

Kluwer Arbitration Blog

New York Arbitration Week Revisited: Stronger Together: Colloquy on Diversity and Perseverance

Dana MacGrath (MacGrath Arbitration) · Friday, December 4th, 2020 · ArbitralWomen

[ArbitralWomen](#) promotes women and diversity in many different ways. We share statistics that reflect the incremental progress toward gender parity in dispute resolution. We share news about the professional achievements and qualifications of women so that the international arbitration community can more readily identify well-qualified women to serve as arbitrators, mediators, experts, and lead counsel. We publish interviews of leading women to make accessible the journeys of female leaders and how they succeeded—against the odds.

But reading about someone's journey is different from hearing it live. Therefore, for New York Arbitration Week 2020, ArbitralWomen organised an event focused on the theme '**Stronger Together: Colloquy on Diversity and Perseverance**' that featured two keynote presentations by [Mélida Hodgson](#) and [Caline Mouawad](#), in which each shared their respective professional and personal journeys as multicultural female citizens '*of the world*'. The video recording can be found [here](#). Each woman's journey is poignant and inspiring. This post shares some highlights of each keynote and offers advice to women building careers in international arbitration.

Mélida Hodgson's Keynote

Mélida Hodgson began by emphasising that perseverance is key. She summarised her path with four epithets '*outsider*', '*invisible me*', '*what is not mine is not mine*', and '*just do it!*'

Mélida described her journey as a multicultural woman in international arbitration as one of '*constant adaptation*.' An immigrant from the East Coast of Nicaragua where the Moravian Church was central to her cultural experience as a child, Mélida explained that this background defined her and equipped her to manage life as a diverse woman in the United States. Mélida observed that she has always been an outsider, as an immigrant, a female, and with brown skin. She did not have steady professional mentors and emphasised the importance of mentors, sponsors, and allies to progress diversity.

Mélida first observed efforts to promote diversity when she was a junior associate at a large law firm. Thereafter, she left private practice and held government roles at the US Department of Justice and the Office of the US Trade Representative, where she handled WTO cases, NAFTA arbitrations, and negotiated bilateral investment treaties. She observed less focus on diversity in

government than in private practice.

When Mélida returned to private practice and even since, she felt some colleagues looking past or through her – disappointingly what she described as the ‘*invisible me*’ syndrome. Even with her unique experience and qualifications to handle treaty arbitrations, she felt unwelcome by the ‘*arbitration club*’, which she attributed to both conscious and unconscious bias. Nonetheless, Mélida persevered. She accepted that life is not fair —and that ‘*what is not mine is not mine.*’ She was grateful for any opportunities and worked intensely to make the most of them to build her practice. She chose not to dwell on obstacles and instead to focus on successes and steps forward. Her overwhelming message was that, notwithstanding any challenges and obstacles, ‘*just do it!*’

With hard work and perseverance, Mélida succeeded in advancing to the top of the international treaty arbitration field. She is head of the New York International Arbitration Practice of Jenner & Block, recognized in numerous directories, and recently elected Vice Chair of the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) Institute of World Business Law, effective 1 January 2021.

However, Mélida has never taken her success for granted and she invests substantial energy toward making the path for others less difficult. She urges that promoting women and diversity at every level starts with each of us and that we must all contribute to achieve progress. If you are an ally of women and diverse people, recruit and hire women and diverse people. If you are a client that wants to progress diversity, select diverse counsel, and appoint diverse arbitrators. Mentor and sponsor diverse talent. Mélida highlighted the importance of educating clients on diversity issues and supporting clients that are seeking diverse counsel teams and teams led by diverse members.

In closing, Mélida said that it was important to remember to be kind to each other and to support each other. With the support of allies, sponsors and the members of your community, ‘*just do it*’ as best you can!

Caline Mouawad’s Keynote

Caline Mouawad began on a personal note, stating: ‘*Everything I needed to know to build a career in international arbitration, I learned from my father.*’ Caline described her father as an inspirational figure who ‘*did not fear change or sacrifice*’, safely moving the family out of Lebanon to Paris during the Lebanese Civil War and later at the height of the hostage crisis in Beirut to Houston, Texas. Caline observed that her father was ‘*unsentimental*’ about such difficult moves because ‘*he knew it was necessary for his five daughters’ futures.*’ She described her father as fiercely traditional and patriarchal, yet he raised five daughters who are all extraordinarily accomplished in their respective professions doing their best to balance personal and professional demands.

Her father distilled the sum of his life experiences into three key pieces of advice that have been instrumental and path-determinative in Caline’s personal and professional journey. First: ‘*get your education.*’ This encompassed not only formal academic education, but also the informal school of life. He instilled a desire to learn, a refusal to stagnate, and a willingness to take chances and embrace change. When Caline was accepted to Harvard Law School, he did everything he could to help, from organising her financial aid application documents to moving Caline’s personal items into her dormitory room. Caline derived inspiration from her father to have the courage to seek a 1L summer internship in Paris, where she ‘*had the opportunity to work for Laurie Craig, one of the*

deans of international arbitration. Little did she know that this summer internship would decide the course of her career. After law school, she joined Simpson Thacher in New York. Later she moved to Salans in Paris and then New York, and eventually joined King & Spalding in New York, where she spent ten years before recently joining Chaffetz Lindsey in New York. These life experiences and the relationships she developed enriched her personally and professionally – a mix of the formal and informal ‘education’ to which her father referred.

Second, ‘*be your full, complicated self.*’ Caline struggled to reconcile her identity and sense of belonging – was she Lebanese, French, American, Texan? She asked her father for advice on how to prioritize these different allegiances and how he dealt with the different parts of his identity. Her father’s answer was simple: ‘*I am a citizen of the world.*’ He explained that Caline was privileged to belong to all these groups – that it was a strength and competitive advantage. It took time for Caline to fully appreciate this advice. Ultimately it became her license to be her ‘*full, complicated self*’ and an asset.

Being her ‘*full, complicated self*’ meant being a New York lawyer who is involved in her Lebanese Catholic Church, spends every Christmas in Texas with family and friends, is married to an American, speaks French to her children, Arabic to her mother, and feels at home in her 3,000-people hometown in the mountains of Lebanon. She described these as ‘*but a few of the ways that I have the privilege, every day, of being multi-dimensional, of living out this global citizenship without having to choose an identity to the exclusion of others.*’ She naturally gravitated to international arbitration.

Third, ‘*follow your path with conviction*’ and trust yourself and your chosen path. After having her first child, Caline chose to return to the practice of law on a reduced hours schedule, an ‘*unconventional*’ choice at the time. Her firm supported her and she found her rhythm. She maintained a reduced hours schedule as her career advanced, even though it meant she made partner later than her peers. It was not always easy to manage, but she was determined to follow her ‘*path with conviction*’ and ultimately prevailed.

Now Caline is a recognised leader in international arbitration. In addition to serving as counsel in arbitrations conducted in English and French administered by the leading institutions, she is on the ICDR and AAA panel of arbitrators, serves as Vice-Chair of the Steering Committee of the ICC Commission on Arbitration and ADR and is the former Chair of the International Law Committee of the New York City Bar Association.

In closing, Caline noted that in all her personal and professional choices, she has tried to live up to her father’s expectations and hopes for her. His advice has been a beacon to her. She continues to follow his advice as ‘*a guiding light*’ in her continuing arbitration journey. She concluded, ‘*my hope is that it may offer you some light as well.*’

Concluding Remarks and Inspired Impressions

I knew there was a chance as a moderator I might tear up during the live event, having seen Mérida’s and Caline’s outlines beforehand. I shared that concern right before the live broadcast, and Caline aptly replied, ‘*There’s no crying on the baseball field!*’

Attendees were empowered by Mérida’s and Caline’s candid narration of their respective journeys.

Some are sharing the video with their daughters.

I asked Caline to share more about her reduced hours of experience in private practice. She made every effort to get home in the evenings to spend time with her children, hopping back online to work again once the children were in bed. But extensive business travel made it challenging. She valued her support network to care for her children while away.

Both Mélida and Caline observed it is possible in the ‘*virtual world*’ to attend events without travel, a silver lining of the pandemic. They encouraged taking advantage of virtual programming and networking as much as possible.

We all look forward to gathering in-person again. Until then, we must make the most of virtual platforms to expand our professional connections and learn new skills to be among the well-qualified women in the field. The ArbitralWomen member [directory](#) is a searchable resource to find talented women leaders in dispute resolution. Mélida and Caline are two shining examples.

Recordings for all New York Arbitration Week 2020 events are available [here](#), and Kluwer Arbitration Blog’s full coverage is available [here](#).

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