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**Charles Martin**

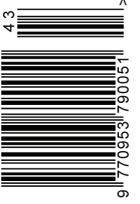
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# THE LAWYER



## Female advance

How five associates aim to put law firm gender balance right

# WILL to power

Tired of firms' talk of commitment to the partnership gender balance while seeing scant evidence of change, five female lawyers have launched Women in Law London (WILL) to empower women to take the initiative themselves



Natasha Bernal

If you look closely around a partner meeting in any of the top law firms in the UK you might see something odd. In a sea of ties and sharp suits, female partners stand out without even speaking.

Despite women accounting for over 50 per cent of all new entries to the role of solicitor for several years, the top 20 law firms have on average only 29.6 per cent female partners – compared to 70.3 per cent male partners.

Add to this a concerning trend: only three of the top 20 firms in the UK have promoted one or more women every year for the past seven years (see box, page 18).

These figures expose a serious disparity in gender at partnership level that still exists within law firms; and it is one that is reflected on an international scale and shows that firms have a long battle ahead to improve their female associate retention rates and encourage women to run for partnership slots.

Data from the top 20 firms in the UK gathered by *The Lawyer* shows nine firms with 30 to 35 per cent representation, seven with 20 to 30 per cent representation, and four with less than 20 per cent.

At the bottom of the gender equality scale is Taylor Wessing, with 11 per cent of female partners in the UK and 12.2 per cent abroad. The one firm bucking the trend is Irwin Mitchell, with equal representation and a 49 per cent female presence as partners both in the UK and globally.

## WHAT HOLDS WOMEN BACK?

Why are there not more women at the top? Some firms blame a hard work-life balance, demanding hours or the allure of in-house roles. Others believe women are less likely than men to aggressively pursue a shot at partnership, may not have enough female role models or mentors to inspire or advise them, or may just not be interested in partnership.

Some people, like the five female lawyers launching an independent network for women lawyers, think lack of communication stunts their growth at law firms.

The five committee members from the WILL network (Women in Law London) may come from four law firms, but they all believe the issues that women face as legal professionals cannot be simplified as lack of confidence or the biological imperative to have children.

Far from being aggrieved, many of these women consider themselves fortunate in their mentors and the encouragement they received, something they are aware is not the case for many others.

Their argument is that there is a lack of information given to female lawyers, and very few opportunities to talk to female partners as potential mentors. There are networking opportunities for partners at the top, but with nothing dedicated to female associates who most need support and advice, these five lawyers decided to start their own.

With 1,200 members from around 350 firms and in-house departments ahead of their first event in the City last Friday (17 October), the demand for an independent network that taps into knowledge from different firms is already high.

## THE MASTERMIND

Edwards Wildman Palmer associate Sascha Grimm is the brain responsible for WILL's launch.

**“Just 17 per cent of women partners were made up last year. That has only changed one per cent since 2006. At that rate it will take 100 years to get anywhere,”**  
**Sascha Grimm**

“Around the end of last year I was looking to join a women's network. It's no secret that retention rates for women aren't that great,” she explains. “I couldn't find anything that was aimed at associates – the demographic that was leaving the profession.”

Grimm decided to call on her network of friends and contacts to find out whether there was any demand for a network aimed at associates. She found four women willing to help her build WILL from the ground up as a “grassroots network”.

What is most concerning is the lack of overall progress in appointments of women to partners. Grimm says that upward movement is “glacial”.

“Just 17 per cent of women partners were made up last year and that has only changed one per cent since 2006. At that rate it is going to take 100 years to get anywhere,” she explains.

Gunning for progression opportunities as a woman can also be a difficult task: “There are always studies about women who act like

## At a glance

The top ten firms in the UK have taken up the initiative to implement mentoring schemes and support for associates, although few are measuring what kind of impact they are having on overall partner figures as a result.

### Norton Rose Fulbright

Most aggressive of the top 10, turning around the low figures prior to 2011 through a monitored pipeline and career strategies programme to a 50-50 split.

### Hogan Lovells

Gone through a recent audit to look at further action on any gender issues. Plans to hit 25 per cent of female partners in the UK by 2015.

### Clifford Chance

Compares and contrasts potential partner candidates for potential unconscious bias. Has an internal women's network and a 30 per cent target but no deadline.

### Linklaters

Leadership programme targets female associates with the most potential. Trying to reach the ‘challenging’ target of 30 per cent for some point in the future.

### Slaughter and May

Plans to improve the gender ratio with a mentor scheme and a women's network. Isn't yet willing to set targets or measure the success of its schemes.

### Herbert Smith Freehills

Gender programmes aim to shield partners' minds against unconscious bias. Has a women's network; hopes to push forward to 30 per cent in 2019.

*CMS Cameron McKenna, Freshfields, Allen & Overy and DLA Piper did not respond to requests for information.*



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDY STAPLES

Girls (l-r): Ellen Hughes-Jones; Sophie Bragg; Suzanne Szczetnikowicz; Sascha Grimm; Fatema Orjera

that: if you do ask for it you are seen as bolshie or pushy,” she argues.

Through WILL, Grimm hopes more female associates will network with female partners and have the chance to find new mentors from different firms – creating a level playing field that will allow more women to fight for partnership.

Although Grimm always says she is “up for a debate”, she believes that flexible working, which some firms have put in place to help female associates achieve a better work-life balance, is something that male associates appreciate too.

“I know a lot of guys who would like to work more flexibly too,” she says.

#### HOW IT ALL STARTED

Mishcon de Reya solicitor Sophie Bragg is one of the committee members for WILL. “Like so many great

plans, it all started over a glass of wine,” she laughs.

The five women may not have discussed the finer details of long-term strategy but they had no trouble identifying the problem they wanted to overcome. “Put simply, something isn’t working,” Bragg explains. “As a profession, we have been talking about ‘the women’s issue’ for too long without seeing any positive change. We want to provide a framework for women to build sustainable networks to boost their careers.”

Although some firms are moving in the right direction, internal programmes have not produced sizeable results. “They may have the schemes in place, but we haven’t seen that making enough of a difference yet,” she says.

“I think that firms are more likely to implement positive changes if

they know that other firms have already found a way to make those changes work.”

Although firms skip around the subject of quotas, preferring to set targets, Bragg isn’t so sure that they are a bad thing: “I am not personally averse to quotas as a short-term measure to correct the imbalance at the top, the theory being that things then self-regulate more organically once the initial correction is made.”

#### THE QUOTA CONCESSION

Shearman & Sterling senior associate Suzanne Szczetnikowicz, who has taken on the unofficial role of vice-president of the network, believes that things aren’t as simple as setting a quota and filling it. “You can’t just separately look at the diversity issue; you have to make it into part of your business,” she explains. “We need to better under-

stand what the reasons are for women moving away from the profession. Quotas do help to bring to the forefronts of people’s minds factors they might not otherwise have taken into consideration.”

After speaking to female associates, many of the confidence issues presented as personality traits were common. “It made me realise that the issue is not just about us as lawyers, it starts with our education system and the way girls and boys interact at a young age,” she says.

If anything is going to change, Szczetnikowicz argues that it has to start with the senior and managing partners’ mentality. “There needs to be a dialogue. We talk about this glass ceiling, and while it is helpful to have a network like ours as well as mentoring, you also need management to buy in to make it work.”

Although the WILL network is

## Cover story



### Sascha Grimm

**2007-present:** Commercial litigation associate at Edwards Wildman Palmer

**On the ethos of the network:** "It's a grassroots network and we want it to stay that way."

**Her inspiration:** "Lady Hale. She is brilliant and I would love to have her by my side."



### Sophie Bragg

**2012-present:** Employment solicitor at Mishcon de Reya

**2010-2012:** Associate at Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer

**Her inspiration:** "I admire Helena Kennedy QC and Mishcon head of employment Joanna Blackburn, who has been a very positive force for change at the firm."



### Ellen Hughes-Jones

**2012-present:** IP associate at Edwards Wildman

**2008-2012:** Associate at Bristows

**Her inspiration:** "Among others, Bristows partner Liz Cohen. She showed me that being a woman shouldn't be an issue."



### Suzanne Szczetnikowicz

**2014-present:** Senior associate, project development and finance at Shearman & Sterling

**2013-14:** Associate at Shearman & Sterling

**2012-2013:** Legal associate HSBC

**2009-2012:** Associate at Shearman & Sterling

**Her inspiration:** "Shearman & Sterling partner Sarah Priestley, who was involved in the project."



### Fatema Orjela

**2011-present:** Senior associate, corporate and private equity, Kirkland & Ellis

**2009-2011:** Associate at Hogan Lovells

**Her inspiration:** "Kirkland's Christian Iwasko and Eric Dahl and Hogan Lovells' Tom Whelan are among those who have taken the time to mentor me."

just starting out and a lot is to be decided, Edwards Wildman intellectual property associate and WILL committee member Ellen Hughes-Jones knows one thing for certain: "We don't want to be a bunch of lawyers standing in a room and complaining about our problems."

"But we were quite confounded by what we've found – people are mentally checking themselves out of their career at mid-rank associate level because they think they won't be able to manage having a family with the pressures of being a partner. We want to make sure they know this is not the case," she explains.

"Having a support network behind you means you see someone who has done it before, and so know there is a path to partnership," Hughes-Jones says. The network has set up a series of mentors or 'champions' who are planning to provide exactly that.

"Having people ahead of you who you can speak to and learn from will be very useful."

Hughes-Jones has noticed an exodus of women to in-house roles. "There is still a perception that in-house enables you to have a better work-life balance," she says. "We want to investigate that further. I am sure men feel the same way."

"Also, there is a perception that people tend to recruit in their own image. If that is the case, we need more women to recruit other women – we need to make sure the best candidates for promotion are presented."

#### LOUD AND PROUD

"Ironically, I met Sascha at a networking event," says Kirkland & Ellis associate Fatema Orjela. She joined WILL with the aim to "provide the loudspeaker" for female associates' collective voice.

Orjela believes the project wouldn't have come about if current and past female partners hadn't paved the way. "They have done their part and pushed their way through. There needs to be a dialogue now so that

our generation can do our part," she explains.

Between them, the five women contacted the 100 top firms in the UK to tell them about the network. "We were quite overwhelmed by the response, given we were contacting very busy people who have their own initiatives and we didn't have a name. It was surprising and comforting that people completely understood why our offering could be different," Orjera explains.

#### CHAMPIONING PARTNERSHIP

Maples & Calder partner Heidi de Vries is one of the champions for the Will network, and says she was "delighted" to be involved.

"From my perspective, I am very fortunate to be able to balance my career and my family life. It comes with an awful lot of hard work and a lot of ball-juggling," she explains.

De Vries, who was made partner when she was pregnant, says the process to get to the top was a meritocracy. "I wouldn't say it was a struggle but I worked very hard to meet the criteria that was set out."

"I think it's very important for firms to make it known what the requirements are to progress to partnership. Law firms also need to have a culture of looking to promote women and have a culture of diversity."

Behind the scenes, many of the top 10 firms in the UK have been working on bridging the gap between the number of female associates and the number of female lawyers.

One of the standout examples is Norton Rose Fulbright, which has gone from extremely low numbers to a 50 per cent representation year-on-year since 2011.

Norton Rose Fulbright Global Director of People and Development Andrew McEachern says the firm developed a plan to address the lack of diversity, implementing a pipeline from associate to partner. The firm's 2010 career strategies programme made a marked difference. It also has a flexible working scheme.

McEachern explains: "We haven't

# Cover story

## Half of all entrants, a quarter of all partners

Women have made up more than half the entrants to the roll of solicitors for quite some time, yet this statistic is some way off being reflected in annual partner promotions.

In the top 20 UK-headquartered firms, only a quarter of partnership promotions globally between 2008 and 2014 have been women. At the height of the financial crisis, in 2009 and 2010, women represented less than 22 per cent of partner promotions in this group.

For the same group of firms in the UK itself, the statistics are a little better, although it should be

stressed they are still poor. Between 2008 and 2014 women represented 28.6 per cent of all partner promotions in the UK.

In 2013 a full third of new UK partners in the top 20 were women, but depressingly there was a fall of almost 5 percentage points between 2013 and this year. In 2014 28.5 per cent of promotions went to women.

Of the UK top 20, the firm that has proportionally promoted the most women is **Irwin Mitchell**. Almost half its promotions since 2008 have been female – 25 out of 51. The firm is arguably helped by the fact that it focuses on

contentious work, including insurance and employment, areas that have traditionally attracted more women.

Among the more global firms **Norton Rose Fulbright** stands out. Since 2008 women have accounted for 37.5 per cent of its promotions in the UK and 36 per cent globally, or 61 women out of 169 promotions.

Legacy Norton Rose was historically rather poor on diversity metrics, making up no women in the UK in 2008 or 2009 and only one in 2010. Globally, women represented only 10 per cent of promotions for these three

years. However, since 2011, the firm has become the most consistent promoter of women in the UK top 20 apart from Irwin Mitchell. In 2011, 2012 and 2013 women represented 50 per cent or more of all UK promotions, and since 2011 more than 40 per cent of new partners globally have been female.

**Slaughter and May** is the only other firm in the UK's top 20 where women make up a third or more of newly promoted partners globally in the past seven years – although Slaughters' promotion rounds tend to be small which means that, in percentage terms

made any promotions in that time because that person is a woman, but we have seen a change in women aspiring to partnership because of this programme.

“When we are looking for more partners, we have to make sure that we have a slate of candidates that isn't just filled with men.”

### THE DIVERSITY CHALLENGE

It is hard to say why firms have not done anything about gender disparity at partnership level before. “Some firms haven't had a diversity manager, it just wasn't a priority,” he says. The big pressure for firms has been from the client side as they become more invested in diversity, changing their priorities.

The firm's associate retention rate is high, with a drop-off rate of around 10 per cent on the path to senior associate. Its target is 30 per cent, although McEachern is reluctant to set a date, saying the firm needs to encourage talent development without doing anything “un-meritocratic”.

Herbert Smith Freehills has taken a different approach to solving the gender-gap issue, aiming to eliminate unconscious bias. It held a gender programme, attended by 80 per cent of London partners, with the objective to alert them to unconscious bias when hiring and promoting.

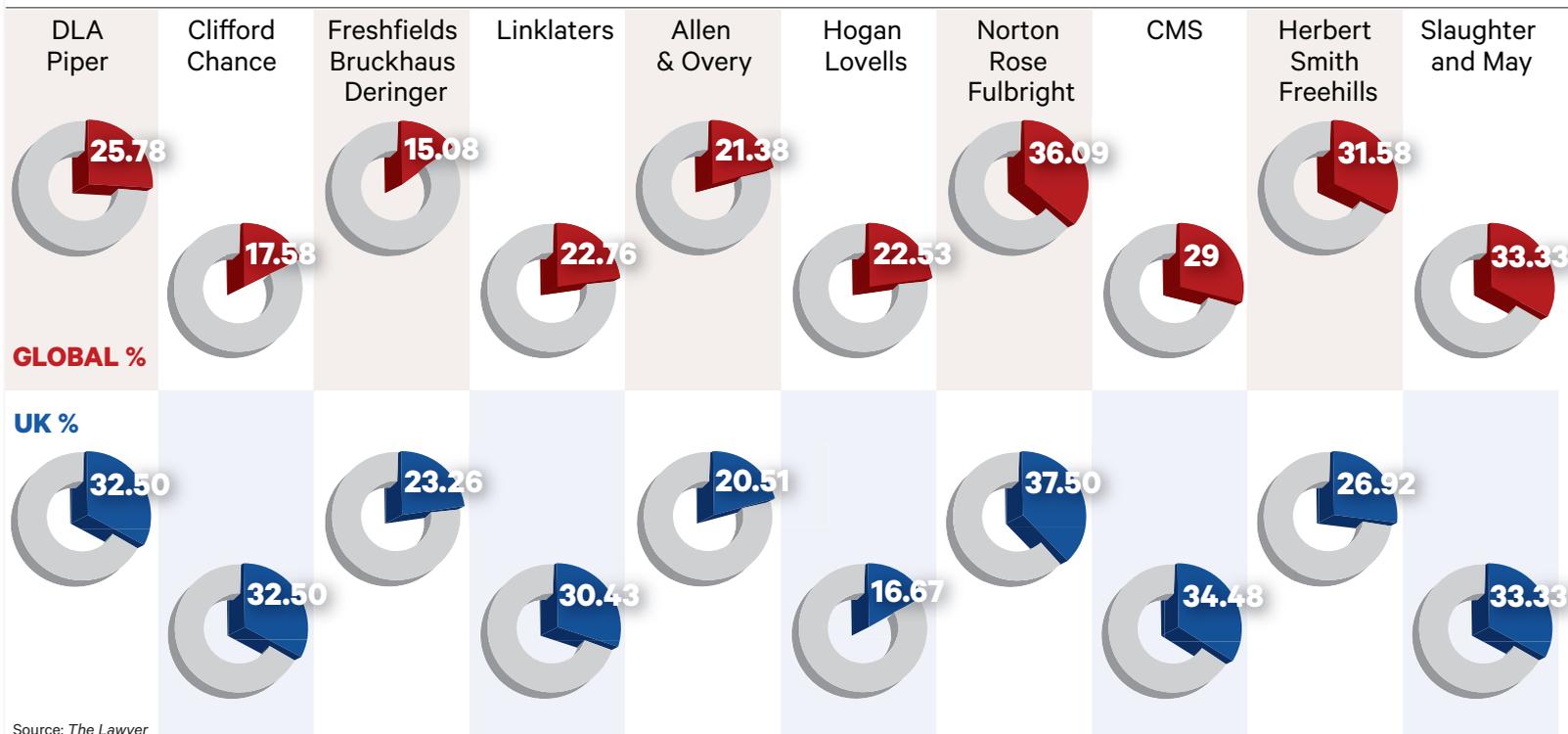
The firm has a “challenging and aspirational 30 per cent target by

2019”, which is “not a quota and not a cap”, according to diversity partner Nick Turner. The firm also has targeted career development work aimed at the 1-3 years PQE, and an internal woman's network with around 400 members. The firm admits it “could probably do more about flexible working”.

Hogan Lovells, which has several different mentoring schemes, has the objective of 25 per cent of female partners in the UK and 30 per cent of across the firm by 2015.

“We have just undertaken an audit in our London office to look at what further action we could take over gender issues,” Hogan Lovells diversity committee co-chair Ruth Grant says. “I think quite a lot of

## Female partner promotions as % of total promotions



women have represented between 0 per cent (in 2009, 2011 and 2012) and 75 per cent (in 2008).

In four firms – **Berwin Leighton Paisner (BLP)**, **Bird & Bird, Clyde & Co** and **Herbert Smith Freehills** – women have represented over 30 per cent of partner promotions since 2008.

At the other end of the scale, **Taylor Wessing** has the lowest proportion of female promotions of the top 20. The firm has made up only five women in the past seven years – one in 2008 and four in 2013. This represents just 12 per cent of the firm’s promotions.

Even in 2013 those four female partners represented just 25 per cent of the round. In London only two female associates have made the cut in seven years: tax specialist Omleen Ajimal, who has since left the firm and is director of international tax at **Squire Patton Boggs**, and private client lawyer Kirstie McGuigan.

Other top 20 firms where women represent less than 20 per cent of all promotions in the past seven years are **Ashurst, Clifford Chance, Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer** and legacy **SJ Berwin**.

**Freshfields** has the poorest magic circle record, with women

making up only 15 per cent of global promotions and 23.3 per cent of UK promotions.

Of the top 20 eight firms – **Ashurst, BLP, Clydes, Pinsent Masons, Simmons & Simmons, SJ Berwin, Slaughters and Taylor Wessing** – have had years where they have made up no women at all. That figure rises when UK-only promotions are examined. Indeed, only three firms in the top 20 have managed to make up at least one female lawyer in the UK every year for the past seven years – **Clifford Chance, DLA Piper** and **Eversheds**.

the rest of the aspirational 30 per-centers. Partner Fiona Hobbs says: We will try our hardest to meet the targets we have set ourselves, but they are aspirational – and challenging – for a reason.”

The firm has training, events, mentoring schemes and the Linklaters’ Women’s Leadership Programme to target women.

Slaughter and May has a mentoring scheme and a women’s network, and has said it is keen to promote more women to partnership. However, it has yet to set gender balance targets for partners.

**STEPPING UP PACE OF CHANGE**

Firms may be willing to take a step in the right direction and encourage female associates to stand for partnership, but without monitoring results and taking decisive action, the pace at which they make female associates partners will continue to stutter. Meritocracy seems to be the buzzword of many firms that are determined to promote the best person for the job, regardless of gender. This puts more pressure on female associates, who will have to be more vocal and clear about their aims for partnership to be noticed.

With an uneven playing field and a fierce fight for a narrowing margin of partner slots, a bit of networking might not be the key to partnership for the next generation of female associates. It may mean the start of a tight-knit community of women who are able to put collective pressure on law firms to turn the tide on partner numbers.

women would like to be partners but they don’t always articulate it, whereas men do.”

**TOP-DOWN ENCOURAGEMENT**

The change often comes from above, according to Grant. “Role models and behaviours between partners are really making a difference. This is difficult stuff.”

There is a substantial lack of female role models at the top, Grant says. “I think the problem is that the number of female partners is pretty static. We aren’t generating more role models out of the blue.”

She argues that flexible working should be available to everyone. “It shouldn’t be a gender issue,” says Grant.

“It’s about good communication and we need more people to be willing to have a career conversation at an early stage.”

Clifford Chance monitors proposed partner candidates and “compares them to the corresponding associate gender representation of the underlying group and office”, gives training around unconscious bias and has an internal network for women.

Despite this, the firm has yet to reach its 30 per cent target. A spokesperson for Clifford Chance says “there are no quick answers, however our priority is to secure a sustainable improvement while maintaining our meritocratic culture”.

Linklaters’ approach is similar to

