

### REAL ESTATE

# Law firm coalition hopes to address gender issues in legal industry

BY JEREMY NOBILE

It didn't take a global health crisis to point out what has been known for generations: The legal industry is collectively failing women.

Nonetheless, the pandemic has shone a brighter light on issues impacting working women, who, according to Pew Research Center, lost jobs at a greater rate than their male counterparts during this economic shock.

As for female lawyers, the COVID-19 outbreak created fresh disruptions that are thought to be adversely affecting not just work-life balance, but the ability for women to grow in their professions.

Circumstances vary, but according to the American Bar Association, women across the industry are coping with "daunting issues" ranging from increased stress to loss of income and feelings of isolation. These issues are attributed in some part to gendered expectations and inadequate recognition of parenting needs.

This is where an initiative under the banner of GELI — which stands for Gender Equity in the Legal Industry — comes into play.

GELI is a unique coalition of law firms, attorneys and other legal professionals — predominantly in Northeast and central Ohio at this point — whose ultimate goal is to support the advancement of women in a field that has long struggled with gender and racial equity.

GELI's hallmark offering is a number of forums designed to get both men and women in the legal profession to talk candidly about women's issues in particular, which can range in topics from maintaining work-life balance and mentoring, to supporting career advancement and improving compensation.

GELI has held three digital forums and is setting up its next, which is slated for noon to 1:30 p.m. June 9. It's titled "Gaining a Different Perspective: Successful Female Business Leaders Talk Gender Equity in Their Professional Industries."

With the spirit of collaboration behind it, GELI doesn't have a specific leader.

But its organizers include Christina Niro of Cleveland-based Frantz Ward, who chairs the firm's women's initiative, and Mallory Monhemius of Columbus-based Vorys, Sater, Seymour and Pease. Supporting groups and members of GELI in this market include the Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Association and at least nine area law firms.

The intent of the forums is not to "tackle issues that have been beaten to death before," Niro said, but to "tackle harder issues in a safe space and with a smaller group."

"The mission of GELI is to bring private law firms together for collaborative, non-adversarial discussions to hash out and what's working and what's not working at firms, and how we can collectively advance women, which ultimately benefits us all," Niro said.

Both men and women are encouraged to participate in the GELI forums. That dynamic has already yielded some interesting conversations.

Monhemius said a male equity partner at one firm shared his reluctance to take the full amount of parental leave allowed following the arrival of his newborn. He was afraid of how doing so might be perceived by his firm.

This points to a nuanced issue women more often tend to face: the notion that taking time off, even in terms of parental leave, might reflect poorly on someone's work ethic, which could hinder their chances of moving up the corporate ladder. This puts women, who often shoulder more at-home duties, at a possible disadvantage compared to their male colleagues.

The message in the forum was that men and women should equally take their full parental leave permitted.

Frantz Ward managing partner Christopher Keim has sat in all but one of Cleveland GELI forums so far. Some talks about work-life balance, he said, were enlightening. He feels his firm is flexible with matters of work-life balance, yet he finds listening to conversations among people from various firms to be important. This is something he might not otherwise be exposed to as firms tend to silo off from one another — at least those in the same markets. He laments how there is no similar forum for managing partners to discuss the same things in the region.

"People are fearful of giving information to the competition," Keim said. "So that's a great thing about GELI. People blew right past that issue and said we need to acknowledge these gender issues and talk about what we can collectively do to understand and address them."

One managing partner, who asked to speak on background, said they felt their parental leave policies were progressive until they heard about what other firms were doing, which brought some perspective to the matter.



Christina Niro

They also said they came to better appreciate the "sense of frustration among female attorneys," who said they don't see visible paths to equity partnership.

"I heard that," the managing partner said. "And it hit home a lot."

Beyond simply being the equitably proper thing to do, responding to women's needs and enabling their advancement could pay meaningful dividends.

Companies increasingly are looking for diversity among law firms — not just in a practice group that might work on their matters at hand, but for the firm itself.

According to *The American Lawyer*, some Big Law firms have lost work to smaller, minority- or women-owned outfits as clients become frustrated with the glacial pace of improvement in diversity among their legal services providers.

Supporting and advancing women is just one piece of that puzzle, and there's unquestionably room for improvement.

According to the National Association of Women Lawyers and the ABA, in 2018 women comprised just 19.5% of equity partners and 30.5% of nonequity partners in the nation's 200 largest firms. That's only a 3% increase in female equity partners compared to 12 years prior.

According to Crain's research, among all in-market attorneys in 76 firms included in the 2020 Crain's Law Firms list, 71% are men and 29% are women. Among local partners at those firms, 79% are men and just 21% are women.

"This is big," Monhemius said. "People aren't going to hire us if we are not actually fixing these issues in law firms."