

Report shows small increase of women in law firms

Nearly 35 percent of lawyers in firms nationwide are women

By: [Thomas Franz](#) in [News Stories](#) August 7, 2017

Women representation in law firms is still growing at a slow pace, according to a report recently published by Law360.

The report, which was cited in an article by the American Bar Association, states that women made up 34.8 percent of lawyers in law firms nationwide last year. That figure was up from 34 percent last year.



Law360's survey included 300 law firms with at least 20 attorneys, and also revealed that just 17 percent of law firms reported that at least 40 percent of their lawyers were women.

Reaction from Michigan lawyers

Leaders of women lawyers groups across Michigan weren't surprised by the survey's findings, but nonetheless expressed disappointment that more progress hasn't been made in this area of the legal industry.

As for causes behind the survey's findings, they pointed to the difficulty women face in raising a family while attempting to advance in their legal career.

"Generally speaking, women typically have to juggle more, from children to taking care of aging parents, to volunteering for community events. These experiences and responsibilities should be celebrated, not discouraged," said Julie A. Gafkay, president of the Women Lawyers Association of Michigan. "Unfortunately, the latter tends to be true, in order to be successful, CEO or partner at a big law firm, women are often faced with the dilemma to choose versus being able to balance it."

Sharan L. Levine, a partner at Levine & Levine in Kalamazoo, said she has seen some change in law firm demographics over her 40-year career, but it hasn't been enough.

"I'm sorry to see that the numbers are so scant relative to women's rise. When I went to law school, we were clearly a minority and there were many firms who had no women in the firm at all," Levine said. "It surprises me to see that there are still law firms that have maybe one or two women. You still see it."

How to improve

In order to make better progress in this area, women lawyers have suggested that firms model their office dynamics after Silicon Valley.

"Silicon Valley does a very good job of trying to incorporate both genders into the workplace and make it easier for both genders to have successful work lives as well as home lives," said Shawndrica N. Simmons, president of the Black Women Lawyers Association of Michigan.

"I think if law firms adopted the same philosophies, such as on-site day care, lack of scrutiny for wanting to take off for leave for an issue with their child or for a woman's issue, if they made their work environment more conducive where it was more open and accepted, than we can be open to our issues, put them on the table and be judged solely on our work product," said Simmons, of Simmons Legal in Pontiac.

Gafkay, of Gafkay Law PLC in Frankenmuth, added that firms need to rethink what a typical workday looks like.

"Real progress will require rethinking the traditional work day so all employees, not just women, can have balance and ultimately will be more productive as a

result. With technology, it's possible to work remotely, to reduce travel with videoconferencing. With technology, the workday should be more flexible, not less," Gafkay said.

Erin Klug leads the Oakland County section of the WLAM, which she explained helps support and encourage women entering the legal industry.

"Pushing the idea of women supporting other women is probably the biggest thing we do, and maybe that doesn't directly affect the number of women in a law firm, but I think that it at least indirectly does," said Klug, of Varnum LLP in Novi. "I think if women had more mentors then they would be more inclined to stay in the practice and firm life and stick it out, but women mentors are very difficult to find."

Gafkay added that involving men in the process of increasing the number of women in firms is an important part to this process as well.

"Equality benefits everyone — women and men. We're working to include men and get them to the table to help with equality. Men are welcome to be members of the organization. WLAM is building alliances with other organizations to reach more people so that more girls see that being a lawyer and a successful lawyer is possible and desirable for women," Gafkay said.