

By Rachel Spalding

WOMEN & LAW:

Have We Really Come a Long Way, Baby?



Photos by National Association of Women Lawyers

The findings are mixed when it comes to progress on gender parity in the legal profession, but at least the SFVBA is ahead of the curve.

TO SIT IN ON A MONTHLY board meeting at the San Fernando Valley Bar Association is a beautiful thing if you're looking for signs of societal progress.

Members of various ages discuss life at their firms and the growth of their families back at home over prime rib, mac and cheese, and lemonade before getting down to Bar Association business. Half of all the power positions at the Bar appear to be occupied by males – but half are filled by females.

Longtime SFVBA go-to member and Sherman Oaks trust and wills “Super

Lawyer” Heather Glick-Atalla gets ready to call the meeting to order; she has become the 94th president. Meanwhile, the president-elect is Amanda Moghaddam, a claims attorney at Lawyers Mutual Insurance of California.

And SFVBA Board Secretary Taylor Williams-Moniz, a partner with Young & Williams LLP who sits next to Moghaddam, jokes about having escaped her young children for the evening to talk shop with other adults – no need here to pretend that she isn't a working mother who juggles many

things at once, like old-school tradition at a prestigious law firm once dictated.

Meanwhile, male members of this group chime in with news about their spouses and children, too, before the formalities begin.

If only the rest of the legal profession was as enlightened as the SFVBA.

Recent numbers indicate a complex picture of how female attorneys nationwide are faring post-pandemic. After COVID-enforced Work From Home (WFH) policies, many firms and corporate legal divisions allowed



KAREN RICHARDSON
Executive Director of the National Association of Women Lawyers

attorneys who were performing well to keep to hybrid schedules that allow for some days from home, and others commuting for in-person meetings.

Other national firms disposed of expensive urban real estate in favor of entirely-virtual companies, which in turn allowed staffers to go fully remote, sometimes moving to suburbs or less-congested towns across the country in the process. While this sounds like great progress for American workers in allowing for more individual choice, the American Bar Association’s annual snapshot of the legal profession shows it’s a mixed bag.

The ABA’s 2023 statistics, its most recent, show that 39 percent of lawyers are female, up from 34 percent in 2013. That’s certainly amazing progress from the extent of the female legal workforce from 1950 all the way up to 1970 – it was a microscopic three percent.

However, progress at the highest levels of the profession remains stalled, says Karen Richardson, Executive Director of the National Association for Women Lawyers. “The number just don’t move, it’s two steps forward, one step back,” sighs Richardson, adding that it was only recently that there was enough interest from within the legal profession to even track who rises in which positions, and their gender.

Now that statistics are at least being gathered, Richardson notes that some roles may sound good but

don’t carry the weight of being a top executive.

“For example, many women become the managing partner of a branch of a huge, international firm. That’s an administrative position,” she says. It’s still male attorneys who are tasked with creating client relationships, and thus bringing in money, in Am Law 200 firms (the second-hundred largest U.S. law firms), according to Richardson.

She has also been surprised at some of the remaining prejudices that still seem to be hardwired into law-firm life. She notes that young female attorneys at a recent roundtable NAWL hosted had noted that they keep their offices free of family photos so as to appear laser-focused on the job. Others shared stories about agonizing over when to notify employers about pregnancies and maternity leaves.

“The need is clear to have more underrepresented voices at the table,” she adds.

In case you think all this doesn’t have major implications both societally and economically, keep in mind that the United Nations reports that globally, women earn 77 cents for every dollar earned by men – for equal work. (See *accompanying article for more.*)

Additionally, Bloomberg News reported last fall that women lawyers fare worse than their male colleagues when it comes to their mental health. The Bloomberg Law study found that female attorneys reported feeling burned out on the job 56 percent of the time, while male lawyers reported feeling burned out at work only 41 percent of the time.

The study noted that the stress may partly stem from a decrease in billable hours in the legal world in general, but that doesn’t account for why women would be feeling the brunt. Likely, the answer lies in societal expectations that women rather than men provide care for family members, whether it’s children or the elderly, in addition to holding down full time-plus positions.

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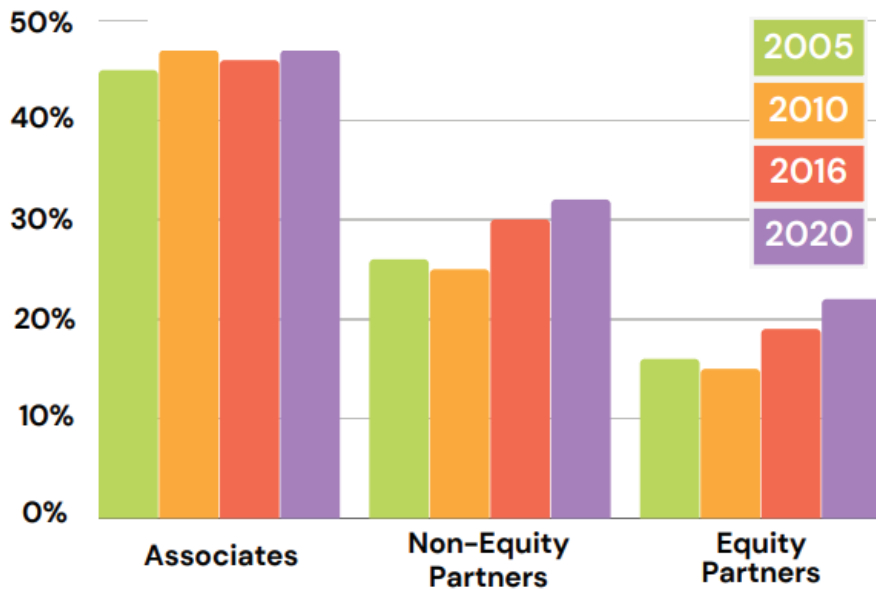
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Percentage of Women in Law Firms

From the 2021 NAWL Survey Report



If things are challenging overall for female legal professionals, wouldn't you think things might be a bit easier in the profession living in a progressive city such as Los Angeles, in which the mayor and many other power brokers are female? One L.A. attorney is Jen Lasher, Associate General Counsel for J.D. Power. With her legal department having gone remote-optional during the pandemic, Lasher now realizes that going into the office daily was "a time suck."

She's far more productive working from home, she notes, and as a mom of two, she feels she has more time to dedicate to any fire drill professional situations that come her way now that she isn't juggling a commute to the office, picking out business attire, or having to meticulously put herself together just to get her work done.

"All I need to get started working is for the caffeine to hit my brain," she jokes about her morning routine. In her division, Lasher is the only litigator, and she also handles compliance and legal guidance for 1,500 employees, while communicating constantly via Microsoft Teams. Her role typically requires meetings in person a couple of times a year, which she also enjoys.

Lasher says that having a high-intensity job such as hers is only possible with both a supportive supervisor and an involved spouse (her husband does intellectual property

litigation). She finally has some balance in her life after years of climbing the ladder, and she's grateful for it.

However, she cautions that the office may be the best place for novice attorneys to acquire a knowledge base and professional network, especially for females who will need a lot of mentorship to rise in the ranks. "Law has lagged behind a bit [as far as parity], but I think things have gotten a bit better, and there are more women in leadership roles in our industry in general," says Lasher.

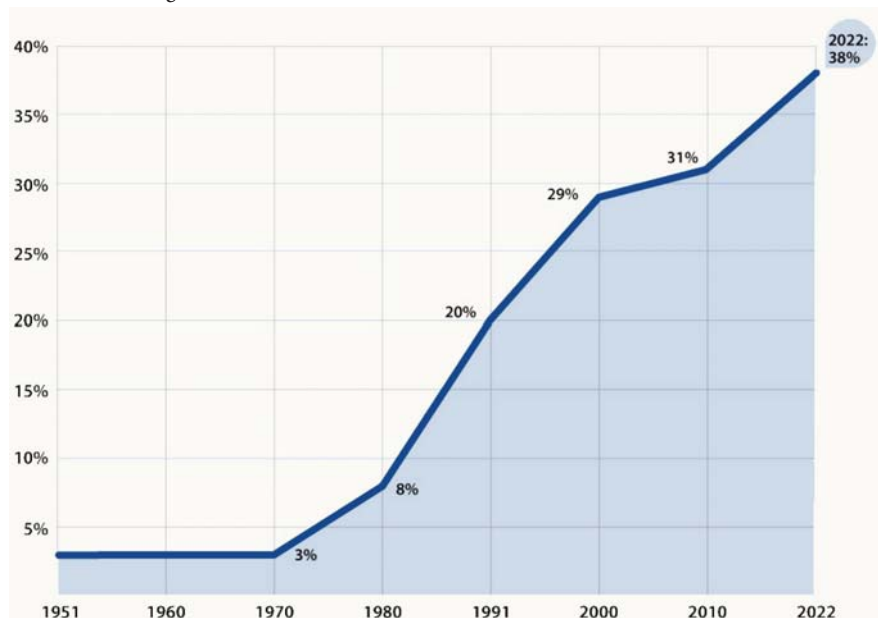
SFVBA past president Carol Newman shares the optimism. "It was a very different world back when I started," recalls Newman with a chuckle. "One out of seven in law school was a woman."

Graduating from The George Washington University Law School in 1977, Newman, now a palimony specialist with her own firm, Alleguez Newman Goodstein, LLP, recalls a time in which bar associations including the SFVBA were mostly male – and even a woman with a J.D. was told to learn to type by potential employers.

The Ebb and Flow of Women in Law: 1951–2022

Data spanning over seven decades paints an intriguing picture for women in law. While the 1950s witnessed a mere trickle of female representation, the percentage of legal practitioners that are women increased to 38 percent by 2022. The 1970s, in particular, marked a dramatic uptick. Yet, the last decade's modest growth suggests that the journey to equality is far from over.

Women in the Legal Profession: 1951–2022



Women made up less than 5 percent of attorneys in the U.S. from 1950 to 1970, but that number has steadily risen since, to 38 percent in 2022.

“When I was a baby lawyer, women were family lawyers; that’s where you had to go to get jobs. And you had to wear a dress. Thank God it’s all changed,” she adds. Despite such obstacles, Newman persisted, eventually becoming the SFVBA’s leader, the first openly-gay president for the organization, in 2015.

“People have changed, and there’s been huge progress,” Newman notes, adding that she’s always glad to see capable female leaders like Glick-Atalla take the reigns, remembering as she does a time when “women in law” often meant hosting dinner parties for your husband’s firm rather than running your own practice.

Since law is a sphere with incredible cultural influence, it is essential that bar associations like the SFVBA join the fight for a fairer workplace, notes Glick-Atalla. After all, the SFVBA’s leader is cognizant of the fact that she herself is privileged to be able to make her own hours and share responsibilities with a spouse (and fellow attorney) who is an equal partner. This allows her to juggle a successful practice, a happy family, and her deep commitment to the San Fernando Valley legal community.

“I know I’m lucky,” says Glick-Atalla. “And getting firms in general to implement more family-friendly policies is key, including paternity leave. It could mean hybrid or remote work, or even creating policies where your kids can come with you to work, and do their homework.” With this subject close to her heart, the new president adds that relaunching the SFVBA’s Women Lawyer’s Section is an item on her list.

Specifics aside, though, top companies will certainly need to start thinking outside the box to attract the top law students of today and tomorrow, many of whom will come from Gen Z and expect things to be far different upon their graduation than some old-fashioned golf-and-cigars boys’ club. The needle is indeed moving toward gender parity in law it seems, but slowly...maybe even very slowly.

“You know, it’s baby steps,” concludes Glick-Atalla. 

By Rachel Spalding

THE DIRT ON PAY: Are Equal Wages Really All That Important?

FEMALE ATTORNEYS ARE aware that a male colleague may well earn slightly more for the exact same position or project, at the rate of 77 cents for a man’s dollar. This disparity hasn’t budged for decades, so it may not seem noteworthy that where leading-edge professions such as law go, the rest of the world follows: Women’s pay overall lags well behind men on an international scale.

The issue has received renewed interest ever since glaring power and financial imbalances between the genders have been revealed in highly-visible industries such as Hollywood, where the Harvey Weinstein trials were the first, but not the last, of many ugly cases.

The good news, however, is that such scandals – and their ongoing presence in courtrooms in New York and Los Angeles – ended up renewing efforts to address the treatment

of women in the workforce in all professions.

But even as the number of male law students declined annually for the past 12 years according to the American Bar Association – and 14,000 more law students in 2022 happened to be female than male – gender still has a damning effect on the ultimate career track of a novice legal professional.

Only 22 percent of all equity partners in firms were female in 2022, notes Karen Richardson of the National Association of Women Lawyers.

Even with so much progress, top posts in law firms rarely go to women; a mere 12 percent of managing partners were female, as of 2020. Ultimately, this creates a self-reinforcing loop. Young female attorneys are siloed into “family-friendly” positions that do not earn top dollar – the legal equivalent of pushing



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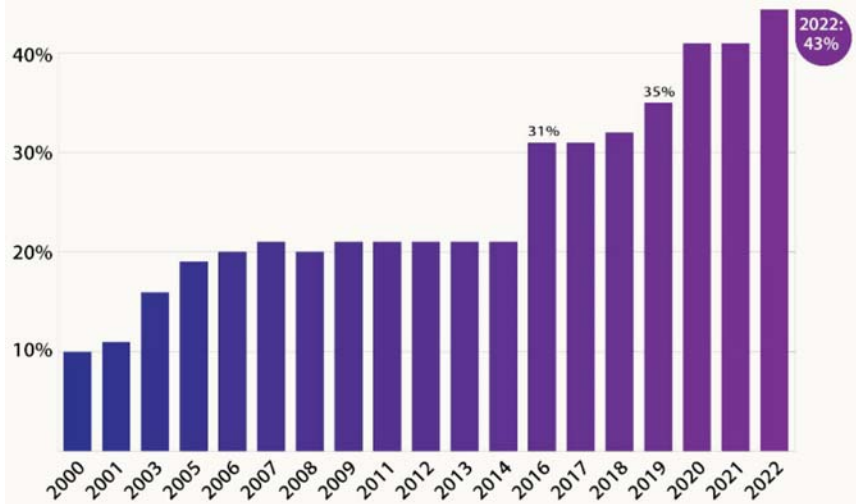
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Female Law School Deans: 2000–2022



The percent of law school deans who are women—10 percent in 2000—jumped from 20 percent in 2006 to 31 percent in 2016, reaching 43 percent in 2022.


young women toward “safe” careers in teaching or nursing.

Globally, this gender wage gap contributes to women disproportionately experiencing poverty. The United Nations’ Department of Economic and Social Affairs has thus earmarked “achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls” as its number five overall goal.

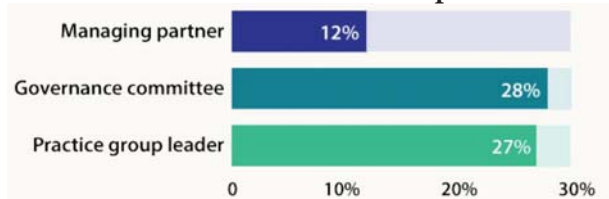
The U.N.’s announcement in turn spawned the International Bar Association’s “50/50 by 2030” project, launched in 2021. The aim is to create a blueprint for the global legal community to begin establishing direct

policies for gender parity in the highest levels of private practice, in-house positions, the public sector, and the judiciary.

Data on rank and pay is to be collected throughout the coming years for a true snapshot of how female lawyers the globe over are faring, with support for the endeavor coming from the LexisNexis Rule of Law Foundation.

Advocates of parity note that diversifying the upper tier of any company will ultimately only create better results in the long run. “More fairness [will] create healthier firms,” asserts Richardson. 

Women in Law Firm Leadership Roles: 2020



In 2020 women made up 12 percent of law firm managing partners, 28 percent of governance committee members, and 27 percent of practice group leaders.

Women in Law Firms: 2020



In 2020, women made up 47 percent of law firm associates, 32 percent of non-equity partners, and 22 percent of equity partners.