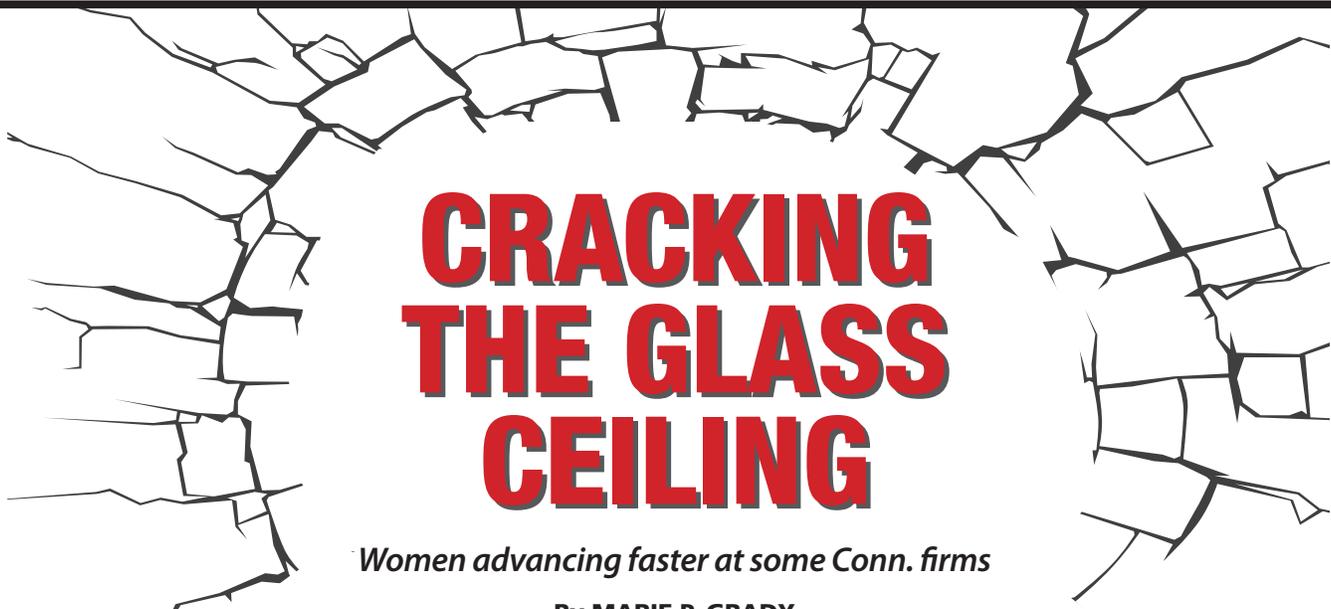


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CRACKING THE GLASS CEILING

Women advancing faster at some Conn. firms

By **MARIE P. GRADY**

As managing partner of one of the largest Connecticut law firms, Elizabeth J. Stewart may have a better perspective than most on the rate at which women are advancing in the legal profession. So she was a little disappointed, but not terribly surprised, when a recent national survey found her peers moving up in the ranks at a snail's pace.

"It's the exception rather than the rule, and I expect it will be for some time," Stewart said of her leadership role at Murtha Cullina.

But, like several other firms in Connecticut, Stewart's appears to be outpacing its larger counterparts nationally. In a report released in November, the National Association of Women Lawyers said a survey of the nation's 200 largest firms found that women had made little or no significant progress in assuming leadership roles or in being paid as much as men.

For example, on average, women made up just 10 to 20 percent of the membership of the largest firms' governing boards and comprised just 5 percent of managing partners. Just under



Female lawyers in the Hartford office of Jackson Lewis say the firm has helped create a climate where gender is not a concern. From left, back, are associate Sally St. Onge, managing partner Beverly Garofalo, partners Holly Cini and Victoria Chavey, associate Cristina Madry and of counsel Sarah Baskin. From left, front, are partners Alison Wice and Tanya Bovee and partner and litigation manager Margaret Strange.

Gary Lewis

15 percent of equity partners — those who rake in the most profits and carry the most clout via their ownership interests — were women, a figure which hasn't changed in six years.

By contrast, women comprise 40 percent of Murtha Cullina's five-member executive board. Nearly 20 percent of its 63 partners are women, and 10 of those 12 partners are equity partners, Stewart said.

Other female managing partners in Connecticut painted a similar picture of progress even though a much-heralded gender equity initiative launched by the Connecticut Bar Association in 2008 has yet to produce quantifiable results.

Firms credited programs ranging from flexible work schedules to accommodate working mothers — and, in some cases, fathers — to initiatives designed to groom women for leadership roles and rainmaking opportunities.

At Waterbury-based Carmody & Torrance, managing partner Ann Rubin said that women hold 28 percent of the firm's equity partnerships and three of five leadership positions. But she cautioned against any strict comparisons to the national data. "The survey only encompassed the 200 largest firms. In Connecticut, the vast majority of law firms are quite small. The [national] results are very different from the experience we've had at Carmody & Torrance," Rubin said.

Marsha Belman Moses, who has been managing partner of Berchem Moses & Devlin, which has offices in Milford and Westport, for 15 years, said that about 30 percent of senior partners — or three of 11 — are women. They include equity and income partners, with the latter group's salary based on a set income rather than profit sharing. Moses called the national survey discouraging. "Quite honestly, I was surprised to read those results and obviously disappointed," she said.

The national report offered few clues as to why gender equality in law firms has stagnated, and doesn't indicate the extent to which personal lifestyle choices, rather than discriminatory practices, influenced the numbers. Diane

Whitney, director of a Women's Leadership Initiative at Pullman & Comley, said she works with one associate who has chosen a part-time, non-partner track role because she wants to spend more time with her family.

"If women don't want those positions then there isn't a problem, but if there's something standing in their way, that's unfortunate," Whitney said.

Retention Key

Robin Frederick, a member of Shipman & Goodwin's seven-member management committee, said 29 percent of her firm's equity partners are women, or double the national average. "The firm retains talent and we have some very talented women at the firm," she said.

At Robinson & Cole, one of Connecticut's oldest and largest firms, women have traditionally held three of five seats on the management committee and co-chair two of three practice group sections, according to partner Rhonda Tobin, co-chair of the Litigation Section and a member of the Managing Committee.

"When it comes to firm leadership, we have a dramatically different experience than what others are reporting; it may be because we're very democratic," Tobin said.

While the national survey found women disproportionately stuck in staff attorney or counsel roles that do not lead to partnerships, Tobin said counsel roles at Robinson & Cole are filled equally by men and women and can lead to partnership. Tobin was promoted to partner from counsel.

A number of out-of-state firms with a significant Connecticut presence also said they exceed national averages relating to gender equity. Beverly Garofalo, managing partner of Jackson Lewis's Hartford office, said the number of female partners in the 670-lawyer national employment law firm jumped from 18.5 percent in 2005 to more than 27 percent this year. Nevertheless, she said the stagnant rate of female ascension nationally was sobering at a time when many clients are demanding more diversity in their law firms. "I was sorry to see that not only does it seem to have plateaued but



Law Tribune File Photo

Judge Lynda B. Munro, a former chairwoman of the Connecticut Bar Association's gender equity task force, said it's hard to judge the progress of women in law firms these days, given the impact of the struggling economy on the legal sector.

that we might be going in the wrong direction [as an industry]," Garofalo said.

Generational Mindset

Like others, Garofalo wondered whether the survey data was also reflective of a generational mindset in which both young women and men are placing greater emphasis on life in the work-life balance. Stewart, for example, said some men as well as women, including partners, are taking advantage of flexible and part-time schedules.

McCarter & English, a 400-lawyer, East Coast firm with offices in Hartford and Stamford, is one of only three firms in the country to meet all six of the Women in Law Empowerment Forum's criteria for gold standard certification, which take into account female leadership and pay parity. In Connecticut, 30 percent of McCarter equity partners are women, according to Jane Warren, a Hartford-based equity partner on the Women's Initiative Steering Committee. "We have worked very hard to make sure we have women in leadership positions in the firm," said Warren.

At Edwards Wildman Palmer, a 650-attorney firm with Connecticut offices, 22 percent of income partners are women and 10 percent of

equity partners are female, according to Judith Hurley, chief operating officer. A spokesman for Day Pitney, meanwhile, said one woman is on the firm's four-member executive committee, 18 percent of partners firmwide are female and two out of eight departments, or 25 percent, are headed by women. The firm doesn't release equity partner data, he said.

Pipeline Gets Smaller

In a troubling sign for future efforts to groom women lawyers for leadership positions, the national survey found a decrease for the first time in its six-year history in the number of new female associates. But, overall, Connecticut firm managers did not find a similar decrease here. And several young female associates cited their firm's commitment to flexible work schedules and efforts to help women succeed as among the reasons.

At Jackson Lewis' Hartford office, third-year associate Cristina Madry said she received nothing but support from management when she asked to reduce her hours by 50 percent to have her first child with her attorney husband. She had returned to 80 percent of normal working hours when she recently learned she is expecting her second child. "Everyone was extremely supportive," she said.

Fellow associate Sally St. Onge said the number of female role models at the firm has helped create a climate where gender is not a concern. "I don't feel like a 'female associate.' I just feel like an associate."

At Shipman & Goodwin, third-year associate Latonia Williams said she was drawn to the firm after working there as a summer associate in 2008. "I think Shipman could serve as a really good example for other firms," Williams said. "My perception of my ability to be promoted is directly correlated to the number of women in leadership positions. I'm lucky the firm does well in that regard."

Beyond The Pledge

The national statistics were released three years after the Connecticut Bar Association

launched a gender equity initiative in which 11 firms signed a pledge to submit annual reports tracking their progress. Among others, the effort was spearheaded by Stacy Smith Walsh, then an associate at Day Pitney who has since been elevated to human resources director.

A firm spokesman said she would decline comment as she is no longer involved in the initiative or practicing law. The new co-chair of the CBA Women in the Law Committee, attorney Andrea Barton Reeves, said she has not received progress reports from firms that signed the gender equity initiative, but the committee would soon reach out to determine whether the program is meeting its objectives. Partners at a number of firms that signed the pledge did not return messages seeking comment.

Judge Lynda B. Munro, the state's chief administrative judge for family matters, was chairwoman of the gender equity task force when the Connecticut effort began. She said she was encouraged by the progress at some Connecticut firms. "Maybe we can be a trendsetter for the rest of the country," she said.

But in some respects, Munro said, the national survey data raises more questions than it answers.

"I think that it's impossible at least in this sort of three- to five- year window to look at any progress, or lack thereof, without consideration of the effect of the economy on these law firms," Munro said. "There are just too many questions that may be engendered by the difficult climate that I think would need to be isolated out. Of course, the correlary question of that is [whether] the economy is affecting women disproportionately."

In terms of layoffs, at least, the national survey did not determine that women were being disproportionately affected. The dip in new female associates is likely related to fewer females attending law school amid an economy which has shed tens of thousands of law jobs, the report acknowledged.

The slow ascension of women may also be due to the fact that many are simply not willing to define their success by a law job that sucks too

much time and energy from raising a family. Barton Reeves is one of those who left a promising position with a Connecticut firm to raise a family. She's now vice president of administration at HARC, which serves people with intellectual disabilities.

"There's this very strange tipping point," Reeves said. "Just as you're at a point in your [legal] career as a woman when you have to devote the most amount of resources to your profession, it's often the same period of time you have to devote those resources to your family."

But Murtha Cullina's Elizabeth Stewart and the three other female managing partners counter the notion that you can't raise a family and raise the bar for a law firm. Stewart was recently rushing back from her firm's Boston office to attend a performance by her 10-year-old son. Ann Rubin, Marsha Belman Moses and Beverly Garofalo have all raised children while moving up the ranks.

Like her counterparts, Stewart credits support from her husband, an organic chemist and professor. Moses said women today are in a far better position than when she started practicing three decades ago. Change, she said, takes time.

"Certainly when I started practicing it was a very male dominated practice," Moses said. "Even though this report is not one that I would like to be seeing, it still shows tremendous growth in terms of the role of women." ■

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