

## IBA Inspirational Legal Women Podcast Series 2

### Episode 2

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### Pascale Lagesse



**Sara Carnegie (SC):** Hello and welcome to the second series of the International Bar Association's Inspirational Legal Women podcast. I'm here today with Pascale Lagesse, a French lawyer whose Mauritian heritage and family experience played a huge part in her decision to pursue a legal career from a very early age. Pascale is a partner and founder of Bredin Prat's employment law practice, as well as being the current Vice-Chair of the International Bar Association's Legal Practice Division. She's also a member of the IBA Management Board. She's been recognised as one of the leading employment law lawyers in France, as well as being one of the top 40 of the CAC 40 lawyers, which refers to expert business lawyers advising the largest companies on the French stock market. In addition to her legal practice work, Pascale is also the course director for labour law studies at the Paris Bar School and a member of the research commission at Paris 2 Pantheon Assas University.

**SC:** So, thank you so much for joining us today, Pascale. I'm delighted that you agreed to be a guest and your energy and passion has been so visible over the time I've known you when working for the International Bar Association, and I'm really looking forward to seeing what you do next. But for now, I have some questions for you as an inspirational legal woman. And I am going to ask, first of all, what drew you to the law as a profession and did you have any early experiences that shaped the lawyer that you've become?

**Pascale Lagesse (PL):** Thank you, Sara. Thank you. And I'm very honoured to participate in this great session.

I was born in Mauritius, a little tiny island in the Indian Ocean. In those days, women were not given a chance to go to the university, and this is the start of all the story. I was fortunate in that my mom and my grandma pushed me a lot because they hadn't been given this opportunity. And also, I had a very close relationship with my dad, who was a solicitor in Port-Louis-Ile-Maurice. And the funny thing that I went through when I was young is that during the vacation, I would go with my dad to his office and at 12 years old, I was sitting on a chair in a little corner and listening to him talking to his clients. So, [my] dad, the females of the family and a young uncle who came to France in those days – that was during the student revolution – came back to the country and decided to start a social revolution and go against all the privileges such as the sugar cane industry, and fight for equality, fairness for people. So, this is the background of the family.

So law was, of course, absolutely key in all that and I was given a chance at 17 years old to go to France, very, very far away from the country, without any WhatsApp or direct flights. I arrived in Paris, I was 17 and a half. I hadn't seen the snow, I hadn't seen the night in the morning before university started, so I was quite late at the courses in the mornings because it was very cold and dark. But I was immediately so passionate about law when I started all these courses at Paris Assas University, and then later on, Panthéon Sorbonne.

**SC:** So was that your first time away from Mauritius or just your first time in France?

**PL:** That was not my first time, that was my second time far away, but that time I was on my own in Paris. I only knew one person, a friend of mine who was also from Mauritius. In those days it took 19 hours to fly from Mauritius, stopping everywhere in Africa. So I knew very well Dar es Salaam, Nairobi, all these countries because we didn't have any direct flights. Things have changed a lot, but when I came, I was on my own and I was happy to be here. So, I have gone through wonderful times with new friends at the university, but it was also sometimes a bit tough because you couldn't go back home that easily and it was very expensive. I felt very privileged to be given this opportunity to go to the university.

**SC:** That's an inspiring start to your story. And of course, I wonder when you mention what your uncle did, and we will come on – no doubt – to your passion and your expertise with employment law, but was it that that catalysed your interest in employment law and conditions and fairness?

**PL:** Yes, I was a little kid. I was the eldest girl in the family, and I used to go with my grandma, the same one who pushed me, attending all the political events my uncle was doing because that was a tough time. He went to prison, I was accompanying my grandma bringing his food to prison every day, and that was tough in those days, because it was a change of the whole culture of the country, you know? But it's also for all this experience that I have probably kept this very important idea of fairness, liberty and independence that are today things that I find again in the IBA and that's probably why I'm so invested in the IBA.

And also, one more thing is that Mauritius is a very small but very multicultural country. At school, I had friends from all sorts of different backgrounds, right? Mauritius was composed of people from Europe, but a lot from India, Africa, China. So, I've grown up in this very, very, very open-minded multicultural environment since I was very small, you know. It helps. When I go to Africa, my African IBA friends call me 'sister'.

**SC:** And are you there a lot? Do you go back to Mauritius often?

**PL:** I do, but I also do a lot of things in France, because now I have three kids living in Paris and one living in London, so I do a lot of things also in Europe. But my mom, brother and sister are still there, and the uncle I spoke earlier is at the moment Deputy Prime Minister of Mauritius.

**SC:** Oh my goodness, what a change. So from being a kind of agitator and in prison to now deputy prime minister. I love that story. That's amazing.

Going back to your career within the law, and you're currently with Bredin Prat and you've built a very long and distinguished career both there and then previously with other firms. But I wonder if there was a particular moment or challenge that proved formative for you professionally since practising that has really catalysed something in you looking for or looking for difference.

**PL:** I started my career in a very well-known business law firm in France, and worked ten years for a wonderful partner with the idea that one day I would become a partner. There were no female partners at that time in this firm, and that was not something specific to this firm 35 years ago. That was quite the way it used to work, right? After ten years working really hard, I was not elected to become a partner. I don't know exactly why, but some of them say that it is because also they were not ready yet to promote female partners.

At the time I was working there, I had my three kids and for some of the people that were working there, it was not so obvious to be able to be a mom and a partner at the same time. So that was something that was hard to hear, but at the same time gave me the opportunity to decide to manage my life differently and move out and do something about it. I don't know how things would have been if I had stayed there, but the fact that for someone like me – working hard as an employment lawyer, pleading in court, negotiating with unions, advising big clients – it was obvious that the position of partner was not something that had to be reserved to male lawyers. This discussion we are having today rings a bell for me going back to this 25 years ago.

**SC:** I mean, I know the law has evolved in the context of equality and discrimination over the last few decades, but there must have seemed to you at that moment, something of an irony in what you're doing is representing in employment law cases, and here you are experiencing what feels like a very unfair and arbitrary position.

**PL:** I did not suffer emotionally from that because it sent a sign that there was something to be done. So, I just moved on. And after that, I became an equity partner at Freshfields, one of the best UK firms where I created in France an employment law team and everything started again, you know? So, I don't keep a negative memory of all that. I think these are things that happened. In those days, things were different, and it's great that things are changing and have changed, you know.

**SC:** That was going to be my next question, coming on to, you know, from your experience and perspective, how have opportunities for women involved in French legal practice or more generally over the years? If you've got any perspective on that, that would be good to hear.

**PL:** They have evolved, no doubt, tremendously. But there are still, I think, some disparities. Now, there's not one rule, that sort of 'one size fits all' thing, but working in a business law firm, what I can see now is that the young lawyers that become partners, there is no differentiation at the moment, I think, for partners who are really good in what they do. Our firm has promoted a lot of women partners over the years in teams like corporate M&A and all that.

On the market, I would say that in France, those who work in business law firms have noticed this change. What I think is more difficult [is] for the lawyers working on their own, in small firms, right? Because it's more difficult to handle your private life and your professional life if you don't have some colleagues or resources or a firm backing you up. So, I think the difficulty is not so much that the opportunities are not being given. I think they are not given the same way, depending on what type of structure, or if you work on your own or in a small structure with one founding partner who holds the majority of the shares or not. I think things have changed, are changing, but probably a bit slowly.

**SC:** Yeah, that's interesting that you say that; one of the recommendations in our report that talks about subjective experiences of women in law around the world in different sectors has identified particular issues with those who work in smaller legal workplaces, in chambers or solo practitioners. So, that links very clearly to what you've just observed in relation to resources, the infrastructure around people that may find it harder to balance their personal and professional lives.

I wondered whether you think that there's anything else in the themes or recommendations that have come out in the report that essentially feels resonant to you, that you think the profession needs to take particularly seriously. There [are] six recommendations with some sub-points underneath them, but did any one of those stand out to you as being most pressing?

**PL:** Yeah, first of all, I've read the report and I find it a very good report, excellent global report. And these reports are important because they move the lines. I want to say, first, of all in those recommendations, I think what has changed and what will change again [are] also depending on the culture, first of all, right? It's a question of culture. The legal profession follows the evolution of society. In democratic countries, society has pushed forward the women, the law environment is changing similarly. In countries where you find it hard for the civil society to recognise that a woman has the same role as a man, obviously it won't be the same for the women, right? So, we are following the trend of the evolution of society. It's a lot about culture.

I think that we have to trust the women. We know how to do many, many things at the same time. We know to run to the, and buy the, ballet lessons, the ballet shoes for the kids, and at the same time answer the phone to a client and come back home and do the email. So, there's a lot about us convincing the more male environment that we are good and that we know how to do it. And I think it's not only for the men to let us play a role, it's also for us to trust ourselves and know that we can make the difference if we think we can. And also, I think women have to help women. I've always found that.

**SC:** I completely agree. It's a strong point raised by a number of our guests, both in the previous series and as I'm finding again now, the importance of women supporting women and not closing doors behind us, making sure, I think Deborah Enix Ross said, lift as you climb. And I think that

expression is beautiful – to experience the support of a senior woman who wants to see her female colleagues succeed and learn and develop, even if you make mistakes.

**PL:** Absolutely, absolutely Sara, and every time I've had, I was given this opportunity to help a sister, I've done, I tried to do it. I was elected to the Conseil National des Barreaux in 2005 on the list of exclusively female candidates who were only with a group of girls there. And every time, I try to help the sisters, right? Because we can rely on each other. And at all stages, not only between partners or between senior lawyers, even for the young ones, right? And in order to help them also, I think we need to be flexible in the way they work. I'm very open on remote work. I never check the hours. I never look at all these things as far as the work is being done. It happens that I have a daughter now who is a lawyer and I can see the challenges. If she has, and this is the case, a great boss helping her, understanding that she's really serious, that she will do the work, but sometimes has to leave for personal reasons. I mean, this is also something that helps the woman achieve a nice career and have a nice professional life.

**SC:** Yeah, I think the importance here is about trust and allowing a degree of agency and autonomy for people. But, as you rightly say, one of the findings from the work that we've done over the last five or six years has shown us flexibility is so important in a variety of ways, both flexible working opportunities, but also flexibility in how you can engage in the workplace with different support networks.

I think the personal question then for you is about how did you stay motivated and resilient during what has been clearly a very demanding and busy career, having three children, trying to balance your life with the busyness of your client demands and workplace demands, and your leadership as well, working within the IBA in making a difference. How have you managed all that?

**PL:** First of all, I don't have to stay motivated because I am motivated, because I'm very passionate about what I do. I have a great relationship with my colleagues at the office. I have a great team. I like to work with people at all levels, not only big names, right? I like to hire a young, talented lawyer, just graduated from university, and show him how he would be pleading the case in court. I like to do things because I enjoy doing them.

Now, once you say that, I'm a bit of a spoiled kid because I have a great husband who is also a lawyer and who has also participated a lot in the education of the kids. So, it's easier to do that when you're two and instead of doing that on your own, right? That also helped.

And also, I think you need to have fun with the people you do it. You need to be curious. You need enjoy this travelling, this talking, this building bridges between people of different communities, different origins and this is what my motivation is. I don't even have to think about being motivated. I enjoy it. It's natural. I've done that for 35 years. And I hope I'm going to continue a little bit more.

**SC:** Well, that's very lucky because not everyone can say that, I think, in the law and different parts of the legal profession. But as a final question for you, and really aimed at younger people entering the profession, young women in particular, who may be navigating different cultures,

identities, different pressures, what would you like them to believe about their place and their potential in the legal profession?

**PL:** I mean, this is a really, really important question because the world is changing around us and it's also changing for them. AI is going to be a revolution. Every day I hear that. In this profession, we may not need any more young lawyers, we need senior lawyers; you have all these questions coming up. I think the profession has to rethink how it educates the young ones, right? Because for decades, the young lawyers have been doing a lot of commodity work, right, which unfortunately the machine may replace one day. So, it's for us to think about what we need [to do] differently to make them adapt to the new system that's coming up. AI is going to be a revolution, is already, but I think that there will still be a big role for young lawyers if they are trained and work differently.

We were talking today at lunchtime with a very senior lawyer of Paris and he was saying that going to court, doing the pleadings in France, you will still need pleadings for the next ten years, right? It won't be replaced by a machine. I hope not. So maybe the written work will be influenced by the AI, but there will still be a role for lawyers to accompany clients, to guide clients, to say, take care of this and that, you may have not seen that one, and to present the case in court for those who are litigators, to negotiate for those who advise. So, there will be a role for these guys, but it's going to be a different role. So, I think it's important for us in this profession to think about that by anticipation. So, it's not so much a question of equality because now I think all the occidental open society have realised that we have to give the same level of equality to the men and the women. So, gender is something that people have digested, I think, even though it still can be ameliorated, but it's more about for the young ones, the challenges of this technology. That is quite a bit worrying, in a way. But I'm an optimistic person-

**SC:** And you'll be able to follow it through your daughter and her experience and those around you over the decades ahead. But I think you're absolutely right. We need to respond to adapting people's education and way of approaching work to ensure that they're properly equipped to stand the best chance of success.

So, thank you very much for your kind engagement with the podcast. It's been fantastic to talk to you, and I look forward to seeing you soon.