

## Cliffe Dekker Hofmeyr (CDH)

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In 2011 CDH appointed corporate lawyer Brent Williams as its Managing Partner. At that time, Williams was the first black legal professional to be appointed as the Managing Partner of a major national corporate law firm in the history of the legal profession in South Africa.

Under his leadership, this leading law firm continued to grow its gender talent pool and achieved its current BEE status of a Level 1 contributor.

CDH has a resolute commitment to transformation, which requires every CDH partner, professional and business operational employee to continuously share the responsibility to ensure that CDH remains representative of the racial, gender, cultural, and religious diversity of the people of South Africa.

The firm embraces the principles of equity, non-discrimination and inclusivity, with a strong sensitivity towards women and the youth, with much of its support and efforts directed at aspirational advocates.

In relation to its commitment to empowering women, CDH has

presented a 'Women Empowerment' podcast series, commemorating 100 years of women in law in South Africa, featuring discussions with CDH female practitioners who talk about the significance of women empowerment in the legal profession.

CDH also leads by example across all levels in the firm. From 2018 to 2022, Thabile Fuhrmann, a Director in CDH's Dispute Resolution practice and Joint Head of its Government and State-Owned Entities sector, was appointed as Chairperson. Leading from the front, Fuhrmann held this position during the COVID outbreak and provided an extremely steady hand among the global uncertainty wrought by the pandemic.

In 2017, CDH secured the employment of Nomlayo Mabhena-Mlilo, the youngest-ever black female attorney to be admitted as a conveyancer. Mabhena-Mlilo was recently appointed as a Director at CDH.

One of the notable women in CDH's leadership team is Megan Rodgers, Director and Head of CDH's

Oil and Gas (O&G) sector, who champions the role of women both in the legal industry and in the O&G industry in general.

'Globally, women account for just over 22% of the O&G workforce, which highlights the dire need for a concerted effort towards achieving gender parity and the creation of more equitable opportunities,' she says.

Rodgers adds that the women who do enter, tend to do so in support functions, rather than management.

'This phenomenon could be attributed to various factors, including systemic barriers and unconscious bias regarding gender roles.

'Specific to the O&G industry is that an under-representation of women in entry-level positions means a slimmed pipeline for them to be promoted from within to senior roles.

'Women are also less likely to self-promote because we value meritocracy over subjective factors like charisma or self-promotion. This can have implications for career advancement if work environments



Megan Rodgers (left), and Vivien Chaplin (right)

fail to promote equity in career advancement opportunities.'

There are at least three structural obstacles to achieving gender parity in the O&G industry, says Rodgers. 'The first is under-representation of women at entry-level positions, followed by low representation in senior roles. Women occupy about one-quarter of the industry's entry-level positions.'

The second is a lack of representation in technical and operational roles and expatriate positions. The common expectation is that it is necessary to accept international or remote assignments, which can be crucial for career advancement as they often provide exposure to different markets and leadership experiences.

'This can be challenging for females starting their career or raising young families, but when women opt out of such opportunities, it can hinder their visibility, networking and overall advancement prospects,' according to Rodgers.

The third challenge is a lack of mentoring and sponsorship. 'We

need to take deliberate and proactive steps to promote equity in a supportive environment.'

Another CDH female champion is Vivien Chaplin, who is head of CDH's Mining & Minerals sector, and a Director of its Corporate & Commercial practice. She is cautiously optimistic about transformation, both in the legal industry and in the mining industry in general.

'There are many initiatives and programmes to advance women's interests in the mining sector, and women are starting to occupy more C-suite positions. Women are also advancing in STEM - science, technology, engineering, and maths - fields, which support the mining industry.'

This is an add-on advantage for female legal professionals who may consider mining as a specialisation, although, as Chaplin points out, 'it is difficult for young lawyers to decide on a niche specialisation early on, regardless of gender. Although mining is an important part of our economy, our legal industry is not as specialised

as other jurisdictions, and very few law firms would offer a young lawyer the opportunities for this level of specialisation. However, what we are finding, is that mining lawyers (lawyers with expertise in the regulatory aspects of the mining sector) are rare, highly valued and sought after. So, if any young woman (or man) has the interest, ability, and chance to specialise in this sector, they should grab the opportunity.'

The fact that Rodgers and Chaplin lead the sector groups in traditionally male-dominated sectors within one of South Africa's largest law firms is encouraging both for the legal industry and the applicable commodity sectors in which they advise, and is an illustration of how far the industry has come over the last decade.

