

# Women's History Month: Reframing the "Fight" for Equal Opportunity as a Collaboration

**Now that women are a substantial presence and a significant asset in the legal field, maybe it is time to ask how we can collaborate to promote equal rights and equal opportunity for all would-be and current lawyers.**

BY LAUREN E. MADDENTE

Women's History Month can have the most impact when we not only remember those who came before us but contemplate how we can build on their progress. For generations, women worked and sacrificed to improve the financial and personal conditions of women in many fields – science, medicine, business ... and law. Early trailblazers' strides proved what was possible, totally changing the way that women work and live.

Law was once completely male-dominated with enormous entry barriers. Historically, women used their voices and intellect to fight blatant, sexist discrimination. Before advancing to U.S. Supreme Court justice, for example, Ruth Bader Ginsberg fought tirelessly to guarantee freedom from sex discrimination, contributing to and winning landmark cases including *Reed v. Reed* and *Frontiero v. Richardson*.

Charlotte E. Ray, applying under the name C.E. Ray, successfully fought to get into law school when women were openly discouraged from applying. Ray became the first African American woman lawyer in the U.S. and the first woman admitted to the D.C. bar.

Lavinia Goodell, Wisconsin's first female attorney, fought to overcome discriminatory practices after the Wisconsin Supreme Court denied her bar admission based on gender. She fought to introduce and pass a law prohibiting that very conduct.

Despite graduating at the top of her law school class, Sandra Day O'Connor was rejected for attorney openings and only offered secretarial positions. She persisted until she was hired as a deputy county attorney. In 1981, the U.S. Senate unanimously confirmed her appointment as the first woman Supreme Court justice.

The progress made in the decades since Goodell's bar admission has been significant. According to the ABA's National Lawyer Population Survey, resident active female lawyers in the U.S. increased from 34.7% in 2015 to 41.3% in 2025 alone. While that statistic reflects tremendous growth, many do not consider the fight over.

But should it be? And is achieving an equal percentage of legal representation necessarily "winning?"

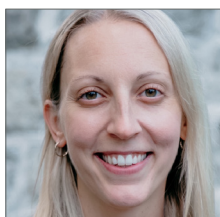
More women have a seat at the table. Now that we are here, perhaps it is time to reframe the fight for women's equality in our profession.

Ruth Bader Ginsberg, Charlotte E. Ray, Lavinia Goodell, and Sandra Day O'Connor did not fight so that we could, or would, fight forever. Now that women are a substantial presence and a significant asset in the legal field, maybe it is time to recharacterize the "fight" for equal rights and equal opportunity as a collaboration. How can we work together to promote equal rights and equal opportunity?

We have not stopped and should never stop efforts to build community, work together, and improve workplace conditions. That means remembering our history but viewing it with a generosity of spirit that drives us to welcome all people into our tent.

In my years working with the Association for Women Lawyers, I have seen our members do just this in ways big and small.

All professional organizations should consider that perhaps less focus on the fight, and more focus on collaboration, will ratify and continue our predecessors' hard work. **wl**



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