

# Women in the Bar: Celebrating Milestones and Supporting Tomorrow's Leaders



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**T**here are now an unprecedented number of women leading bar associations across the nation, from county and state bar presidents to executive directors. This milestone was recently celebrated in the May–June 2008 issue of *Bar Leader*, a magazine for leaders of bar associations published by the American Bar Association.

Our own executive director, Janet Welch, was featured in the story as the first woman executive director in the history of our State Bar. In her typically modest fashion, Janet admitted in the article that at first she didn't immediately recognize the historical significance of her appointment. But after her selection was announced, she noted, "I got countless messages from members—both

men and women—that they were pleased that this barrier had been broken."<sup>1</sup>

The *Bar Leader* article suggests that the increased number of women in bar leadership is, in part, a natural result of demographic changes in the legal profession. According to ABA statistics, in 1980, only 8 percent of all licensed lawyers were women, whereas in 2000, the number had tripled to 27 percent.<sup>2</sup> As more women have joined the profession, they have also taken on bar leadership roles in greater numbers.

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This trend has been no different in our State Bar leadership. In our history, four women have served as State Bar presidents, and two of them have served in the last four years: Nancy Diehl (2004–2005) and Kimberly Cahill (2006–2007). I have had the honor of serving on the Board of Commissioners with them both. I hope we see even greater involvement of women in our State Bar leadership in the years to come. Our Bar is enriched by a diversity of viewpoints, even more so when those voices are in positions of leadership.

Yet I can't help but be troubled by another statistic mentioned in the same *Bar Leader* article. After decades of upward growth, the number of women entering law school nationwide is on the decline.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, a recent study reported in *Focus*, the

newsletter of the Women Lawyers Association of Michigan (WLAM), notes that women leave law firm practice at far higher rates than their male counterparts.<sup>4</sup> The number one reason cited: "difficulty integrating work and family/personal life."<sup>5</sup>

Just a casual discussion about these numbers with one of my female law partners confirmed this. She told me that when she attended her five-year law school class reunion, she was surprised at the number of women classmates who had left law firms and either completely changed their practices or had left the profession altogether, usually because high billable hour requirements prevented a personal life. She mentioned how important it was to her practice that our law firm allowed flexible scheduling and had a culture that supported family as a priority.

We must keep women lawyers engaged in the practice, and in State Bar leadership. The *Focus* article mentions an initiative of the Women's Bar Association of the District of Columbia to tackle some of these issues, and also notes the WLAM is undertaking a similar initiative.<sup>6</sup> I look forward to learning about the initiative and have no doubt the State Bar will support these efforts. ■

## FOOTNOTES

1. Derocher, *Opening the Door: Today's Wave of Female Bar Presidents*, *Bar Leader* (ABA, May–June 2008), p 11.
2. *Id.* at 9.
3. *Id.* at 13.
4. Gault, *Blocking the Off Ramp: Helping Women Succeed in the Practice of Law*, *Focus* (Women Lawyers Association of Michigan, Fall 2007), p 1, citing "Women Lawyers and Obstacles to Leadership," a survey and report of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Workplace Center, available at <[http://web.mit.edu/workplacecenter/docs/law-report\\_4-07.pdf](http://web.mit.edu/workplacecenter/docs/law-report_4-07.pdf)> [accessed May 20, 2008].
5. *Id.*
6. *Id.* at 5.