

Interview with Soni Basra, Recently Appointed Partner

[Soni](#) joined the Chemistry and Life Sciences team at Haseltine Lake Kempner in 2015 as a German and European patent attorney. This year she was appointed Partner, the first female ethnic minority attorney to be made Partner at HLK.

Not one to shy away from tough topics, in this article Soni shares her thoughts on sexism, racism, her experiences of UK and German law firms, and what law firms need to be doing to improve equality.

How did you feel when you found out you are the first ethnic minority female to be a Partner at HLK?

My initial feeling was one of surprise and my initial thought was “Why did it take so long?” Then I looked around at the industry and realised that this is not surprising at all. Many firms in the UK and in Germany have not appointed their first ethnic minority female Partner. In that respect, I am pleased that HLK recognises my contribution to the firm and promoted me to Partner.

In your career, have you ever felt that being a woman or being from an ethnic minority has held you back or caused barriers to your progression?

Looking back, I can definitely identify barriers that I encountered that I would not have had to deal with if I was not female or not from an ethnic minority. Unconscious, and sometimes conscious, biases attribute competence to someone who “looks the part” even before they have opened their mouth. The same biases require someone who doesn’t “look the part” to continually demonstrate their competence, and at the same time their mistakes are often judged harsher. I think the reason these inequalities are difficult to tackle is because they cannot be attributed to one big event. It is a constant stream of actions, which are often unintentional and/or subtle that put minority groups at a disadvantage. Such actions are particularly difficult to appreciate if you are not part of these groups, but they have an overall tangible influence on the workplace. This is why increasing awareness is so important.

I have spent most of my life actively ignoring the barriers put in my way because of my gender and/or race. I just got on with things knowing that change wouldn’t come at the speed I wanted it to. The only option was to accept that I would need to work harder at every step to work around the barriers placed in my way.

In the past couple of years, I have become more sensitised to the issues faced by minority groups in the workplace. This is in part because of HLK’s diversity and inclusion programme, which I have been heavily involved with since it was founded. Also, I started to recognise the barriers more clearly due to my increasingly close proximity to the “upper ranks” where diversity is diminished. I also realise that I have more of a voice the more senior I become and I feel a duty to use this voice to effect change.

Equality covers more than gender and race, what does true equality in a workplace mean to you?

For me it means the equal distribution of opportunities irrespective of your age, sex, gender, religion or belief, race, sexual orientation, education, socioeconomic background and language. It is really about a meritocracy and finding the best person for the job.



Some argue that not seeing gender or race is the best way to achieve equality, while others say that only by acknowledging our differences can we truly work towards being diverse. What is your view on this?

I think we should be celebrating differences and not trying to ignore them. It has been shown that the most effective teams are comprised of a diverse group of individuals. It is not only a question of achieving diversity, it is also important to be inclusive in a meaningful way. I believe that people are most engaged when they are appreciated for their differences and encouraged to be themselves and to provide perspectives from different angles. If done correctly, diverse teams have huge potential to achieve great things by contributing a range of ideas and skills.

In 2020 we are seeing articles announcing that large UK law firms have appointed their first female leader. Why do you think in 2020 it is still seen as newsworthy that a woman has achieved a position of power? And why is a woman achieving a position of power in the European legal industry so rare?

These are very big questions. It really shouldn't be news and in an ideal world we wouldn't be doing this interview at all. However, in reality the industry is dominated by a very specific type of person especially in terms of gender, race, education and socioeconomic group. How did we get to this situation? The truth is we like to stick with what we know and rely on easy but long outdated benchmarks for perceived suitability for the profession. In many cases, these benchmarks are not only detrimental to the business, but have the effect of installing in our profession the racial and socioeconomic barriers present throughout the education system. I think an increasing number of people are starting to ask questions and challenge existing norms. I think this is a good thing and well overdue.

Do you believe that racism and sexism are embedded into the very fabric of the European legal profession?

Speaking from my experience with UK and German law firms, on some level the answer has to be yes. Otherwise, how can the decrease in diversity when going up the ranks in a firm be explained? Sadly, this is not only true for the legal profession, but applies to our wider society. All of us have biases, which are often based on factors out of our control and determined by our environment. The initial aim is not to eliminate these biases altogether. Instead, the immediate aim is to become aware of our biases to an extent that we are able to make conscious decisions not to act on these biases, but to truly treat people as individuals.

As an example, we have all been brought up in a predominately patriarchal society and it is up to every one of us, male and female, to challenge the current norms that are embedded in our society. I think women have a huge role to play in this, which requires unpicking certain behaviours that have been taught to us since we were young girls and replacing them with our own narrative. We also need men to become more involved and to start speaking up. We all need to increase our self-awareness and act on what we discover in every way we can.

No one can achieve equality overnight and the European legal industry has a very un-diverse history to turn around. In your mind what is a realistic timescale for law firms to become truly diverse and what steps need to be taken to achieve this?

If we start taking action now and continue moving along this path, I think it will take at least a generation to see the industry become truly diverse. For new firms this process would be a lot quicker as they can hit the ground running with their first hires. I think the new generation of leaders do consider themselves more aware than the previous generation. This may be true to an extent, but unfortunately a lot of work still needs to be done to raise awareness. Being sympathetic to a cause alone is not enough for change to occur. There needs to be change from the inside out, which means the implementation of change and not just talk of change.

The action that needs to be taken starts with looking at how we recruit. At HLK we have made efforts to increase the number of universities we reach out to for our graduate programme. We also anonymise CVs as far as we can to reduce the unconscious bias element to hiring. This is the first step and ideally we should also be going into schools and introducing children from diverse backgrounds to the legal industry and sending them the message that there is a path for them into the legal profession. The other very important aspect is the retention of a diverse workforce. In order to do this, the playing field needs to be levelled out and opportunities need to be distributed in a fair way.

You are a Partner who chooses not to work full time. Working part time is often a taboo in European law firms. How do you find this works for you and what would you say to firms who are reluctant to promote people who work part time to Partner level?

I am fully committed to my job and to my clients. To ensure I can always do my best at work and be the best mother I can be, I decided to work part time with the aim of achieving the flexibility I needed to fulfil both roles to the best of my ability. This has worked well for me as it helped to manage my own expectations. In reality, my overall contribution to the firm has not suffered in any way by working part time. It is well known that part time workers can be more efficient with their use of time. I have been flexible enough to be available for the firm when required, be it for last minute cases or business trips. I actually don't think that most of my clients are aware that I am part time, but that probably tells me that I'm not being disciplined enough with my non-working time! I have been lucky that HLK takes a holistic view of their employees and working part time is not equated with a lack of commitment to the job. I think firms that take the view that only full time attorneys can be promoted to Partner are missing out in the long run. I personally think that by taking this approach, many of these firms will not keep up with the changing world and the need to provide a diverse and inclusive workplace.

On another point, I would like to say that because of the pandemic and the necessity of working from home, the workplace has changed significantly, especially in terms of the rigid view of the 9 to 5. Many firms are trying to anticipate where this change will lead, but one important thing that has changed is the increased flexibility that is being afforded to employees and the proof that this model works. There are many different models to which companies can work and there no longer has to be "one size fits all". I hope we can ride this wave and make some real positive changes to build a more flexible and inclusive workplace. My personal hope is that more fathers take parental leave, which would be a winning situation all round.

As a role model to young women and ethnic minorities in the European legal profession, how will you use your position to make real change?

I guess it starts here with this interview. Raising awareness of diversity and inclusion issues is very important and I am happy to use my promotion as an opportunity to get people thinking about the issues at hand. I am driven to start a conversation about important issues that many people are uncomfortable with raising. We need to start having calm, open and frank discussions about the day to day issues experienced by different groups of people. We also need to become more comfortable with pointing out injustices we see, no matter how small they may be. Only when we recognise the issues and are willing to talk about them can we move towards finding solutions.

Two years ago HLK set up an internal diversity and inclusion group made up of volunteers from across the firm. We come together to exchange ideas and implement action points to make our firm a fairer place to work. Our main aims are to raise awareness about D&I issues, celebrate diversity within HLK, engage as many people as possible to establish support networks, and to challenge accepted protocols and effect institutional change. I think it is essential for firms to set up D&I groups and more importantly, for these groups to be taken seriously. Our job as a group is not easy and to do it properly we might need to ruffle feathers and certainly address the difficult issues head on. It is clear we have a long way to

go, but I truly believe we are on the right path. Ask me again in 10 years' time and see how we are doing then!

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About Haseltine Lake Kempner

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