

Patron, the Honourable Acting Justice Jane Mathews AO

Best Workplaces for Women Highlighted in Law Firm Comparison Data

19 October 2015

Gender reporting shines a light on what is happening in law firms, and although progress is being made, there is still a way to go. The 2015 Women Lawyers' Association of NSW (WLANSW) Law Firm Comparison project conducted by the WLANSW Workplace Practices Subcommittee, highlights exactly where progress has been made, and the firms that are making it, on a range of indicators including partnership composition, parental leave and pipeline statistics.

Since 2013, when WLANSW last conducted its Law Firm Comparison project, the introduction of more comprehensive reporting requirements to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) has meant that there is more information publically available about a wider range of law firms, the gender composition of their workforces, and their diversity and inclusion practices.

The following is notable about the 2015 data:

- Many firms improved their female partner percentage from previous years.
- Those who did not fall into 2 categories - those who were already above the female partner average in past years, and have slipped slightly, and those who have fallen further behind.
- The proportion of female senior associates is high, in many cases more than 50%. The challenge is in converting that to partner numbers, particularly equity partners, and creating career frameworks that are not necessarily linear, but genuinely value different levels of contribution and seniority.
- The WGEA data on equity partner numbers, and the gender split within that group, is highly valuable, and drives much greater transparency.
- When firms were ranked by both numbers of female partners and equity partners, (possibly for the first time this year) the stand-out firms who are exceeding the female partner average in both total partner and equity partner categories were Maddocks, Gilbert & Tobin, Holding Redlich, Hall & Wilcox, and King & Wood Mallesons, with Ashurst just missing the general partner cut-off, but making the equity partner average. It must be remembered that the measurement is taken from the average female partner percentage (ranging from 20.4% to 25.4% depending on the size of firm), which is still considerably below the average of women in the profession as a whole, currently sitting at 48.5%.
- For the first time, data was available on the percentage of partners working flexibly. With focus on initiatives like "all roles flex" it will be interesting to see if these numbers increase over time. The challenge is to redesign the work model and recognise that flexibility is a mainstream issue and not a benefit only available for employees with caring responsibilities.
- It is encouraging to see the number of men taking parental leave, as gender equality is more than just women in partnership roles, but also includes men in non-traditional roles, and sharing the caring work. These figures continued to be very low and are an important indicator that despite there being policies in place that allow men to take parental leave, these are not being accessed because of the culture in law firms and in the legal profession more broadly.
- While the majority of firms say they have done a gender pay analysis, a number have not, and the level of analysis might be queried given that the WGEA gender pay gap for the legal profession is at 35.6% overall.

From 2016, WLANSW will be looking to grow and expand its Law Firm Comparison Data project, including the disclosure of data in relation to firms who have adopted the Law Council of Australia Equitable Briefing Policy. While there is no requirement to disclose partner pay to the WGEA at present, this could additionally be an area of attention in the future, as an organisational wide pay gap analysis cannot really be comprehensive if one cohort is excluded from it.

The 2015 WLANSW Law Firm Comparison Data Table is available on the WLANSW website
<https://womenlawyersnsw.org.au/workplace-practices/>

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