

Patron, the Honourable Virginia Bell AC

WLANSW MEDIA RELEASE – 2020/2021 LAW FIRM COMPARISON PROJECT

In 2019, when the Women Lawyers Association of New South Wales (WLANSW) published the last Law Firm Comparison Project report, we called for firms to implement practical and measurable steps to change their workplace culture and structures to enable women to fully participate and thrive in the legal profession.

The WLANSW 2020/2021 Law Firm Comparison report (the 2020/2021 Report), now in its eighth year, is based on analysis of data from the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA), other public sources and information provided by firms in response to a WLANSW request to firms that report to the WGEA.

The 2020/2021 Report shows that leadership of law firms is remaining male dominated, despite women making up more than half the profession (and over half of law graduates for many years). Unfortunately, since our last report, the number of female chairs fell to only six, and the number of male chairs rose to 87.

On the positive side, firms with female CEOs increased from six to eleven and female director numbers increased from 24% to 26.5% overall.

The overall trends in partnership ranks show that there was a marked reduction in the number of firms where women make up less than 20% of partners. There was an increase in the number of firms with more than 30% women partners.

The difficulty is identifying whether women are achieving equity partnership, and this is why WLANSW surveyed reporting firms. Of the 12 firms that provided the detailed information we were seeking, overall 30% of partners were women. However 26% of partners were equity and 39% were salaried. Of the 86 part-time equity partners, 40 were women and 16 were men. We found this statistic encouraging as it indicates that part-time work may not be an impediment to achieving equity partnership.

Promotion of women partners continues to improve, but WLANSW would like to see more firms publicly committing to yearly targets for partnership admission. Our dataset for 2020/21 showed a continuing reduction in the number of firms only promoting men to partnership during their rounds of promotions. 23 firms in our datasets for the last four years averaged over 40% female promotions during the four years that we have been collecting this data.

The WGEA Employer of Choice citation continues to be valued by a number of reporting firms. There are now eleven firms which have held the citation for ten years or more.

Leading firms are continuing to take practical measures to address the structural and cultural impediments to the retention and progression of women in the legal profession. These measures include commitments to targets for female partners and at board level, focussing on pay equity and flexibility for men and women, commitment to the Law Council of Australia's Equitable Briefing Policy and the adoption of the Law Society of New South Wales' Charter for the Advancement of Women.

WLANSW President Renee Bianchi said *"Whilst the legal profession, along with everyone else, has been dealing with the COVID global pandemic, it is encouraging that our data shows continual improvement in the number of women in senior leadership positions in the profession, and a reduction in firms promoting only men to partnership. We hope that the flexible work practices that have been adopted through the pandemic will continue and this will lead to greater diversity in workplace culture and structure."*

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The 2020/2021 Report is positive but there is still more work to do to ensure the promotion and retention of women in the legal profession and into senior leadership roles in the profession, particularly to partnership, and especially equity partnership, and board level.

Women have made up more than half of all law graduates for some decades. This should have filtered through to greater numbers of women in senior leadership roles and has not. More work needs to be done. Cultural change cannot continue at a glacial pace if we wish to retain and promote greater numbers of women in the legal profession. “

The 2020/2021 Report can be accessed via the WLANSW website:

<https://womenlawyersnsw.org.au/resources/lawfirm-comparison-project/>