

Ask Pat

Dear Pat:

I read the letter of “Alice, Looking to Break Through the Glass Ceiling,” and your response, with great interest (*Sept. 30 issue*). I graduated from UNM Law School in 1989, have worked continuously in the legal profession since that time, and am a partner and shareholder at Hatch, Allen & Shepherd, PA.

There is a noticeable lack of women shareholders in this state. It has been my experience and observation that this is primarily caused by women devoting themselves to their families. Such devotion in the face of society’s career expectations for professional women is commendable, and to be applauded. I am proud of the New Mexico women attorneys who do not bend to the pressure to be “Super Mom.” They realize that you can’t do it all, and you really don’t want to.

My daughter is now 19 years old, and for 15 of those years I have been practicing law. I tried to do it all, and did a fair job of being both an attorney and mother, but not a great job of either. Of the women attorneys in my class, I can think of only a handful that have persevered in the profession, and managed to raise children at the same time. I have not observed gender discrimination in this firm, or in the legal profession in New Mexico in general. Yes, there are some “dinosaurs” out there who will never truly accept women. They are the exception rather than the rule.

I would encourage “Alice” to continue her professional path, continue to devote herself to her family, and enjoy the rewards that come with that devotion.

Very truly yours,
Kimberly A. Syra



Dear Kimberly:

It appears the “glass ceiling”¹ issue remains alive and well for women in the practice of law. The letter in response to the earlier column on this issue and the author’s anecdote illustrate the tension many women continue to experience – it is often difficult, if not impossible, to be both a good attorney and a good parent.

Perhaps more interesting about the response to Pat’s column about the glass ceiling is that it underscores another possible reason for many women feeling unable to shatter that proverbial ceiling. It seems that some of the more traditional tension or competition between the “stay-at-home” and “working” mothers (remember the

1980’s and 1990’s?) has been replaced with a sense of competition between mothers in the workplace and the idea that women trying to balance professional lives with parenting can do an adequate job of both but an excellent job at neither. It seems that although women are expected to continue to work after becoming parents, it is correspondingly expected that they will be less adept at work and less effective as mothers. This is disturbing on many levels.

First, the tension between work and family continues to haunt many working parents. Perhaps as men continue to become more hands-on and involved fathers, businesses and law firms (as well as other professions) will recognize the need for all employees, men and women, to balance their private and professional lives.

¹ Pat remains uncertain if the term “glass ceiling” applies to the current discussion. Debate continues regarding whether the “glass ceiling” refers to circumstances beyond women’s control (as distinguished from real or perceived “lifestyle choices”) or refers to limitations on women’s opportunities in a more general sense. For the purposes of this column, Pat uses the term as a metaphor for the overall lingering discrimination or obstacles a woman encounters that a man in similar circumstances has not historically encountered.

Second, there is a continuing competition between women who want their companies to recognize the difficulty inherent in balancing demanding professions with family responsibilities and women who want no accommodations made based upon gender or family needs. For example, a recent article profiled five women who made partner at the law firm of Connell Foley LLP in New Jersey. The women made a point of stating “everyone makes it on their own with no special treatment.” The message was clear – there is no accommodation for women partners who have child rearing responsibilities and the women do not want accommodations or the perception that things were any easier for them. See <http://www.cfg-lawfirm.com/news/woman-njljOLD.html>.

Finally, the issue may be more hidden than it was in earlier decades. Women, and their employers, want to think that discrimination and the “glass ceiling” are things of the past. As a result, it is more difficult to discuss or address lingering differences in how women are treated. Pat is aware of instances in New Mexico where women associates are billed at lower rates than male associates with equal or less experience. Women associates have complained that male shareholders invite male associates to meet clients, to out of office social functions, and to lunch regularly, but do not extend the same invitations to female associates. Women have reported being an “afterthought” introduction at firm functions or when introductions to clients are made. These may at first appear trivial complaints; but, when billing income, client contact, and the appearance of fitting in socially with the established shareholders affect one’s partnership track, such lingering discrimination can have a disproportionate impact.

A review of publications and studies directed towards law firms emphasizes that gender discrimination and the “glass ceiling” remain important issues. Instead of being complacent with labeling law firms and other employers as “family friendly” or offering a mommy track, or flex time, or part time schedules to women – with a corresponding effect on the partnership track – we should instead recognize the importance of adjusting our professional and cultural expectations to value both professional achievement and parenting. It would increase productivity and efficiency in the workplace if no parent was forced to feel he or she “did a fair job of being both an attorney and a [parent], but not a great job of either.”

Ask Pat is a feature provided by the Committee on Women and the Profession. This is a question and answer column with a twist – “Pat” will answer questions about gender bias in the legal profession. All of the letters are loosely based on real events. Readers are invited to send their comments or letters to “Ask Pat,” State Bar of New Mexico, PO Box 92860, Albuquerque, NM 87199-2860. “Pat” responses are provided by members of the committee.