Inspirational legal women podcast series two

Episode 8

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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.

Hanim Hamzah is an international partner at King & Wood in Beijing, China, and is the Vice Chair and Treasurer of the IBA Section on Public and Professional Interest, or SPPI as it's known. She has 28 years of experience across the UK, Malaysia, Japan, Indonesia, Singapore and China in major infrastructure project financing

and M&A transactions in multiple sectors, including banking, energy, real estate and technology.

Hanim specialises in cross-border securitisation deals, structured financial products and Islamic finance, and has represented global investors in high-value onshore and offshore multi-currency transactions. She has been recognised as a distinguished practitioner or leading lawyer by multiple legal ranking organisations, including Asia Business Law Journal, Legal 500 and In-House Community Counsel, and was named in the top ten pioneers of new legal thinking by the Financial Times Asia-Pacific Innovative Lawyers Awards in 2018.

Thank you so much Hanim for joining us today. It's great to have you as a guest on the series. Perhaps we can start from the beginning and what first drew you to study and practise law, and perhaps a little more information about how your career evolved into being a global cross-border practice.

Hanim Hamzah (HH): Thank you, Sara. Thank you for having me and congratulations on the Raising the Bar report. I think it's really great that the IBA continues to do and survey this in a global way so that we get the pulse of what's happening with women in the legal profession.

To your question, on a Malaysian government scholarship, I left Malaysia at 16 to study in the UK, and that single opportunity set the trajectory of everything that followed. I mean, at that age, alone and far from home, deciphering the Glaswegian accent, the law became something I gravitated towards, precisely because it offered structure in an unfamiliar terrain, a universal language, a framework for navigating the world. But I should be honest. I did not arrive at the law in a straight line. I arrived as a young Malaysian Muslim woman in the 1990s Britain. I was very aware of how few people in my profession looked like me or shared my background. So, I had to learn quickly that my identity was not a limitation to be managed but it was a lens through which I could see what others simply could not. So that shaped I guess in the years that followed every transaction, every negotiation, every room that I've walked into since.

The cross-border dimension – it grew organically. It began with the career in the UK, then KL, Kuala Lumpur, and then in Tokyo, and then Jakarta, and Singapore, and now Beijing. So, each move helped deepen my understanding of how capital, culture, commerce intersect in that sense, and how the law has to flex differently in each of them. So yeah, so that's really how I got to where I am today.

SC: That's a fascinating journey. I'm particularly impressed with the fact you were able to come over to the UK aged 16. That's a young age to be dispatched into the unknown with the culture

and the weather shock, no doubt. And you said you were in Scotland, so you were studying there. How did Scotland come to be the location of choice?

HH: Well, my brother went to Strathclyde University and he kind of paved the way. And at that point, the Malaysian government had scholarships, Petronas and Tenaga Nasional scholarships, for Malaysian students to go abroad. And Scotland was one of the, I don't know why, I guess it's one of key [locations]. You go to do A levels in England. You do Scottish Highers and then you do university in Scotland, but to do law, because Malaysia is a common law jurisdiction, you need to go down south to England to do English law.

SC: That's very brave. And we've heard about the different jurisdictions that you've worked across. So, there have been multiple countries over nearly three decades of your experience working in law. And you mentioned obviously Malaysia, Japan, Indonesia, Singapore, and now China. And I wonder how those different legal and cultural environments have shaped your perspective, particularly as a woman building a career in those different countries in law?

HH: Personally, I'm a mother – relatively late in life – and part of an LGBTQ+ family. So Rehya was born, my daughter, into a family that kind of did not fit the template that many legal environments have accommodated. So my partner and I, we navigated parenthood across jurisdictions in a context where legal protection and cultural attitudes to families like us, varied enormously, especially in the ASEAN region. So that experience itself was profoundly clarifying. It taught me what it truly means to operate at the intersection of multiple identities as a woman, Asian, Muslim, member of the LGBTQ+ community, mother of a young child. So, the conversations that I have been having in professional forums about inclusion were no longer really abstract to me. They were immediate, structural and very personal.

Professionally, the moment that shaped me most, I guess, was this large restructuring. This came out of the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis. I was working on a multi-stakeholder, multi-currency restructuring involving creditors, regulators, parties; they all had deeply divergent interests. So, what I learned from that, and from the transactions since, that technical excellence creates the conditions for a deal but it's really human judgement, the ability to read the room, to hold competing interests in tension, to know when to move, when to pause, and how you close the deal. I think that brings, I guess, personal experience to the professional. So those two lenses I carry simultaneously.

SC: Did you find that similar challenges existed in all of those countries, or I mean obviously without needing to be specific, has there been varying degrees of positive or negative experience in different places?

HH: Yeah, I mean, I remember reading [in the report that] one in two women lawyers experienced workplace bullying, right? And one in three experienced sexual harassment. So, there's a different degree of bullying and harassment, but the very fact that these jurisdictions do not accommodate, you know, part of my identity has not made it that easy. You just have to navigate around it or be polite, but you know, it's just something that I've learned to do I think quite well, because it's this part of who I am, right? You just need to do that, to move forward.

SC: I think that's one of the great things about the IBA. We don't get as much input from surveys in the ASEAN region. For whatever reason, it's been one of areas where we don't find that the traction is as great as we might like. But certainly on the bullying and harassment work, there did seem to be a reasonable response rate and it mirrors what you've described, which is interesting but it does show that there is a global problem and likewise with women experiencing progression and benefits or challenges in working in law again, we do find the global problems but perhaps the slightly lower response rate in the regions that you've worked in. Does that surprise you?

HH: Yeah, but I mean, like for me, each country has taught me something different. Japan, for example, that was early 2000s when I was in Japan for five years. And I was really one of the very few foreign women in the room and one of even fewer Southeast Asian Muslim women. I quickly learned that in that context, influence is earned through consistency, patience and playing the long game. So, there was no real shortcut and there was very little tolerance for the kind of assertiveness that you might have read as confidence in the London boardroom. So, you kind of have to play that role well.

And then in Indonesia, I was building the practice from scratch. Indonesia was then coming out of a period of very difficult racial tension and into democracy. And starting out as a partner then, I needed to kind of be the architect, the rainmaker, the manager, the lawyer, simultaneously. So, that cultural navigation also was required. It was quite complex and you built across religious issues as well in Indonesia and political lines, and all of those need to be balanced quite acutely.

SC: It could be worth a whole separate conversation that we could spend for hours on that. But I'm coming back to your work and I know it spans highly technical areas such as structured finance and Islamic finance, and the latter brings its own ethical frameworks alongside the commercial considerations. And I wonder, has that shaped how you think about the role of law in balancing profit responsibility and long-term value?

HH: Well, Islamic finance really found me as much as I found it as a Malaysian Muslim lawyer practising in markets where you have Sharia-compliant structures. So, that was critical to mobilising capital in Malaysia and Indonesia, so it was a natural evolution.

But Islamic finance is built on principles of fairness, shared risk, prohibition of exploitation. So, these are not just commercial guardrails, but they are [a] real ethical worldview embedded in transactional law. So, working in that space reinforced for me that law, at its best, is not a neutral instrument, right? It encodes values. So, the question is always whose values and whether those values serve a broader social good. And for me, that lens really stayed with me well beyond Islamic finance. So, when you look today, I mean, ESG, you know the ESG frameworks today, or the discourse around business and human rights. There is that tension in commercial imperatives, meeting the demand for accountability. So law, I guess, is where that tension gets resolved, or maybe not. So, I think, you know, women lawyers, particularly those who have navigated complex identities and systems, are often well-placed to hold that tension productively, but you know it's not easy.

SC: I was going to ask and I'm glad you referenced how women lawyers engage with those tensions and issues because I wondered whether you've seen opportunities for female practitioners evolving in that area over the course of your career or whether it was quite male dominated. I make assumptions without really knowing anything about it at all but I'm curious to see if you've witnessed change in that space.

HH: Oh yeah, I think in this space there has been real progress. I know the IBA's data reminds us that the progress has been uneven in terms of leadership training, who has access, senior positions and things like that. But in Islamic finance specifically, which operates largely in environments where gender dynamics are complex, there's still significant work to be done, not just on access, but also on visibility, and especially at senior levels. But, you know, after 9/11 there have been a lot of transactions into Asia as well. We do see a lot more complex transactions and it gives opportunity for women to participate in such transactions and work more on such deals.

SC: Well, that's good to hear. And I suppose I can come on now to your current role as an international partner on the firm's global board, sitting at the intersection of law, strategy and client relationships. Does that shape your view of leadership? And what skills do you think are important for lawyers today?

HH: I think on leadership, it's less about talent, but more about maybe capacity, endurance, the ability to sustain, to adapt under pressure, to keep going when the course is harder than you expect. I personally have completed all six marathon majors. I've done triathlons. So for me, they

helped me in my professional context in a big way because discipline, physical and mental resilience, these are not separate from the work; they are the work, [particularly] in my current role at King & Wood, building the strategy, how we go global with our clients, developing our network across the region.

I think the most important skill is not really legal knowledge. It is the foundation, but it's [the] ability to listen, to synthesise the complexity and to bring people with very different interests toward a shared purpose, like connecting the dots. So, it's really the same skill I deploy, when I'm at an IBA committee session or the SPPI or sitting on a board. It's the listening part that a lot of us tend to do less of.

SC: I think the listening, the art of good communication, it's so important and as important in my view as technical expertise and brilliance because if you can't communicate well and you can't engage properly with people, the technical brilliance is not going to carry you through.

HH: And reading the room, right? That commercial empathy, the cultural intelligence and knowing, you know, when you need to be curious, when you need to let someone speak and yeah, just that emotional intelligence that we talked about.

SC: Absolutely. So critical for leaders. But I'm seriously impressed with your reference to your marathons and triathlons. That's not something I've been able to emulate in my personal life, but I know it's been very helpful for people to be able to balance the demands of a busy legal professional career with some ability to kind of decompress. So, sport is an obvious, and I'm sure important, important outlet.

Hanim, I'm going to come on to the IBA Global Report, which was published recently. This is the *Phase Two Report* of our *Raising the Bar Women in Law* project, which has been running for several years now. But this report draws on the experiences of 5,000 women in law worldwide, working across different sectors at different stages of their career. We've made a number of recommendations aimed at law firms or legal workplaces, bar associations and individuals. And I wonder with your international perspective, your leadership experience, what recommendations or what aspects of that report do you think firms and institutions most need to prioritise.

HH: I've got three recommendations. But let me start with something, what the report makes clear, that the data confirms that women are leaving […] not because they don't love the law, but it's because they're not satisfied with the structure, the culture and the systems that surround the practice of law. So, with that in mind, my three recommendations would be, I guess, first, accountability. The report is right that the firms need not just policies, but you need to have really clear KPIs, targets and genuine transparency around progression. What gets measured gets

managed. So, you need to require the same rigour on gender diversity that we expect on financial performance.

Second would be the report's data on caring responsibilities. That struck me personally. I think the report cited quite high, 52 per cent of respondents have dependent children and others have caring responsibilities. I am a late career mother, so navigating parenthood in a family structure that the profession is only just beginning to understand and accommodate. So that's important and the report is emphatic, but firms need not just parental leave policies, but a culture in which using them is genuinely supported, and not subtly penalised. So, I think that return to office pressure that the report documents is concerning and in my view, it's counterproductive for retaining women at the mid to senior career stage.

My third recommendation would be, I guess, one that resonates with my intersectional experience – the call for intersectional approach, that you don't treat women in law as homogenous category. I'm someone from Southeast Asia, navigating a career as a Muslim, as a LGBTQ+ professional, in jurisdictions where very different levels of legal and cultural protection exist. So, it's fundamentally different from the experience the profession has historically designed its diversity efforts around. So, I've lived that difference. The IBA report begins to name it; I think the profession now needs to act on it.

SC: Yes, I think that's right. It was a challenge for us to address more than gender diversity in the project, primarily because being a global organisation, it's not universally evident how you approach issues around sexuality or race in some jurisdictions that the difficulty is there, hence focusing in purely on gender as the sort of baseline starting point. But I think you're absolutely right, not treating women in law as a homogenous group, looking at the different intersectionalities, that's certainly something that I know our Diversity and Inclusion Council is keen to maintain and certainly it becomes I think integral to the carrying out of these recommendations in many jurisdictions and sectors where those issues can legitimately be part of their focus. I think it's inevitable it all kind of comes together. So thank you, that's a really helpful reflection.

Finally, for young women entering this increasingly global, fast-moving legal profession today, what would you most like them to understand about how they can build confidence, resilience and then have a meaningful career in law?

HH: So, my own trajectory, I guess my own background or my own journey has not been linear. None of it was planned and none of it is easy but I guess the first thing I would want women entering the profession to understand is that your path will not look like anyone else's. And that is not a problem, I mean it's your advantage. So, the legal profession has historically rewarded a

very narrow template of progression. That template probably was not designed with you in mind, but the world is changing and the lawyers who will shape the next 30 years are those who bring something genuinely different, I think, to the table.

Second would be, your identity is not your baggage. It is intelligence. We are navigating a complex system, you know, as a woman, perhaps you're a person of colour or first generation professional. So, all of that means that you have the capabilities that no law degree can fully teach, right? Cultural fluency, resilience in ambiguity, the ability to hold multiple truths simultaneously. So, these are leadership skills.

I think the third would be, find your community and find your team. I think the IBA report talks about how mentorship and sponsorship are among the most powerful drivers for women advancement in law. And unfortunately, a low proportion of respondents felt satisfied with their access to mentors. So that's not good enough and it's important to seek out people who will open doors and commit to doing the same for those who come after you.

And finally, maybe finally sustain yourself, I guess. Do something different; run or sing or whatever. Do something that belongs entirely to you, that no client or firm can claim. Resilience is not something you store, it's something that you actively build, right? So build that, whatever that's authentic to who you are.

SC: That's very sound advice. And yeah, I agree, you made a comment there which has been made by a number of our guests, probably all of them in fact, which is help others lift as you climb, whatever way we want to phrase it, but the support that we offer to those around us, those coming up behind us, I think is really important to change the culture of law to make sure we give back and we inspire the next generation of lawyers, both women and men.

Hanim, it's been an absolute pleasure to speak with you today. Thank you so much for sharing your time and your insights and experience of your legal career. Thank you.

HH: Thank you, Sara. It's been great.