

Specialist Law Firm Leader of the Year: Paulina Riquelme Pallamar

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Paulina Pallamar

Paulina Riquelme Pallamar, founding partner at Eelaw in Chile – and this year’s winner of Latin Lawyer’s Specialist Law Firm Leader of the Year Award – is the only female lawyer in the country to found a firm dedicated exclusively to environmental law.

Riquelme spoke to Latin Lawyer about what led her to establish Eelaw, her biggest concerns about the environment, and what it is like to occupy a niche space as a female lawyer in Chile.

Riquelme launched Eelaw in 2008. The firm – made up of 12 lawyers and eight paralegals – is exclusively dedicated to environmental law matters, including the development of projects and permits, environmental litigation and compliance, regulation monitoring, pollution control and the circular economy. Riquelme has herself given legal advice on the development of national environmental regulations and participated in environmental public policy discussions, as well as working on numerous multilateral environmental agreements involving Chile.

Eelaw occupies a niche space in the Latin American legal market. It has its work cut out for it: a recent [report](#) by The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the World Justice Project suggests the gap between environmental laws and environmental realities is widening in Latin America as climate change, air and water pollution, deforestation and loss of biodiversity become more urgent. Although countries across the region have incorporated environmental legislation, there are serious weaknesses when it comes to implementation.

When Riquelme founded Eelaw, these inconsistencies also existed. “Back then, there was possibly only one environmental boutique, and the practice itself was still considered very minor in full-service firms. It was more an accessory to the larger M&A deals that needed environmental due diligence, for example,” reminisces Riquelme. “The practice was vague and narrow, it only involved things like environmental assessment, some due diligence, and some litigation strategies. That was it.” Today, as the world becomes more actively involved in the struggle to reverse the effects of climate change, more environmental boutiques have cropped up.

Before founding Eelaw, Riquelme studied and worked at home and abroad. A graduate of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Riquelme had her sights set on a legal education in the US. She received the prestigious Fulbright scholarship, studying a master’s in environmental and energy law at Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana, where she took her husband and son, who was four years old at the time. “I couldn’t have gone alone – together, the experience was amazing,” she says.

After her postgraduate degree, Riquelme was offered an internship at Gallagher & Kennedy in Phoenix, Arizona. Following that, she was offered the

opportunity to practise there as part of the firm's environmental department. She worked there for a year and then returned home, where she spent some time as an environmental associate at Chilean law firm Urenda Rencoret Orrego & Dörr.

As is typical when working within a particular area of the law, Riquelme quickly built up a detailed roster of contacts and a cross-practice awareness. "I started working with clients, who then recommended me to their clients too." The experience led to her launching Eelaw. "I never thought of myself as a businesswoman, and I did not plan to found my own law firm. It just happened naturally."

She eventually quit her role at Urenda Rencoret, but her experience at Gallagher & Kennedy had planted an idea in her head. "When I quit, I started to get calls from clients. I was also being recommended," she says. "They asked for my help on specialised environmental legal tasks and counselling. So I started very, very low key with some special tasks, and then the practice started, and the complexity of the issues started to grow."

At 50, Riquelme is far from handing over the mantel to another lawyer at the firm, and as the only partner, would be unable to – but she is keen to implement a robust progression plan for all lawyers at the firm so others can make it to the partnership in the next year or so. She hopes to commercialise the firm too by appointing a legal director – but that is a plan for the future. "We're working towards an array of goals at the moment. We'll get there!"