

# The Australian

---

## Women slide in partnership ranks

- Virginia Harrison
- From: The Australian
- June 25, 2010 12:00AM

**THE proportion of women promoted to partnership at leading firms is shrinking despite a return to growth by the legal services industry.**

Women account for just 21.9 per cent of all new partners promoted in the past six months, down from 26.8 per cent a year earlier.

The declining proportion is one of the key trends identified by The Australian's end of financial year survey of the 35 leading law firms.

The survey also found that the career prospects of women lawyers appear to differ markedly, depending on their choice of firm.

The results have prompted a scathing attack from Marque Lawyers managing partner Michael Bradley, who argues that law firms are paralysed by inertia.

"Nothing has changed in the last 20 years in terms of the end result, even though more than half the graduates are female," Mr Bradley said. "It's not a question of just waiting for it to filter through the system. Something is fundamentally wrong."

While intake levels have contracted, the proportion of partnerships held by females remains steady at 19.5 per cent.

At Marque Lawyers women hold 57 per cent of partnerships while 20 of the firm's 26 staff are female.

Mr Bradley, a former managing partner of Gadens Lawyers, said he believed sexism continued to block the career progression of some female solicitors.

"There is still a fair bit of sexism in a lot of firms where men are standing in the way of women's promotion," he said.

"There are still a lot of unreconstructed chauvinists out there.

"It's not so much rank sexism, it's just much more convenient to promote people who don't have other things to deal with, people who don't have kids or don't have other interests. It's just much easier to have partners who don't have to go home at 5pm."

Gilbert & Tobin retains its top spot in the survey as Australia's most female-friendly law firm. Women hold 36.4 per cent of partnerships at the firm, but these figures do not account for the latest round of appointments, which will be voted on next week.

Smaller firms again outperformed their larger rivals in the promotion of women, with Holding Redlich, Hall & Wilcox and Hunt & Hunt leading the pack.

The proportion of female equity partners also remained static at 15.8 per cent over the past six months, but a slow creep by the major law firms indicates a glimmer of growth in this category.

Mallesons Stephen Jaques, which makes partnership appointments at the end of the calendar year, shed six

partners -- which had the effect of boosting its proportion of female equity partners to 22.2 per cent.

Freehills followed close behind at 21.4 per cent after adding three female equity partners.

In a sign that confidence has returned to the legal services industry, total partner intake levels have bounced back to pre-financial crisis levels, but the influx was matched by a high degree of churn as current partners were replaced by newcomers.

Total partner numbers have increased by just five since December despite the promotion of 164 practitioners to partnership at the firms covered by The Australian survey.

Mr Bradley believes the under-representation of women at senior levels will ultimately hinder the competitiveness of law firms.

"As the gender imbalance is progressively redressed, those firms that are still heavily male-dominated will stick out and will suffer," he said. "But it's a fair way off, unfortunately."

By 2013, women solicitors are expected to dominate the legal profession. The latest figures show women account for 45.3 per cent of all solicitors in NSW and 45.5 per cent in Victoria.

"The proportion of female solicitors in NSW has increased every year since at least 1988, when only 20.2 per cent of practising solicitors were female," said Mary Macken, president of the NSW Law Society.

However, Ms Macken rejected as "a very blunt tool indeed" the notion that quotas should be enforced to boost the fortunes of women in the legal profession.

"The focus should instead be on identifying and developing policies to deal with any remaining impediments or disincentives to women."

---

Copyright 2010 News Limited. All times AEST (GMT +10).

All times are EST. © MarketWatch, Inc. 2008. All rights reserved. Subject to the **Terms of Use**. Designed and powered by **Dow Jones Client Solutions**. MarketWatch, the MarketWatch logo, BigCharts and the BigCharts logo are registered trademarks of MarketWatch, Inc. Dow Jones is the registered trademark of Dow Jones & Company, Inc. Intraday data delayed at least 15 minutes. "Intraday data is provided by **Interactive Data Real Time Services** and subject to the **Term of Use**." FXQuote™ provided by GTIS, an Interactive Data Company "Historical and current end-of-day data provided by **Interactive Data Pricing and Reference Data**". FTSE (Footsie) is a trade mark of the London Stock Exchange and the Financial Times and is used by FTSE International under license.