's important. Sponsorship, we know that's important. And it's not just obviously the law; this is across the board. This is cultural for the globe. Women's rights, women's issues, are advancing.

SC: I think coming on to the point around mentorship that you've just raised, and that was another part of the report's finding around the importance of mentorship, support, coaching, any kind of efforts to provide women with insights and that additional crutch or insight, I suppose, is the right way of thinking of it. I know that the Women Lawyers Committee, of which you are a significant member, is doing some work around mentoring moments. It's a particular initiative which is being launched later this year. And I wonder from your personal experience, what more you can say about mentoring, either having received it or been a mentor for other women during their careers?

DL: Oh my gosh, there's so much. And there's so many levels to mentorship, right? There's the mentor who really teaches you the intangible. I had a mentor for many, many years. He really taught me about how law firms work, the politics. And this is, again, things have changed dramatically over the years, but when I was growing up as a lawyer, you sat in the partner's room for hours working together, listening to what he, he had to say. He was on calls. You listened in on those calls. People came in, you listened in on those meetings, just watching, like that was huge and tremendous. And also, he was a great guy and super nice. And, while he did chastise me for wearing pants to court, he was extremely supportive of my career. So, there's that piece.

There's the mentor who listens to you complain about the associate down the hall or just the client that's a nightmare, whatever it is. So, there are all different types of mentors and I've been fortunate to have a whole range. And I try really hard to be a mentor to the women in our office, men too but I'm more connected frankly with the women. We have quite a few Asian women as well, so I do spend a lot of time with them.

But the hardest part, Sara, which I think you might appreciate, is in addition to the male-female thing that we deal with, generations now are changing. They're so different, and they're living their lives so differently than the way we did. And they have different expectations about their career and what I find the most challenging is trying to understand what it is they need, what they want.

SC: Yeah, I think that's definitely true and it's not gender specific either. We've seen that across other work strands that we've been involved in, the tolerance for the type of behaviours, perhaps, or workplace cultures that you or I might have accepted 30 years ago. It's quite different

now and the same goes for the number of hours people might be willing to work because wellbeing and questions around that are rightly more front and centre for people.

Is there a particular aspiration for the Mentoring Moments initiative in terms of what you hope it might achieve and how you hope it will support people?

DL: We're at the very beginning of the process, we've only done a few recordings, so it hasn't quite gotten off the ground yet. Really, the most important thing, I think, in my mind is that we get it out there. We want people to see it, so we're hoping that it gets broad exposure on LinkedIn. Again, this is trying to connect with younger people, which is hard. It's hard for us older people. So that's the biggest challenge. And so what I think that the message is it's not new, right? The idea of connecting with somebody, showing compassion, supporting their growth, letting them know that they're safe somehow, and also that they can achieve the goals that they want or at least supporting them in achieving the goals that they want. Those aren't new messages, but being heard, getting those messages across, I think are the biggest challenge.

SC: Yeah, I think that's true. And actually trying to normalise the issues, raise awareness, keep promoting the visibility of that issue. That's where it adds significant value and that's the same across you know a lot of what the IBA does when seeking to reach its members or promoting good practice in different areas.

The IBA's recent report, which we've already mentioned, which is drawn on the responses and experiences of more than 5,000 women who work in the legal profession in different sectors, of course, over 100 countries, so quite a significant report, made six recommendations, which were all directed in different ways at law firms or legal workplaces, bar associations and individuals. And I don't know if you've got particular views on any of them, and perhaps something stands out for you as especially relevant when considering how law firms can support and retain the next generation of female lawyers.

DL: I think the first recommendation you had was around culture. and I think it's number one for a reason. It's not a light switch that you can turn on and off. For example, I've seen at our firm, which I think is really great at being supportive of women, being supportive of people who need support in all sorts of ways, where we have policies and we implement these policies and we do our best, but attitudes are hard to change. And so, it just takes time. It's an evolution.

So again, it means we have to just keep pushing and keep the message from the top. The message from the top has to be consistent. And I wish I had an answer, but you know, don't.

SC: You're managing partner, which is obviously a very senior position to be in, in terms of your office, the New York office, and it's a fantastic achievement. And I wonder if that gives you some unique levers to try and ensure that the culture is moving in the direction that that you yourself want to foster.

DL: Yeah, I do try. We have 60 lawyers in New York, so not a huge office, but just enough that

you can get your arms around it. And culture is super important. Not only like festive gatherings and getting people together, but getting people into the office. Like we're still working on that. I think everybody's working on that, frankly, and that to me is a great indication of the tension that we have in what expectations are, what people want. We know that being in the office, for example, we know that it is so important to not only culture, but to the product, to the legal services you provide. But everybody's different in terms of what they want. And every practice group is different in terms of how they work. So, it's not an easy answer.

SC: No, and it's tricky trying to balance that evidence base that says flexible working is the thing that makes a difference with exactly that point about, well, how much time do we need to be together in person to have the right environment that supports people properly, but gets the work done and creates that familiarity with each other that matters. It's a challenge, I know, for many companies as well as law firms more generally.

And finally, your pearls of wisdom. So, for young women entering the profession today, often in these very high-pressure environments, what would you like them most to understand about building confidence and finding support as they shape their careers? Do you have any tips or thoughts on how you've managed to balance your life and what advice you would provide to others?

DL: I think the most important thing is to figure out for yourself what success looks like. If you want to be a partner or if you want to succeed to a higher level, whatever that might be, whether that's going in house and being a CLO [chief legal officer] or staying at a firm or whatever it is, or even frankly, not becoming a partner and not having that type of a role, but doing your job and getting something out of it. You have to figure that out and expect, know that there will be compromises and get comfortable with your choices on those compromises.

Everything requires choices and you can't beat yourself up. You can't have it all, but you can have some things and you can find a career that makes you happy. You got to be gentle with yourself in the process.

SC: I think that's excellent advice. I think being comfortable with your choices is very wise indeed. And I think being ultimately kind to yourself and to others as part of the whole journey that we're on, you know, everyone's got their own challenges. And I think that's important. We don't try and place too much of a heavy weight on ourselves in terms of where we're aiming, but equally people can be incredibly ambitious in entering the law. That's part of the character type, isn't it? The personalities that are often drawn into worlds of that nature.

But Darien, it's been a real pleasure speaking with you today and you've revealed a great deal and lots of interesting insights as well. So, thank you for being with us and we'll end here. Thank you.

DL: Thank you, Sara. My pleasure. I really appreciate the opportunity.