



# United we stand

Women need to help each other to help themselves, say **Ann Halpern** and **Weedie Sisson**

**M**adeleine Albright, former US secretary of state, famously said: “There’s a special place in hell for women who don’t help other women.” How many female lawyers, particularly female partners in law firms, deserve a place in that hell? Sadly, in our experience of the legal environment, all too many would qualify. The women’s movement hoped that, as women climbed the corporate ladder, they would enhance the working environment for their ‘sisters’. But what has been the reality in the law?

## **Helping hand**

We challenge women lawyers to be more engaged in helping their female

colleagues succeed. The evidence suggests that if there is ever to be a quantum change in the number of women lawyers achieving career success, be it through women’s initiatives or otherwise, it is women helping other women who can make the difference. A woman who helps other women helps herself by creating a collective path to her own further success. She also helps her firm to succeed as the more gender balanced the management of a firm, the more likely it is to be successful, according to recent research into women executives by international graduate business school INSEAD.

There is almost no hard evidence showing women lawyers helping others

to succeed. But there are a number of theories that suggest at least a few possible reasons. Some commentators focus on how competitive for popularity women are by nature. From the beginning, women compete with the other women in their family for the attention of the men in the family and when they go on to school, they keep on competing, be it for their teacher’s attention, or to be the best friend of the most popular girl or boy. For women, from the very start, life is one big popularity competition, which just continues when they enter the world of work.

Of course, men are competitive too but in a different way. Women compete

for approval to support their concept of self worth and to gain self esteem rather than to win. If this analysis is true, then women are so busy competing with each other that they seem to lose sight of the bigger picture – that by supporting each other they can change the social/cultural mold of their workplace and ultimately improve the situation for all women, including themselves.

Furthermore, females are said to be socialised at play differently from males, which impacts on their future ability to negotiate political liaisons both generally and with other women. This leads to a lack of working together in their common interest.

Various studies (for example Heim and Murph; and Tannen, as quoted by Stiller Rikleen in her work ‘Ending the Gauntlet’) suggest that women lawyers struggle to help other women unless they actually like them, whereas male lawyers won’t worry about whether they like their colleagues or not, they just want to be part of the winning team and will do whatever it takes to achieve that.

### Queen bee

Another possible oft-cited cause is that successful women in law firms today have rarely got there because they demonstrate the so-called more feminine leadership attributes. These are widely recognised as collaborative behaviour and nurturing conduct of rewarding and giving feedback, which today are recognised as crucial for the future success of most businesses. Many, perhaps the majority, have succeeded because they have had to become ‘honorary males’, adopting the traditional masculine behaviors of their male counterparts.

This has been called “the queen bee syndrome” (Stiller Rikleen). For example, we have observed numerous instances of senior women lawyers being totally unsympathetic to quality of life issues raised by other women, often taking a harder line than their male colleagues and judging female associates more harshly

than they do their male colleagues. It is suggested that they do this in order to retain their often lone place at the top of the organisation. These ‘queen bees’ may also be seen as bullies by others, and research (survey by public sector trade union Unison and *Company* magazine) shows that the most common bully is an older woman in a more senior professional position.

Only 22 per cent of women who feel bullied will report the bullying, while the majority quietly accept it and ultimately tender their resignation. Bullying can include having promotion blocked, so if, as we have seen, women are often denied promotion as they don’t match up to the requirements of the queen bees, we also know that they are rarely called to account.



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The seeming unwillingness of women to help other women should not be seen as a convenient excuse for firms to do nothing. On the contrary, this is a call to practices that genuinely want to improve the chances for women to succeed and future-proof their business. How can these women be persuaded to act? If not willing to act for altruistic reasons they must see that their own sense of security would actually be strengthened by having more women succeed so that together they form a stronger and more influential group.

*A Tale of “O”* by Rosabeth Moss Kanter is used by Stiller Rikleen to describe the impact of unequal representation on the position of all women. It shows how successful women

could be even more secure and able to be themselves were there more women at their level around them.

### Showing initiative

Many practices in the US and a few in England have put in place women’s initiatives aimed at helping women succeed. Often these focus on using female role models and mentors to provide active support to women seeking proactively to manage their career progression. Yet if our premise is right, these approaches are unlikely to be effective as, in our experience, too many of the role models identified are queen bees and typically they repel the women they are aiming to encourage to remain and work towards their future success.

Equally, formal mentoring relationships are quite difficult to get off the ground unless the women who are brought together are really keen for the relationship to work and so it is often the informal mentoring relationships which are perhaps the most effective. If more women would actively seek to mentor their female colleagues, real sustainable change will result. Every woman partner should make it her business to promote more women to partnership so that there are sufficient numbers to ensure that the ‘tipping point’ towards a gender balanced firm is reached.

Linking with women in business and industry especially as a means of creating opportunities for business development has a direct influence in defining career success. There are numerous women-to-women networks in all walks of industry and commerce. Though we wonder whether many female general counsel, for example, actively help other women to succeed by directing business to them? In our coaching work, we hear stories of women lawyers who have had long-term links with other women working in business and, finding the courage, have asked for work or an introduction that might lead to work, only to hear nothing from their contact again.

What makes it even harder is that women often choose (for a variety of reasons) to stay at their desk to finish their work and so miss out on important networking opportunities. What may be regarded initially as a strong work ethic instead reinforces a weakness in a core capability of becoming a successful partner and is an Achilles heel to promotion – lack of exposure to markets and consequently business development. Women lawyers need greater personal discipline to make the most of opportunities to forge deeper and broader connections with others both internally and externally.



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Despite statistics showing good progress for women in the workplace generally (60 per cent of working professionals are female; 50 per cent of women in education specialise in business and management compared to only two per cent in 1966; six million of the eight million jobs created in the EU over the last ten years have been filled by women (*Economist*, January 2010)), there remains a gaping gender divide.

UK-based trade publication *Legal Week* reported earlier this year that “women make up less than 20 per cent of partnerships in the top 30 UK practices while leading City firms enter 2010 with on average less than 16 per cent of partners being composed of women”. Research by Canadian-headquartered diversity monitor Catalyst shows that, among graduates of elite MBA programs around the world, women continue to lag behind men at every single career stage, right from their first professional jobs. Furthermore, the reports of progress in

advancement, compensation, and career satisfaction are at best overstated, at worst just plain wrong. It is discouraging indeed to know that at this rate equal representation at the top will not be achieved until 2070 – which won't be in many of our lifetimes.

**Turning the tide**

We have highlighted how the lack of women in key positions often narrows the opportunities for others and sustains women's invisibility and inaudibility despite the fact that, altogether, women are present in law firms in ever-increasing numbers. Women will not be seen or heard until enough women reach the top positions. We have four recommendations which could help to turn the tide:

- women need to combine together to deepen and broaden their collective voice to effect change. Supporting each other to succeed is an obvious means to this end. Firms could introduce ways to measure and then reward those partners who are actively helping to change the mind set;
- firms can offer their women lawyers coaching and training in the core capability of forming strategic alliances with other women and, if they use individual business plans, make this

part of the business planning process. Firms can then help women recognize the value of collaborating with other women. Women appreciating the strategic importance of other women for their own ambitions will help change the status quo and enable progress to be made more quickly to help keep top talent in law firms;

- firms have the immediate power to help women by promoting more of them. For example, in last year's promotion round (but sadly, not this year's) Allen & Overy distinguished itself and its leadership by increasing the proportion of women promoted to partnership to 40 per cent. Earlier this year the firm also rolled out an innovative flexible working scheme for partners, including those in the equity, to encourage more women to see themselves as possible partners;
- the Association of Women Solicitors could champion a campaign on this very topic – “Women helping women” – with a series of events focussed around the subject. [WOMENLEGAL](#)

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