

Susan Esserman's Chambers Women in Law Acceptance Speech

When I began my legal career, the number of successful women at Steptoe distinguished the firm and was a decisive factor in my decision to join. Later in my career, as I was departing government after serving during the two terms of the Clinton administration, I wanted to devote time and energy to advancing opportunities for women in our profession. Steptoe stood out in welcoming and embracing my focus.

Through my family and a life-changing experience as a student at Wellesley College, early on I gained an acute and direct appreciation for the collective power of women working together and the importance of women supporting one another. That perspective has guided my legal career.

Effectiveness in advancing opportunities for women requires individual activism, institutional commitment, and accountability, and the three are linked. Each one of us has the power and the responsibility to make a difference, whether serving as a mentor or sponsor, promoting women for partnership or advancing women for leadership positions both inside and outside our firms and companies.

For sustained progress, though, it is important not to be working alone but instead to work with others to build a lasting foundation for promoting inclusiveness and genuine equality. I have been fortunate to work with many extraordinary women at Steptoe to create institutional mechanisms and a culture of inclusivity. I want to specially recognize my partner, Toni Ianniello, chair of the firm's Litigation Department. Toni and I together founded and led the firm's Women's Forum.

In the words of the hit musical "Hamilton," it is critical to be "in the room where it happens." It is therefore essential that women in law firms are in the room and at the table at every level of firm governance. I am proud that at Steptoe, more than 50 percent of our Compensation Committee members, including the chair, are women; half of the department heads as well as our general counsel are women; and more than half of the lawyers we have promoted to partner in the past five years are women, including 80 percent last year.

I want to thank Chambers for recognizing the importance of advancing opportunity for women. But the fact that we are recognizing the promotion of gender diversity rather than gender equality underscores the crucial work that remains to be done. Our collective mission must be gender equality, and it will take active engagement by all of us working together - women and men - to achieve true equality.