

# POUNDING ON A GLASS CEILING

## Speakers Seek to Shatter Final Barriers to Gender Equality

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**O**NE PARTICIPANT IN AN ABA Annual Meeting program assessing the status of female lawyers voiced the often-used—and perhaps tongue-in-cheek—observation that a favorite clothing accessory would be just the thing to help shatter the proverbial glass ceiling that still blocks the advance of women into the upper echelons of the legal profession.

"If you're going to go into the business of breaking the glass ceiling, you ought to wear really stylish shoes," said Charna E. Sherman of Cleveland, a co-chair of the Women Advocate Committee in the ABA Section of Litigation.



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Whatever tool is used, however, advocates of gender equity say that, while the glass ceiling is badly cracked, it still needs to shatter.

They say discrimination continues to pose significant barriers to women in the legal profession, especially in the crucial early years of their careers. It tends to appear again when women attempt to step beyond the tradition-

al role of practitioner and into positions of greater power and influence.

"Equity demands that we destroy the glass ceiling," said Angela Bradstreet, the immediate-past president of the Bar Association of San Francisco. "Smart business demands that we destroy it, as well."

Bradstreet was one of the speakers at the Women's Summit II (the first was held at last year's annual meeting) sponsored by the Litigation Section. The program was organized to present successful strategies for women and others moving up through the leadership ranks of the legal profession.

### THE NEED TO COMMIT

SEVERAL SPEAKERS FOCUSED ON THE NEED FOR TOP MANAGERS at major corporations to make strong commitments to diversifying their corporate legal departments and pressuring outside counsel to do the same.

"It's important for firms to recognize the two components of a diversity program: the business case and the personal commitment of the top officers," said Anne Weisberg, an attorney with Catalyst, a nonprofit organization in New York City dedicated to advancing opportunities for women in business.

Having a diverse group in the corporate counsel's office is simply good business because the broader experiences of the staff will make the company better able to meet evolving challenges, said Weisberg.

But it's equally critical that top managers commit to diversity so that initiatives don't become essentially toothless elements of corporate bureaucracies. Weisberg cited companies such as Del Monte and Ernst & Young that have shown dramatic increases in the number of women on partnership tracks.

In the case of Ernst & Young, for instance, the key to the company's success, said Weisberg, is that the CEO "owns" the diversity initiative. "He's made it his personal mission."

The ABA Commission on Women in the Profession held the next-to-last in a series of hearings on gender equity issues facing female lawyers. The commission has traveled the country, holding hearings in a half-dozen cities at which women described the challenges they face in climbing to the highest levels of authority and responsibility in major law firms and corporate counsel offices.

A number of witnesses told the commission in San Francisco that women still find their careers hampered by outdated notions of their ability to juggle family responsibilities and demanding legal jobs. In addition, "old boy networks" still effectively keep many women from holding high-profile positions in bar associations and other trade groups that are often funnels for judgeships and political offices at the state and local level.

The commission announced at the annual meeting that it will hold one more hearing Nov. 6 in conjunction with the ABA's Women in Law Leadership Academy in Chicago. The commission expects to issue a report summarizing its findings sometime within the next year, according to chair Diane C. Yu of New York City. ■