

Atlanta Attorney's Documentary on Gender Bias Features Legal Pioneers

Angela Morris, Daily Report
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The legal profession has come a long way from the 1940s and 1950s when many law firms blocked women from litigation departments and wouldn't let them sign their names to legal work. But it hasn't come far enough, says lawyer and filmmaker Sharon Rowen.

It's easy to spot the problem with such overt sex discrimination, but harder to see the subtle discrimination of today—which still stymies the careers of many female attorneys. Rowen's new documentary, "[Balancing the Scales](#)," shines a spotlight on the problem. The film features pioneers like U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, civil rights lawyer Gloria Allred and former Georgia Supreme Court Chief Justice Leah Ward Sears.



Law.com interviewed Rowen, of Rowen & Klonoski in Atlanta, about her findings in the documentary, which she is screening in Atlanta on Dec. 8. Below are her answers, edited for brevity and clarity.

For female attorneys and judges today, what are examples of subtle discrimination they still face?

The feeling is very pervasive, especially in larger firms, that women are not going to stay because they are going to choose to step back. That brings forth an entire array of actions that could be called implicit bias: not mentoring them enough; not providing them with opportunities, because they feel the opportunities should go to men who are "going to stay;" not providing them the right kind of clients—the kind of clients, when they work on the cases, could help their progress on the partnership track.

Your film noted that many female attorneys drop out of law firms when they have children because it's so difficult to balance an 80-hour workweek with their family lives. But law firms are driven by the billable hour. What's your idea for an alternative that would make it possible for mothers to continue their careers?

The thinking about this is short-term beneficial, long-term detrimental. In the short term, firms gain more revenue having their associates work longer hours. If associates work 100 hours a week, firms make more money. But in the long term, that's not necessarily good for the firm's morale, diversity, for meeting equality goals or for its bottom line, because it's preventing women from reaching the top levels of leadership in law firms. I think it needs to be a policy for everybody. If we talk about a policy in law firms that allows men or women to work reduced hours when their children are small for a few years, men and women should be given the opportunity to do that and guarantee that when they return from those years, they are guaranteed they can come back to the partnership track. The statistic today is, once a woman steps off the partnership track, there is almost zero chance she will get back on it. The firm will never allow it.

What are steps that women lawyers can take today to continue pushing for gender equality in the legal profession?

Young women feel they are so busy and pulled they really don't have time to think of how society could change and what that change may mean for them personally. People don't think about the fact it's not a level playing field anymore, because they are too busy dealing with their own individual lives and thinking the choices they have to make are personal choices. If I have to say one thing young women should try to do is step back and say, "Instead of feeling that the choices I have to make about work and life and work-life balance are all my personal, individual choices, let me try to think about this as a wider societal problem." Once you realize there is a problem, there can be movement to a solution.

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