

YOUNG LAWYERS

Jacqueline L. Sikora

Chairperson
Young Lawyers Section
The West Virginia State Bar



THE MYSTERIOUS CASE OF THE VANISHING FEMALE LAWYER: WHY AREN'T WOMEN GOING TO LAW SCHOOL?

As part of my duties as the Chair of the Young Lawyers' Executive Committee, I have had an opportunity to serve on the West Virginia University College of Law (College of Law) Visiting Committee, and have heard Dean Joyce McConnell speak about the many wonderful projects happening at the Law School. As a College of Law alum, it is exciting to learn about the expanding clinic program, and to see the new construction that will transform the physical structure and enhance the school's educational offerings. Unfortunately, not all of the news is good. From speaking with Dean McConnell, and listening to her presentations, it

is shockingly apparent that the admission rate for female law students in West Virginia, and throughout the country, has drastically declined.

I can say from experience that being a female lawyer has its share of ups and downs. Thankfully, female lawyers are beginning to break the proverbial glass ceiling. But, the rapid decline in female admittees will undoubtedly mark a decline in progress for all females who practice law. So what does all this mean, and why is it happening?

Did you know that the current female enrollment at the WVU College of Law is 32 percent?

According to the College of Law, female admission rate for the current class is only 32 percent. I was particularly shocked by this revelation because I recall that my law school class was among the first to have more females than males (at approximately 51 percent). How, in 10 years, could female admissions have declined so rapidly, and why?

Did you know that females are opting to pursue other professional fields instead of law?

According to Dean McConnell females are opting for other career paths like engineering or medicine. It seems that female appli-

cants believe that it will be easier to have a professional career and a family if they choose medical school, or another professional school, rather than law school. Whether we like it or not, there is obviously a perception that makes the allure of the legal profession less attractive to females. To make matters worse, firms like Clifford Chance, a global firm based in London but with offices throughout the United States, recently provided a memo to female attorneys offering tips such as “don’t giggle,” “don’t squirm” and “don’t mess with your glasses or hair.” While the memo was allegedly well-intended, it goes on to advise females to “wear a suit not your party dress,” and that “no one heard Hillary the day she showed cleavage.” I am not going to opine whether I believe this memo has any value. But, to ignore such instances of disparity only worsens a problem that has now trickled down to law school admissions.

Did you know that female lawyers are less likely to make partner than their male counterparts?

This problem goes all the way to the top of the law firm chain. According to a CNN report, in the United States, only 15 percent of partners in law firms are women, and they earn less than their male counterparts. Perhaps women need to do a better job of claiming a seat at the table and pursuing their goals, or maybe firms need to do a better job of creating better models and possibilities of fitting work and life together. Or – most likely – both are right. What’s less debatable, however, are the numbers: the most recent Vault/MCCA Law Firm Diversity Survey found that women represent approximately 45 percent of associates, but only 15-20 percent of partners. Moreover, only 32.5 percent of partners promoted in 2011 were women.

Further, a national survey of sixth-year female associates revealed that many female associates feel that it

Female lawyers need mentors, especially female mentors. If you are a female lawyer, you should be mentoring other female lawyers.

is impossible to have a family and make partner – and so they take themselves off the partnership track, even before they have children. The survey also found that female associates complain that their male counterparts have different – and better – opportunities for business development, important assignments and mentorship.

What Can You Do To Help?

To change perceptions about the legal profession, each of us must proactively strive to place female lawyers on the same footing as their male counterparts. This doesn’t just mean giving them the same incremental raise or equally dividing assignments. This means allowing female lawyers to hold leadership positions with firms, and to ensure that the firm culture does not tolerate discrimination against any woman.

Some law firms have taken the lead in ensuring equality for female lawyers. For example, Carlton Fields, a Florida based firm, has implemented a 360-degree review process in which associates rank their practice group leaders on how well they promote diversity; these reviews are a factor in compensation. The global firm Ropes & Gray sponsors a Women’s Forum to provide a venue for its female attorneys to support each other in issues related to advancement and development, by hosting programs on networking, business development and communications skills.

Although firm wide efforts are necessary; mentorship is the key. Female lawyers need mentors, especially female mentors. If you are a female lawyer, you should be mentoring other female lawyers. More importantly, you should assist in eliminating discrimination against female lawyers, or disparity between male and female associates. Changing perception starts with each of us. Unless we place female lawyers on equal footing, the ever decreasing numbers of female law students and lawyers will only continue. **WVL**