

## OPINION

# The pandemic and reshaping firms

A historical opportunity to address systemic barriers cannot be allowed to put to waste as we regroup

**OUR WORLD** turned upside down in 2020!

As the COVID-19 pandemic grasped the world, it shone a spotlight on gender inequality and systemic racism. As the world navigated tremendous societal upheaval and tragedy, I questioned my personal beliefs, biases and privileges as many others did. I wanted to understand the intersectionality of lived experiences that disproportionately impacted women, Black and Indigenous people and people of colour and use the upheaval and reflection to advance women in the legal profession.

The profession recognizes that women in leadership roles are integral to business success, financial performance, and corporate

leadership skills and goals through coaching and training, finding role models and sponsors, creating inclusive leadership structures, and promoting women to leadership in law firms and the profession.

Based on the LSUC database as of Aug. 3, 2012, the *Justicia Guide* reported that only 7 per cent of partners in private practice were women. The 2020 Law Society of Ontario Annual Report, released on May 6th, 2020, reports that women represent 11.16 per cent of lawyers in private practice (sole owner and partners) and 26.47 per cent of partners in private practice.

While women leaders made inroads into law leadership since 2012, these advances have

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culture. Having different leadership styles and perspectives will better address client needs and reflect society as a whole.

In February 2013, Ontario's Law Society of Upper Canada developed the *Justicia Guide to Women's Leadership in Law Firms*. The *Justicia Guide* identified challenges facing women in leadership, including leadership fatigue, work-life balance, systemic biases and attitudes, compensation, tokenism, law firm culture and politics, and lack of access to mentors and sponsors. This list is dishearteningly similar to what women still face in law in 2021, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The *Justicia Guide* also identified strategies to overcome the challenges both for women and law firms, including developing

occurred at a glacial pace. But perhaps there is hope and opportunity to accelerate the advancement of women into law firm leadership.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created challenges for practising law, accessing justice, engaging with clients, and managing additional duties of home life (childcare/eldercare/education). However, as we move through the COVID-19 pandemic, we see a renewed focus on wellness and work-life balance, lawyer engagement, and commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion as critical elements of law firm culture.

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the "facetime" model for law practice within days, and at most, weeks. It is now clear that lawyers can work from home productively and profitably; we are and have been for 15 months. With these benefits, though, comes increased stress and juggling home and professional responsibilities.

Former Supreme Court Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin encouraged the attendees at the Canadian Lawyer 2021 *Women in Law Summit* in February 2021 to think about equality for all in our discussions. She said, "we are at a time when many of the ideas and institutions that we took for granted are unravelling. Something will have to take its place. The wounds will have to be knit up. A new society, a different society will emerge."

The opportunity the COVID-19 pandemic offers to reshape law firm leadership cannot be allowed to slip through our fingers. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the responsibilities of families, caring for one another and building strong communities. Continued flexible and WFH options, implementation of equity, diversity and inclusion policies, focus on authentic leadership, and opportunities for promotion and advancement increases the bottom line, meets client demands, and allows women to lead in law.

Acknowledgement and acceptance by law firm leadership that there are many effective, productive and profitable ways to lead and that the solution is not for women to adopt the male leadership qualities is vital to increasing equality and women in law leadership.

Change can (and must) happen and at a pace never before experienced! Women and men in leadership positions are ideally situated to advocate for the benefits of inclusive leadership and embrace women in law leadership in our post-pandemic society. **CL**

*Jacquelyn Stevens will be speaking at the Women in Law Leadership Forum on Sept. 9th. Visit [canadianlawyermag.com/events](http://canadianlawyermag.com/events) for more information.*

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