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Women in law: Having it all?

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It is extremely difficult to do so, say four senior female law professionals; ultimately, it is impossible to have the best of all worlds

When **Judith Prakash** decided to specialise in litigation following her graduation from law school in 1974, some of her colleagues asked if she knew what she was doing. “There were people who said to me, ‘Why do you want to do litigation? Women should do conveyancing,’” she recalls.

“Although I resisted that classification, I found that when I was in litigation it was much more difficult to manage my family,” said the mother of four daughters, and current Singapore Supreme Court judge. “When I moved to other parts of law involving corporate work and commercial loans, I found it was


easier to manage the family then. In these fields, schedules can be adjusted, but not in litigation as you have to be in court.”

Can women lawyers have it all?

Justice Prakash was speaking at the recent *“Women in Law: Managing it all”* panel discussion that was jointly organised by the Singapore Management University School of Law and the Singapore Academy of Law. A main topic of discussion was: Is the man/woman distinction specific or especially relevant to law? Is there an issue with women having it all?

“If you don’t want to have children, you can go as far as any man can go because the law can be such a demanding mistress whether you are a litigator or not,” said Justice Prakash. “If you want to have children, then you have to give up a little bit of your career. You might have to move to a different area of practice that makes fewer demands on you, or you limit the number of children that you have.”

Two other members of the panel personified the two options. **Stefanie Yuen Thio**, Joint Managing Director of TSMP Law Corporation, chose the latter option by having just one child. **Rachel Eng**, Joint Managing Partner of WongPartnership, has three children, but chose to move away from the high-pressured world of Mergers & Acquisitions (M&A) to focus on capital markets.



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“Both M&A and capital markets are challenging,” Eng explained, “but the time demands are different. There will be tradeoffs. It would be wishful thinking expecting to have the best of all worlds.”

While a choice must be made between having more professional success or family time, Yuen Thio shared an observation about the hurdles to women’s professional success.

“If there’s a promotion, women won’t put up their hands unless they feel they can do 90 to 95 percent of the job well. We don’t put ourselves forward, and we develop a victim mentality by saying, ‘Why doesn’t my boss pick me?’”

Leaning in

The message, perhaps, is to heed the call of Facebook’s Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg to “lean in”. But as women climb up the ladder, it becomes more difficult to juggle family and work. Can the law firm help their senior female employees juggle work-life balance?

“The culture of the firm is important,” Eng emphasised. “If you need to take your baby to the doctor, and your partners say, ‘It’s fine, go ahead’, you’ll feel more at ease. However, if they were to say, ‘Where is she? Why isn’t she at the office?!’ nobody will sign up for flexi-time work schemes because they’ll feel that they will hurt their careers if they do so.”

That is a common worry regardless of gender and profession, although the pressure of meeting client and billing demands at a law firm magnifies this stress. A female lawyer might ultimately choose to put in the hours at the office, as Yuen Thio did when her son was little. It was a decision that left her wondering to this day: “Have I made the right decision?”

“When he was an infant, I came home at ten in the evening, and I played with him for two hours until midnight. He was the baby who had an extra long afternoon nap so that he would be wide awake to play with mommy when she got home at night. We didn’t plan this on purpose, it just developed that way.

“I worry that I’ve made him pay the price for my career,” she said about her son, who is now 15 years old. “Having said that, we’re really close. He’ll tell me, ‘Mom, we can talk about all kinds of things, but my friends don’t really talk to their parents at all.’ I’m hopeful that he has overcome the challenges that my life has set for him, and hopefully he doesn’t turn out too bad a kid because of what I did.”

Justice Prakash, whose has four grownup daughters, has a slightly different take on the issue.

“I don’t have much guilt; maybe I should,” she mused, drawing chuckles from the audience. “There was one point when my youngest daughter said to me, ‘Why do you have to go to work? Why don’t you stay at home?’

“I said to her, ‘If I stayed at home, I would be on your back all the time. I would check if you’ve done your homework. I would make sure you comb your hair and have your bath early. I would make sure you’re at school early and that your bag is packed.’ I told this to her often enough that one day she said, ‘Maybe it’s a good thing you are going to work,’ said the judge, sparking much laughter.

Making work work for the family

The decision to juggle work and family or to be a full-time mother is a personal one. Yuen Thio fully supports women who give up their careers for the family – “more power to them” – but decided “I would be a better mother by setting a good example to my son that you can try and have it all, and you shouldn’t make compromises on your life. I don’t want him to have the guilt of saying, ‘Oh, my mother had to give up her career for me.’”

“Don’t forget: when you continue to work when you are a mother, you serve as a role model to your children,” said Eng. “Children look at mom and go, ‘Mom goes to court, and she appears before judges.’ They look up to their mother.

“For stay-at-home moms, they tell me that when their kids are grown up, they find that there are no common topics to talk about. As a working mother, you can talk about things that happened at the office. For a stay-at-home mom, her children might look at her as purely a homemaker.”

“So if you are the type who needs to work,” Eng concluded, “try to find an organisation that will accommodate your schedule.”

“Women in Law: Managing it all” was held at Singapore Management University on July 17, 2014. The panelists were: Justice Judith Prakash, Judge, Supreme Court of Singapore; Rachel Eng, Joint Managing Partner, WongPartnership LLP; Stefanie Yuen Thio, Joint Managing Director, TSMP Law Corporation; and Kaya Proudian, Partner, White & Case LLP.