

Women and law: Q&A with Jana van Zyl

Jana Van Zyl of Dommissie Attorneys is an expert in consumer law, focusing on areas such as regulatory and compliance requirements, e-commerce and consumer protection. She shares her views on women and the legal profession.

Women's Day commemorates the day a group of South African women marched against pass laws in 1956. Do you think the constitution has since evolved to pay greater attention to women's rights in our country?

Jana Van Zyl: *Constitutionally, yes, we've come a long way, but there are still double standards in the workplace. I've often heard of women being asked personal questions in job interviews or work situations - such as, "Are you planning to have children any time soon?" I've even heard of employers asking whether or not an employee was unable to travel because she was breastfeeding. As much as I can understand that it is inconvenient for an employer to lose an employee due to maternity leave, female employees should be afforded equal opportunities.*

It's been said that there aren't enough women in high profile roles in the legal profession. Do you think it's harder for women to enter the legal profession?

JvZ: *I don't think it's harder for women than for men. It requires a lot of hard work - no matter what gender you are.*

What advice would you give to young women hoping to enter the profession?

JvZ: *It's important to find the speciality where you are most comfortable. I enjoy the market I'm in, and working with my clients. I love that I'm here to provide solutions to businesses. It's not about scare tactics but about enabling businesses to continue to do what they do best, in a compliant manner. I didn't enjoy litigation as much, but every individual has to find their niche.*

Secondly, keep in mind that the legal profession doesn't resemble the "TV lawyers". In reality, you are not running around court in your high heels, and you definitely won't shout at the magistrate. It's not necessarily glamorous in any shape or form. If you really want to work in the legal profession, you have to prepare yourself for hard work. A good deal of my time is spent doing research, for example, or engaging with clients.

What is the best advice you can give young women who are hoping to start their own businesses?

JvZ: *When you start out, money is always in short supply, but you cannot cut corners. We often get phone calls from clients who've done business without the proper contracts in place, and only realise how important that contract is when an issue crops up, after the fact. Work legal costs into your business plan and budget from the get-go. Take it one step at a time. Prioritise which contracts or other legal documents or advice you will need right away, and get legal advice upfront. It's an essential cost and you will save yourself a good deal of money (and troubles) by complying from the start.*