

Women partners Still few and far between

By Kathleen Bird

Despite all the talk the past decade about gender diversity within the legal profession, the partnership ranks of many of New Jersey's best-known law firms largely remain a man's world.

Whether by design, happenstance or other forces, female lawyers here are hardly making a dent into the upper echelons of leadership.

They've made great headway into associate ranks, but the door to bigger riches, status and other benefits that accrue for partners has barely opened — much less been entered.

And the reason most often cited by law firm leaders is that women in most instances make such choices as motherhood or other lifestyle opportunities that effectively remove them from or hamper their pathway to partnership.

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James F.X. Rudy, managing partner of Fox Rothschild's office in Lawrenceville, said his firm, like others, has lost female attorneys "because they made a lifestyle change and a career change. The law becomes less attractive of a career if you've got family plans."

Rudy said that while it's helpful for firms to offer more-liberal leave policies, flexible schedules and part-time positions, nothing will change "until there are more house-husbands."

The numbers tell a gloomy story.

Mid- to large-sized law firms in New Jersey have women associate numbers fairly evenly divided by gender, but that picture dims dramatically when examining the stark reality of female partners.

The associate ranks among 37 New Jersey firms included in a recently released national study reflect the entire attorney population and law-school graduation classes, hovering in the 40 percent to 50 percent range.

Yet, women as partners in the same firms are relatively few.

The study's 37 state firms have a total 1,618 associates, 718 of whom, or 44 percent, are women. At the same time, those firms have 1,399 partners, of whom just 233, or 17 percent, are women.

That means nearly three of every six associates are women, while just one of nearly five partners is female.

'Having it all'

In a word, after decades of talk about diversity, women's liberation, equal opportunity and "having it all," the legal world in the Garden State remains dominated by men who earn the fatter partner paychecks and carry more clout within large- and mid-sized firms.

The dearth of female partners comes as symbolic measures of women's gains in the law are frequently cited. The disconnect, though, between symbolism and reality is stark. For example, of the seven state Supreme Court justices, three are women. There are more female assignment judges than ever. And three of the past 10 New Jersey State Bar Association presidents have been women.

But when it comes to the nitty-gritty of women ascending to partnerships, there's virtually nothing to cite. The disjoint between symbolism and reality is vivid.

Managing partners and officials at other firms echoed the basic message from Rudy, the managing partner at Fox Rothschild.

"I don't see anything else that can be done to change it other than men stepping up to the plate on child care," Rudy noted, underscoring that women generally bear a disproportionate share of caring for the responsibilities for children, elderly parents and households.

He said some women drop out before they make partner and either stay home or pursue other careers because "they don't want to be superwoman and be a lawyer and a mom, too."

Sometimes, he added, the decision is purely economic as women find their "highest and best use" might be taking care of their own three children, for instance, rather than paying \$36,000 annually for child care or even twice that for the care of an elderly parent. "The alternate care arrangements have gotten frighteningly expensive," said Rudy.

Findings

The findings about the ranks of female associates and partners are derived from an analysis of the NALP Directory of Legal Employers. That organization, formerly called the National Association for Law Placement, compiled a wealth of data reported by firms as of Feb. 1.

The state's largest and oldest firm, McCarter & English in Newark, boasts 87 women, or 48 percent, of its 181 associates but takes a nosedive in the number of female partners. There are only 22, or 15 percent, among 145.

The picture is more dismal at other firms often considered among the state's largest and most-prestigious.

Lowenstein Sandler in Roseland has 66 women, or 42 percent, among 157 associates. Twelve of its 84 partners, or 14 percent, are women.

Of Morristown's Riker Danzig Scherer Hyland & Perretti's 91 associates, 39, or 43 percent, are women. Of the 47 partners, just 10, or 21 percent, are women.

Newark's Gibbons, Del Deo, Dolan, Griffinger & Vecchione has 25, or 40 percent, female associates among its 62, but only nine, or 17 percent, of its 53 partners.

Sills Cummis Epstein & Gross in Newark has 38 women among 81 associates, or 47 percent. At the same time, though, only eight of its 66 partners are women, or 12 percent.

Beth S. Rose, a Sills Cummis partner who heads the product liability practice group and sits on the management committee, said it's a challenge for the firm to retain female lawyers, primarily because they choose to care for their children.

"It's so individual," Rose said of the multitude of reasons why women leave. "I haven't heard any of them say, 'I hated practicing law.' "

Some have been hired away by Sills Cummis' clients.

Strategies

Flexible hours has allowed the firm to keep attorneys who work part-time as partners, associates and of counsel.

The firm offers 12 weeks of paid maternity leave and 12 additional unpaid weeks, and has formed a women's group that meets regularly and provides a forum for support, mentoring and networking. Sills Cummis also offers professional skill-building opportunities for women on marketing and client development.

Life choices drive women away, Rose said, noting women traditionally bear the lion's share of family responsibilities, including "shopping for groceries, doing the laundry or figuring out the play dates."

Wilentz, Goldman & Spitzer's numbers are similar. Among 58 associates, 32, or 55 percent, are women. Only 10, or 14 percent, of 69 partners are female.

South Jersey

The situation isn't much better in South Jersey, where Archer & Greiner in Haddonfield has 19 female associates, or 39 percent, of its roster of 49. But there are only 8 women among 70 partners, just under 9 percent.

At other firms, the percentages are higher although the raw numbers are lower, which skews the results.

Nine of 20 associates at Dechert in Princeton are women, or 45 percent. There are four female partners, comprising 36 percent of its 11 partners.

Fox Rothschild's office in Lawrenceville has 10 female associates, exactly 50 percent. The firm has eight female partners, or 20 percent of its 41 total.

But the firm's Atlantic City office, where women comprise five of the nine associates, or 55 percent, there is only one female among 16 partners.

Audrey D. Wisotsky, a part-time partner at Pepper Hamilton in Princeton — of the 10 partners there she's the only woman — said, "Women in the law face the same issues as other women — how you want to live your life. When you're faced with a demanding professional career and children, how do you deal with that?"

She said that while Pepper Hamilton recognizes that individuals have life decisions to make, the firm handles requests for part-time status on a case-by-case basis. Of the firm's 16 associates, nine, or 56 percent, are women.

Female partners and associates there share "our insights into how you juggle it all," she said. She explained she chose to work part-time because her children are ages 11 and 15.

Said Wisotsky, "I've been very lucky."

Other firms

At Porzio Bromberg & Newman in Morristown, 11 of 29 associates are women, or 38 percent. Among partners, though, there are seven women and 20 men, or 26 percent.

At McElroy, Deutsch, Mulvaney & Carpenter in Morristown and Newark, 44 percent of associates are women, or 38 females and 49 males. There are 16 female partners and 53 male, for 23 percent women.

Norris McLaughlin & Marcus in Somerville has 14 females and 17 males among associate, but only 11, or 18 percent, of its 62 partners are women.

Pitney Hardin in Morristown has 111 associates, including 48, or 43 percent, women. At the partner end, 13, or 21 percent, of 61 are women.

Wolff & Samson in West Orange has 16 female and 23 male associates. While women comprise 41 percent of those ranks, only six, or 13 percent, of the 48 partners are women.

Drinker Biddle & Reath's Florham Park office has 33 associates 12 of whom are women, or 36 percent. Women hold four, or 11 percent, of 38 partnerships.

Cathy Fleming, president-elect of the National Association of Women Lawyers, the oldest women's bar association in the country is a partner at Edwards Angell Palmer & Dodge in Short Hills, the only woman among 10 partners.

No female partners

The following firms have no women as partner, according to data they submitted to NALP.

Greenberg Traurig in Florham Park has three women among 10 associates and 12 partners.

Kelley Drye & Warren in Parsippany counts six women among its 13 associates. There are eight partners.

Latham & Watkins in Newark has more female associates — 16 of 30, plus four male partners.

Lerner David Littenberg Krumholz & Mentlik in Westfield reported six female associates of 30, or 20 percent, and 21 partners.

Proskauer Rose in Newark has 17 female associates, outnumbering the 14 men, at 55 percent women. There are four partners.