

Celebrating women in law

by Koula Glaros-King, Susan Fitch, and Patricia Dougan (staff attorneys)

Those of us practicing law as women today have seen our share of change in the field. Some of us began our practices decades ago, while others are just starting out. None of us have been immune to bias in our careers in some way, shape, or form.

And yet, we take this opportunity, the day after our global celebration of International Women's Day, to celebrate how far we've come try-- from earning the right to vote for more than a century now, to gaining the ability to obtain credit without a cosigner in 1974, to normalizing calling out the pervasive sexual harassment and gender discrimination through movements like #MeToo in recent years. Our foremothers would hardly recognize the world we live in today.

We also recognize where we still fall short: **professional representation**, where women represent slightly more than half of law school graduates, but make up less than half of the legal workforce, and a much smaller percentage of upper level positions in law firms; **wage disparities**, where on average, female lawyers make 85 cents for every dollar men make, and where the top 10 percent of mid-career female lawyers make 60% of what their male counterparts make; and **gender bias**, where 82% of women lawyers have been mistaken for a lower-level employee, and not one male surveyed said the same.

The strides women in law have made are a testament to their legacy -- a legacy we all continue to build. As we recognize this year's International Women's Day theme of #BreakTheBias, we celebrate the ceiling shattering women who came before us, and those of us who strive to continue paving the way for those who will follow.

As poet Rupi Kaur has written, "I stand on the sacrifices of a million women before me, thinking *what can I do to make this mountain taller, so the women after me can see farther?*"

Women we celebrate in law:

- In 1638, **Maragret Brent** became the first female to practice law in colonial America.
- **Myra Bradwell** was the first woman to found and publish a legal newspaper, the "Chicago Legal News," and fought (ultimately unsuccessfully) for the right to practice law as a woman.
- **Lemma Barkaloo** was denied entry to one law school, faced such brutal harassment from male classmates that she left another, and ultimately passed the Missouri bar exam in 1870 with the highest marks of a group of five applicants. She died of typhoid fever before realizing her dream of practicing law.
- In 1870, **Ada Kepley** became the first woman in the United States to graduate from law school. She was ultimately denied a license by the state of Illinois, due to a law that prohibited women from practicing law.

- **Charlotte Ray** became the first Black female attorney in the United States in 1872 and was the first female admitted to the District of Columbia Bar and the first female admitted to practice before the Supreme Court of D.C. She didn't get many clients due to racism and sexism, and she eventually stopped practicing law and became a teacher.
- In 1886, **Lettie Burlingame** founded The Equity Club, the first professional organization for women lawyers.
- **Harriet Taylor Upton**, who was not an attorney, but who ran the National American Women's Suffrage Association first out of her Warren, Ohio home and later from the Trumbull County Courthouse until 1909.
- **Lyda Burton Conley** became the first Native American female lawyer in 1910. She fought to protect native burial grounds. Her efforts eventually led to Congress banning desecration of such grounds.
- **Aileen Trusler** was the first woman to graduate from the University of Akron School of Law and the first woman lawyer in the Summit County Prosecutor's Office.
- In 1920, **Florence Ellenwood Allen** won a seat on the Cuyahoga County Court of Common Pleas, making her the first woman to be elected as a judge in the U.S. She went on to become the first woman elected a state's highest court and the first woman judge on a federal appeals court.
- **Genevieve Rose Cline** was the first female federal judge in America, nominated by President Calvin Coolidge in 1928. She was an advocate for consumer and women's rights.
- **Jane Bolin** became the first Black woman to serve as a judge in the United States. She spent her career fighting for racial equality in children's services, probation office assignment, and childcare.
- **Mary Cacioppo** was the first female Assistant Law Director the City of Akron, the first woman to serve on the Akron Board of Zoning Appeals, the first female Chief Profescutor in Summit County, and the first woman appointed as a magistrate in the Domestic Relations Court. She went on to have an illustrious career as a judge throughout the state.
- **Pauli Murray** was a human rights activist and legal scholar in the twentieth century. She co-founded the National Organization for Women, was active in the civil rights movement, and the fight for LGBTQ+ people's rights.
- **Constance Baker Motley** wrote the original complaint in the case of Brown v. Board of Education and was the first Black woman to argue a case before the U.S. Supreme Court. She went on to become the first Black federal judge in 1966.

- In 1963, **Sarah Tilghman Hughes** became the first female judge to swear in a president, swearing in Lyndon B. Johnson on Air Force One in the aftermath of President Kennedy's assassination. Hughes attended George Washington University Law School by night while living in a tent by the Potomac River.
- **Barbara Jordan** became the first woman elected to represent Texas in the U.S. House of Representatives in 1972. Much of her legislative career focused on fair employment practices and defending the constitution through landmark issues like the Watergate scandal.
- In 1973, **Sarah Weddington** became the youngest person to argue and win a case in the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Roe v. Wade*.
- **Sandra Day O'Connor** was the first female Supreme Court Justice, appointed in 1981 by President Ronald Reagan.
- In 1984, **Mary Spicer** became the first female judge in Summit County's history.
- **Janet Reno** was named the first female Attorney General in 1993 and is the second longest tenured person to hold that position.
- **Ruth Bader Ginsburg** was the second female Supreme Court Justice, appointed in 1993. She spent her career fighting for equal rights for women, disabled individuals, and members of the LGBTQ+ community.
- In 1994, **Jane White Taylor** became the first female president of the Akron Bar Association. She also served as president of the Ohio State Bar Association and spent years promoting free legal assistance to low-income Ohioans through her work with the Ohio Legal Assistance Foundation.
- **Hillary Rodham Clinton** is a lawyer, political, diplomat, and former first lady. She was the first woman to be nominated for president by a major political party.
- **Michelle Obama** earned her JD from Harvard in 1988 and went on to work in public service law. As First Lady, she advocated for poverty awareness and health and wellness.
- In 2007, **Judge Carla Baldwin** was sworn in as the first African American female judge in Youngstown.
- **Loretta Lynch** spent much of her career working as a drug and violent crime prosecutor and worked for years for both the U.S. Attorney's Office and in private practice before becoming the first Black female Attorney General in 2010.

- **Sonia Sotomayor** became the first Hispanic and Latina woman justice on the Supreme Court in 2009. Her career has seen landmark decisions supporting minority rights, rights of LGBTQ+ individuals, and campaign finance reform.
- **Elena Kagan** became the fourth female justice on the Supreme Court in 2010. Before her nomination, she served as Associate White House Counsel and was the first woman to serve as dean of Harvard Law School.
- Also in 2010, **Benita Pearson** became the first Black female federal judge in Ohio. Before being appointed to this role, she had a distinguished career as a trial assistant U.S. attorney in the Criminal Division of the Northern District of Ohio U.S. Attorney's Office.
- On Jan. 1, 2011, **Maureen O'Connor** became the first female Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Ohio. She also has served as president of the Conference of Chief Justices and as chair of the National Center for State Courts.
- In 2012, **Elizabeth Reilly** was named interim dean of the University of Akron School of Law, making her the first woman to hold the position. She also was among the first class of students to attend Princeton University, where she studied English language and literature.
- **Amal Clooney** is an international human rights attorney and has represented victims of mass atrocities, as well as journalists detained for reporting on human rights.
- In 2018, for the first time, an all-female bench of judges was elected to serve on the **Summit County Common Pleas Court**, making it the second court in Ohio with more than two seats to be filled by all women. **Youngstown Municipal Court** also now has an all-female bench.
- **Kamala Harris** spent her career as a prosecutor, before joining the world of professional politics. In 2020, she became the first woman and first person of color to serve as Vice President in U.S. history.
- **Tiiara N.A. Patton** was appointed to serve as a bankruptcy judge for the Northern District of Ohio in 2020, after serving as a trial attorney in the U.S. Trustee's office and being in private practice.
- This year, **Ketanji Brown Jackson** became the first Black woman to be nominated to the U.S. Supreme Court. Her career has spanned private practice and criminal defense.

This article is part of Legal Aid's ["Big Ideas" series](#).

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