

WORKING
MOTHER

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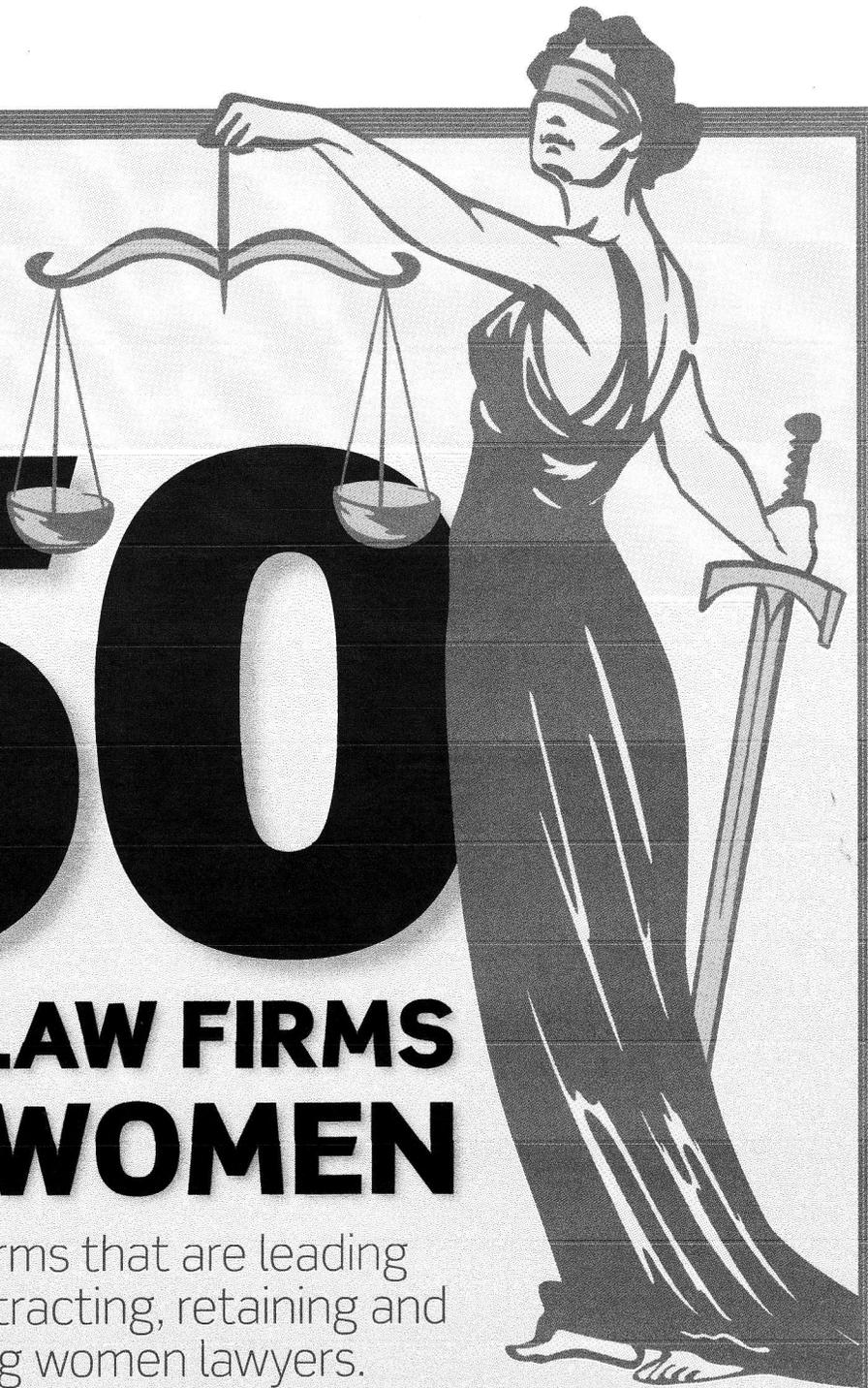


FLEX-TIME
LAWYERS LLC

500

BEST LAW FIRMS FOR WOMEN

Meet the firms that are leading
the way in attracting, retaining and
promoting women lawyers.



Why Work Life Still Matters

By Deborah Epstein Henry

In my work with law firms and companies, I see women focusing more and more on seeking gender-equal compensation and opportunities for promotion,

leadership and business development. The thinking goes that until women represent a critical mass in the leadership and rainmaker ranks—about 30 percent of a firm

or company's ownership and management positions—they will not have enough influence to change the way business gets done.

This critical-mass emphasis represents a shift in focus, and it shows progress: Women have been able to expand their messages and goals in recent years. But while the Best Law Firms for Women seek

to improve women's advancement and leadership trajectories, and equalize compensation and business development credit, women's retention must not get lost in the climb to the top. Why is it important? Because nearly one third of women lawyers continue to leave the legal workforce, independent of maternity leave. Talk about critical mass.

Family reasons remain a significant factor in women's departures, along with lack of career satisfaction. If more of these "early leavers" are encouraged to remain in the workforce or are welcomed back after leaving, the pipeline of midlevel women lawyers and managers will fill with leadership candidates. These women will be positioned to achieve the critical mass at the top that is necessary for real change.

To retain these early leavers, law firms and companies need to institute more generous maternity leave policies, facilitate viable flexible and reduced hours and develop phase-back for returning new mothers and reentry policies for women who have stepped away from the profession. But policies alone will not do it. Those who reach leadership positions can take these policies a step further and use their platform of power to lead differently. For example, leaders can de-stigmatize work life offerings so that women and men can avail themselves of these options for reasons other than parenting. Men can be encouraged to be part of the process, too. They continue to make up the majority of the power base, so men need to be instrumental in women gaining power.

Advancing more women and supporting work life initiatives at the same time requires careful planning on the part of law firm and corporate leaders. Safeguards are needed to ensure that the power message is not diluted and women do not lose credibility or diminish their opportunity

to get a seat at the table by advocating for both. Here are three important steps that I recommend law firms and companies consider:

- **Track all levels of female representation.** The simultaneous push for retention and promotion will only be beneficial if it results in more women staying in or returning to the profession overall *and* in more women being represented at the highest level.

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- **Create an on-ramp that enables talented women to return to the advancement track.** In other words, women who've been on a slower track and are capable of doing more sophisticated, higher-paid work should be given the opportunity to resume the fast track.
- **Break down existing stereotypes.** Men and women must be educated



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about the different career paths available to them, what each entails and the risks and trade-offs of their potential choice. Law firms and companies must be vigilant that women are not being steered into "mommy" tracks that minimize their opportunities to reach leadership positions and equity partner status or gain equal compensation and business development credit. They must also guard against assumptions that all women or all mothers want their hours or responsibilities limited.

The bottom line is that when women achieve the critical mass at the top of their profession, they will be able to redesign the way careers are built, to allow for women who are singularly focused on seeking powerful positions as well as women who want to have children *and* lead a law firm, and every other variation in between. By embracing different career models, law firm and corporate leaders will not only ensure that early leavers remain in or come back to the profession, they will also increase the number of women in the leadership pipeline. ■

KEY EQUITY PARTNERS = Equity partners who are women NONEQUITY PARTNERS = Nonequity partners who are women REDUCED HOURS = Lawyers working reduced hours