

How Ropes & Gray Hit 31% Female Partners: Its Women's Group Is Not Just For Mommies.

How did this Boston Brahmin firm become the poster child for making female equity partners?

By Vivian Chen
August 31, 2020

I seldom have anything nice to say about big law firms, so listen up.

There's a sliver of hope for women in Big Law. In a handful of major Am Law 100 firms, women are cracking the 25% female equity partner ceiling. According to ALM Intelligence data (based on 2019 statistics), this tiny list includes Ballard Spahr; Davis Wright Tremaine; Morgan, Lewis & Bockius; Morrison & Foerster; Ropes & Gray; Jones Day (it reported 25.4%, though that number is not verifiable, as the firm refuses to disclose information about equity status); and Covington & Burling. (This list excludes firms focused on specialized practices like labor and employment or immigration that tend to deliver lower profits.)

The standout is Ropes & Gray, which clocks in at 28.8% female equity partners. And if you include its latest crop of partners, Ropes' female equity partner rate jumps to 31%. (Keep in mind, the national average is 20.5% female equity partners.)

A high-powered firm with almost one-third female equity partners? Shocking. Moreover, Ropes ranks as the 13th highest-grossing firm in



(Courtesy photos)

Julie Jones (left) and Jane Goldstein.

the Am Law 100 and boasts \$2.8 million in profits per equity partner. Plus, it's chaired by a woman, Julie Jones, a private equity specialist.

Not bad for a firm that's still remembered for its stodgy Harvard patina. (Yes, it still represents Harvard University.) So how did this Boston Brahmin firm become a poster child for gender progress?

For starters, Ropes is a one-tier partnership, a structure in which women tend to thrive better than the two-tier system. "We are equity partners, so that 31% female partnership is meaningful,"

Jones says, adding that the one-tier system “avoids the feeling of second class citizenship.”

The firm’s approach to clients might also be a factor—it has around 100 client teams and clients don’t belong to one partner, Jones says. She also points to the firm’s “extraordinary growth” in recent years as an opportunity for it to be shaped.

They’re all plausible explanations, but the one that intrigues me is the firm’s women’s affinity group. Both Jones and Jane Goldstein, co-head of the firm’s M&A group in North America, cite it as a key factor.

Affinity groups aren’t always perceived as meaningful. Sure, women’s groups might be effective in pushing for nicer lactation rooms and flexible work arrangements, but do they help elevate women to positions of power? Many women tell me they are a waste of time. Some very successful female lawyers I know won’t have anything to do with them.

Yet Jones and Goldstein credit Ropes’ women’s forum for helping their careers. “In 1996, I started the women’s forum, and we were just trying to figure out how to survive this place,” says Goldstein, who started at the firm in 1989. “But we’ve moved from survival to thriving.”

That meant a conscious decision to move beyond the predictable lawyer-mom issues.

“Early on, it was perceived as a mommy group, and some women were worried,” Goldstein says. “We wanted to make it a source of success for women. Though we talked about life/work

balance, we agreed we wanted to focus on work—how to replicate the old-boys’ network.”

Jones, who arrived at the firm in 1994, says Goldstein gave the women’s forum vitality: “Jane’s leadership moved it to career development—presentation skills, the elevator pitch, business skills. We want to succeed at home, but we also need the talent to be the best lawyer.”

The forum emphasized developing clients, particularly female ones. “We talked about how to combat men playing golf,” Goldstein says. “So we created client events that allowed people to engage.” Jones adds that their spin on golf has included karaoke nights and Madonna concerts.

Clients have taken notice that women are key players at Ropes. “One GC said she could count on one hand the women on most teams, whereas half of our team are women,” Jones says.

Would changing the focus of women’s groups result in more female partners with business? Who knows? But considering how meandering work/life balance discussions can be, maybe it’s time to tackle something more pragmatic and manageable.

“I can understand how some women shy away from affinity groups,” Jones says. “To me, it means it’s not working and needs to be redesigned.”

Contact Vivia Chen: vchen@alm.com or @*lawcareerist*

Vivia Chen is a senior columnist at *The American Lawyer* and the creator of *The Careerist* blog.