

# Despite significant progress, women still facing obstacles in climb to leadership ranks



By Brian Cox

It's been roughly 50 years since women began entering the legal profession in large numbers.

In 1960, women comprised only 3.5 percent of the enrollees at American Bar Association-approved law schools; in 1970, they comprised 8.5 percent; another decade later, they were up to 33.6 percent, according to figures from the ABA.

Decade by decade, the percentage continued to climb until the number of women enrolled in U.S. law schools actually overtook men eight years ago, and that gap has continued to widen ever since. Nearly 56 percent of J.D. students currently enrolled at ABA-accredited law schools are women.

It should come as no surprise then that in 2023 the number of women in the ranks of associates at U.S. law firms for the first time reached a slight majority (50.31 percent), according to the latest diversity report from the National Association for Law Placement.

That's the encouraging trend.

The discouraging reality is that women remain underrepresented among firm partners, making up only 27.76 percent of all partners, according to the same NALP report. The numbers are even lower for women equity partners in multitier firms, where only 23.7 percent of equity partners are women.

Even more troubling is the stark fact that many women are choosing to leave the profession so that by age 50, they make up only 27 percent of practicing lawyers, according to the ABA's 2019 report, "Walking Out the Door: The Facts, Figures, and Future of Experienced Women Lawyers in Private Practice."

"Law firms devote substantial time and resources to the hiring and training of their women lawyers, and that investment is lost when senior women leave," concludes the report.

While the legal profession attracts women, that attraction does not translate to retention, according to the authors of the report.

California attorney Karina Sterman believes law firms need to undergo a cultural shift if they hope to stem the exodus of experienced women attorneys from the profession — or risk falling even farther behind when it comes to gender equality.

"Firms need to create workplace environments for women lawyers where they are supported by their colleagues at different life stages in their careers," says Sterman, a partner in Greenberg Glusker's Litigation and Employment Law Departments. "There is a difference for women based on their age that really exists to a much lesser degree with male attorneys."

What support is in place, she asks, when a woman attorney decides to start a family? Data from the ABA makes clear that experienced women lawyers bear a disproportionate brunt of responsibility for arranging for childcare and are more often the ones leaving work when needed by the child or to attend the child's extracurricular activities. Sterman maintains that law firms must devise more effective means of enabling their women lawyers to balance family and household responsibilities with their professional obligations at the firm.

The ABA has found that work-life balance is more difficult to attain for female attorneys "because they often have more obligations both inside and outside of work without the same amount of support."

Sterman points out that further support is also needed for women attorneys in mid-career who are often expected to "pretend they have not missed a beat" during the years they were also having kids and raising a family and later in their careers when they may be dealing with the disruptive health impacts of menopause.

As immediate past chair of the Primerus Women Lawyers Section and as the current chair of the Los Angeles County Bar Association's Diversity in the Profession Committee, Sterman is committed to raising conversations around the necessary support law firms should offer their women attorneys at the various stages of their careers as well as their lives.

"I think much of the disconnect is because there hasn't been enough awareness created," she says. "We're trying to create an environment and platform where all of those conversations can take place. And it starts with having conversations amongst ourselves."