

Inside one of Canada's 'last patriarchal institutions'

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Nathalie Godbout, co-founder and partner of Godbout Fawcett Law, said that although the legal industry has made progress in the gender divide, there still remains more work to be done before equality exists.

Photo: Eric Elliott/Telegraph-Journal

Saint John • Women around the world celebrated International Women's Day on Wednesday, commemorating generations of progress made into closing the gender gap within the workplace.

Nathalie Godbout, partner and co-founder of the newly created Godbout Fawcett Law, said that although much progress has been made in eliminating the gender divide, there are still identifiable differences in the

legal industry for men and women.

"It would arguably be one of the last patriarchal institutions that we have," she said. "The billable hour, the patriarchal model of a firm, the gender specific roles we assign to people either consciously or unconsciously, I think that women are not always equated with ambition."

She said these typical structures of a law firm don't allow women to pursue their ambitions or lives outside of the workplace. In June 2016, after working together for 20 years at several law firms in Saint John, Godbout and Cathy Fawcett began thinking about establishing their own firm where they could break down some of these structures and establish a design that fit their lifestyles.

Fawcett said that there were instances within the courtroom where she would be asked to work later into the evening that had a different effect on her as a woman than it would for a lawyer who is a man.

"I think it's more likely on the minds of female lawyers if they have family responsibilities," Fawcett said. "There are certainly men who do take over those parental responsibilities and they're the ones responsible for pick up at daycare, they're the ones responsible for taking the kids to hockey practice or whatever it might be, and I think every parent has it, I just think that it's more common in for female lawyers."

On Dec. 1, 2016, they opened their doors, specializing in boutique litigation as well as workplace harassment investigations for the province. Godbout and Fawcett also employ Laura Cutler, who works primarily out of her home in Moncton, a situation most traditional law firms would not be open to, Godbout said. When designing their firm, she said they focussed on making it capable of allowing everyone at the firm to work from various locations and not be limited to an office space like that of conventional firms.

"I think it appeals to women and like-minded men," she said, noting that it's more by coincidence than design that the firm is currently made up of all women. "There are lots of men in my profession, who are of like mind that aren't feeling challenged by the new way of doing things, who would fit in very well in this firm."

Even with two-plus decades of law experience, Godbout said she still notices a difference in the way men and women are treated within the legal industry, although the differences have faded in recent history.

"When I became a partner in a law firm after seven years, I was the second woman only to do so in that firm's 75-year history so there is inherently a bias against women," she said. "It's born of the fact that they might go and wish to have children, that they might have a different idea for how to design the work they do and when they do it, so I think there are a lot of considerations that women have that not all men have because of the inherent bias."

For her, she said International Women's Day is a reminder of the road yet to travel, still hoping her two daughters are able to pursue every opportunity they desire regardless of their gender.

"It's a day when we remind everyone that when we pick up a newspaper and we see a group photo of thought leaders in the province, there needs to be just as many women in that photo as men, which is not the case," Godbout said. "I long for the day when we don't need an International Women's Day and I think

we've got quite a ways to go as well."

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