

WLANSW press release – 2019 Law Firm Comparison project

It's not about the women – firms should be examining their structure and culture

In 2018 WLANSW called on the legal profession to expedite the advancement of women in private practice in the profession by committing to a number of concrete measures including setting targets for partner admission, undertaking regular gender remuneration analysis, introducing transparency around remuneration and encouraging men to take up parental leave and flexible work arrangements.

The WLANSW 2019 Law Firm Comparison report, now in its 7th year is based on analysis of data from the Workplace Gender Equality Agency and other public sources. The report shows that the firms that have adopted some of these measures are making progress on gender equality, and although it is slow, there has been improvement over time in the number of firms with higher female partner percentages. 13 firms which made partner promotions in 2017, 2018 and 2019 have met the 40% minimum female partner percentage target recommended by WLANSW, and in fact 3 firms have exceeded 50% female partner promotions in that time - Clayton Utz, Maddocks and Holding Redlich.

This demonstrates that WLANSW's recommended 40/40/20 model, with 40% of any new partner admissions in any year being male, 40% female, and the remaining 20% varying depending on the candidate pool, is achievable. *"Targets are an effective way of keeping firms accountable, particularly when they are made public, and reflect the underlying pool of female partner candidates. We would like to see more firms commit to public targets for female representation"* says WLANSW President Larissa Andelman.

Progress on female partner representation is slow, but trending upwards, with a small number of firms now with more than 40% female partners, from zero firms above 40% in 2013. There remains a persistent number of firms with less than 20% female partner representation. Given that women make up more than 50% of the legal profession overall, WLANSW would expect to see the rate of change accelerate in the near future.

Unfortunately, there were 10 firms who promoted no women to partnership in 2019, despite the senior associate pool overall being female dominated. While no firm has more than 50% female partners, almost every firm has a senior associate pool that is more than 50% female. This suggests that the pipeline is not the issue, rather the glass ceiling remains strongly placed between senior associate and partner level in some firms, warranting examination of what the requirements are to make partner in those firms.

Leadership of firms remains male dominated at the Chairperson, CEO and director level. 10 of the 61 firms had no women on their governing body in the reporting period, and only a handful of firms had a female CEO. While increased female partner representation is encouraging, it must also be reflected in other leadership roles within the firms.

What was really encouraging is that leading firms are taking steps to encourage more men to take parental leave, with Baker & McKenzie and Allens both introducing innovative parental leave policies that promote equality.

WLANSW president Larissa Andelman said *"To support women at work, employers also need to support men to take up a greater share of caring responsibilities. 24% of all female partners are working part-time while for male partners this figure is around 4%. Women are also overwhelmingly the ones taking parental leave, with few men even taking leave as a secondary carer, despite many firms having generous paid leave for secondary carers. This has to be a focus for firms, not just to*

support women, but to break down the cultural and structural barriers that make it unacceptable for men to work flexibly or take parental leave.”

In addition, leading firms are taking practical measures that include undertaking an annual gender pay analysis, creating transparent and objective structures around the setting of remuneration and remuneration reviews, and setting targets to reduce any gender pay gap they find, and adopting the Law Council’s Model Equitable Briefing policy. These proactive actions demonstrate not just a commitment to gender equality, but practical and measurable steps that will make it happen.

WLANSW president Larissa Andelman said *“Unless law firms implement practical and measurable steps to change the workplace culture and structures, women will not be able to fully participate and thrive in the profession.”*

WLANSW has published a Leading Practice Guide for Law Firms which sets out the practical steps that can be taken to improve gender equality for all and looks forward to working with law firms in 2020 to implement these measures.

The Guide, Report and 2019 Comparison table can be accessed on the WLANSW website.