

'A Bleak Picture' for Women Trying to Rise at Law Firms

By **Elizabeth Olson**

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Even as more women add a law degree to their résumés, carving out a successful career at a law firm remains an uphill endeavor.

While initiatives and conferences to expand the number of women who are equity partners at law firms are something of a cottage industry, progress for women is, at best, static, according to the “2017 Law360 Glass Ceiling Report,” released on Monday by the legal publication Law 360.

Women are 50.3 percent of current law school graduates, yet they still make up just under 35 percent of lawyers at law firms, the report found. Most important, their share of equity partnerships — where the highest compensation and leadership positions are lodged — remains at 20 percent and has not changed in recent years, the report found.

“It’s a bleak picture, with a few bright spots,” said Anne Urda, the Law360 editor in chief, who helped oversee the report. The overall number of female lawyers at firms was up about 1 percentage point over last year, but only nine of the 300 firms surveyed had a lawyer work force that was 50 percent or more female.

As female lawyers largely remain boxed into the lower-ranking and lesser-paying jobs, the report noted a rise in gender bias lawsuits against law firms, which “likely will push law firms to reflect on their efforts to move the needle on gender parity.”

Last month, Steptoe & Johnson became the latest major law firm to be named in a lawsuit alleging gender pay disparity for either associates or partners. The others are the former Chadbourne & Parke, which is now merged with Norton Rose Fulbright; Proskauer Rose; LeClairRyan; and Sedgwick.

With a claim for \$100 million, the Chadbourne case, brought by three female former partners, has drawn the most attention. Chadbourne is contesting the claim.

A second case, filed in May against Proskauer Rose and brought by a female partner in its Washington office, is seeking \$50 million for “substantial gender disparities” in the firm’s compensation practices.

The plaintiff, who asked not to be named in order to protect her personal information, argued that even though she was a partner, the firm had “excluded” her from client matters and refused to allow her “to pitch or to participate in any employment litigation matter for firm clients, rebuffed her efforts to assume a greater leadership role at the firm, tolerated and facilitated an environment where she was targeted for harassment and humiliation by firm leadership, demeaned and belittled by her peers and clients and refused to rectify pay disparities.”

Proskauer rejected the claims as “groundless” and accused her of seeking “to squeeze a massive payout from our firm in exchange for her rapid departure and an agreement not to weaponize her blatantly inaccurate charges.”

Accusations — and defenses — in such cases can be raw and personal and take years to be resolved.

The Steptoe case, filed in June, is focused on pay levels for associates, the first rung for a law school graduate. Ji-in Lee Houck said her \$85,000 starting salary at Steptoe’s Los Angeles office was half of that paid to her male counterparts. With two years of experience, she was hired as a contract lawyer and later, with good annual performance reviews, was officially promoted to become an associate but was not paid commensurately, she maintains.

Steptoe was “paying lip service to diversity in its work force, and even counseling the firm’s own clients on policies to avoid pay discrimination,” her lawyer, Lori E. Andrus of Andrus Anderson, a San Francisco law firm, said in legal papers.

Steptoe, in a statement last month, called the lawsuit a “baseless” claim from “a former junior associate who was hired as a contract attorney and stayed with the firm for less than three years.”

It noted that, in 2016, 50 percent of its new partners were women and that this year that figure had risen to 80 percent.

But such law firm figures can be deceiving if the women are not equity partners, said Elizabeth Tursi, the chairwoman and a co-founder of the Women in Law Empowerment Forum. The forum allows firms to apply for a gold standard certification for its diversity efforts. So far in 2017, 44 major firms have been awarded the certification, which requires a firm to have 20 percent of female equity partners, among other criteria.

Even so, sometimes firms that apply for the certification list nonequity partners in the partnership category, she noted.

The reason, Ms. Tursi said, is money.

“Firms emphasize generating revenue, and profits per partner,” she said. “They do not want to keep cutting that equity pie, so they keep making nonequity partners or adding laterals.”

Correction: July 24, 2017

An earlier version of this article misstated Anne Urda's role at Law360. She is the editor in chief, not a managing editor.

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