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Focus on

Gender and the Law



+ A Discussion with

HCBA Women Past Presidents

**Roundtable Participants**

Marlene Garvis
Kim Lowe
Sonia Miller-Van Oort
Adine S. Momoh
Sheryl Ramstad
Hon. Mary Vasaly
Courtney Ward-Reichard

Remote Participants

Jewelie Grape
Trudy Halla
Jean Holloway

Moderators

(Pictured Below)

Lisa Buck
Ayah Helmy

Gender and the Law Roundtable

A Discussion with HCBA Women Past Presidents

The circle of women seated at the roundtable was diverse: law firm partners, in-house counsel, business advisors, a judge; black, white, Latina; single and married; Gen X to baby boomer. Their paths to the law were just as varied. One woman knew she wanted to be a lawyer when she was six years old. Another was intrigued by the law after working as a paralegal. One woman left a successful career in nursing to go to law school. Their paths differ, but they share a common bond: each served as president of the HCBA during her career. As women and leaders in our profession, their voices are vital to issues of gender. *Hennepin Lawyer* staff invited these attorneys to a roundtable discussion. Excerpts from the discussion follow. Responses have been edited for clarity.



GETTING INTO THE LAW

Sonia Miller Van-Oort ►

I would say I was a little bit naïve and I think I went into my first year of practice thinking that working hard and doing good work was enough. And I learned in the first couple years that no, there's actually more to this than that. It's not necessarily explained to you at first and I think a lot of times people don't end up getting it at all, but I did get it then and understood that there are politics, there are relationships, and even having a mentor isn't enough necessarily in a big law firm to advance and get the opportunities that you want.

Sheryl Ramstad ►

I remember people being very supportive of me as a young lawyer. I started as a public defender about the time Diana Murphy first went on the municipal court and I watched her go from there to the federal court. By the time I was in the U.S. Attorney's Office, she was a federal judge. I also remember Helen Kelly, who preceded me as president of the Hennepin County Bar, Minnesota Women Lawyers (MWL), and the Minnesota State Bar. I remember Rosalie Wahl, I remember when she was first appointed, I remember Rudy Perpich's term—he started appointing a number of women. There was sort of a breakthrough then where you didn't feel like you were alone.

Trudy Halla

I have always felt very, very lucky. I have always been mentored and treated with respect. When I was a paralegal, I was obviously the only woman in meetings and young, and somebody would ask me to go get a cup of coffee or make a copy and the partner I worked for would say, "No, Trudy needs to stay here. I'll get my secretary to do that for you."



"I mean, my law school class, we had just a handful of women and one of the professor's had 'Ladies' Day' which was the only time that he'd call on women."

– Sheryl Ramstad

◀ Adine S. Momoh

Being a first-generation American, and my immediate family not having been lawyers, the only sense I had of what the practice of law would be like was when I was a summer associate as a 1L and a 2L....One of the things that I didn't realize going into the practice was how important it would be to have an outside network of mentors, sponsors, and champions. You don't think you would need that when you are in law school. You would think all of that would be at the firm, but you don't think you really need to be involved in the community, certainly not in the beginning of your practice. I was fortunate enough to have many colleagues that I had met through my associate stint, as well as many others I had met in the community. Many people told me earlier on to get involved and be active. It's worked for me.

◀ Kim Lowe

I was raised with a working mother who had kind of gone through a lot of this. She was a career executive my entire life, and went to work when I was six months old. I was probably more prepared and really knew hitting the ground running what I wanted to do. I wasn't shocked about business development, and I wasn't shocked about relationship-building. It was pretty easy for me, generally.

CHALLENGES IN PRACTICE

Marlene Garvis ►

I didn't always recognize who my real mentors were for a long time. So that was difficult. But I had to learn to speak for myself, reach out into the community, so I became very active in MWL. I then became active in HCBA. On my own, I did these things because I thought they were really important and one of the things that I realized is that practicing law then was the goal and the end....But the mentoring that you have now, the support that's out there now was not there when I came out of law school in 1984. But we made it.

"Once you get to a certain age, and the clients hire you, you control your own destiny. I'm at a place in my career where people seek me out. That's just a branding and a power you start to get as you get older."

— Kim Lowe



▲ Courtney Ward-Reichard

Early in my career I was involved in some litigation where our firm was basically the only Minnesota firm and there were a bunch of the biggest New York firms. And I'd go to meetings—we used to actually meet face-to-face back in those days....I'd be in the conference room with 50 chairs around a giant table and I'd realize, there's like two women in this room. And I worked with a lot of women on these other teams representing other defendants in this litigation, but they didn't get to come to the table.

Adine S. Momoh

I think I have had to work harder than my peers just to prove to people I had these results so I should be lead counsel and first chair on this case. If it's a man who happens to be white, they may not even have to put forth a resume of the cases they have done. And they can automatically just get on the case. I know I have had to work harder than peers to be lead counsel on matters. I think that's where having a supportive network comes in to play. A lot of time when those conversations are happening, you may not even be part of that discussion. You may not even be at the table to vouch for yourself, so it's important to have those supportive colleagues that can speak on your behalf.

◀ Hon. Mary Vasaly

What I was hoping to do with my year [as HCBA president] was to encourage lawyers to participate in the bar association because I felt it was of such importance to the profession. When I started practicing law, lawyers' attitudes about the practice of law were different than they are now. At the time, that smaller community of lawyers thought of themselves as members of a "profession" whose main objectives were to deliver outstanding work on behalf of clients, and also to provide service and leadership to the community. It was in the latter 1980s that things changed and we started talking about marketing, the "bottom line," and how a law firm was foremost a business. When this change began, there was concern that the focus on the bottom line meant that service to the community, mentoring, and pro bono work would suffer. Similarly, with the competition for business, we thought professionalism and collegiality might be impaired. And that was true to some extent. It was also true that we lawyers became more isolated at a time when it became more important than ever that we work together to solve problems.

Sonia Miller-Van Oort

I don't think it's a predominant thing, but from time to time there is a difference in opposing counsel in what they try to do and how they interact, but again is it because I'm a woman, or is that the practice? I'm not someone who's quick to go to "it's a woman thing" but I do feel like there are times when I have experienced that.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Courtney Ward-Reichard

I've used technology to try to bridge that gap... I would rather be at my child's swim practice with my laptop than not at swim practice. For me, being able to take that technology and say I'm going to be present, I'm going to do things with the kids, I'm going to drive them where they need to be driven. I've always got the phone. All the things that allow us to work from anywhere, I really take advantage of that....I am always there when my kids need me, but there are times where I also have to say I do not have the bandwidth to figure this out for you. You have to figure it out. And I think ultimately that serves them pretty well.

Sheryl Ramstad

Now that I've got children who are raising their children, it's one of the regrets I have that there were so few choices in our era for being able to do both a professional career and parenting. I remember vividly going to school outings where I'd be the chaperone, but I'd be sitting there with a file on my lap on a hayride. At that time it wasn't possible to leave and then come back. I'd been so driven to get into practice that I didn't want to sacrifice that.

Marlene Garvis

In terms of work-life balance, my mother died when I was eight, so my biggest thing when I had my kids was that I would be there. So I felt, even going to law school, that I was there. I would work early in the morning before they got up, or late at night. I was always active in the community and had leadership positions in the community organizations before I went to law school. It wasn't unusual for me to have some evenings I spent away. I felt that I was trying to be a role model for them. I tried to be at all their activities, and they had a lot of them.

Hon. Mary Vasaly

I wanted so much to be successful at what I was doing. I didn't know whether I'd be able to go part time or leave for a time. I'm really glad that women since that time tried that, have done that, and made inroads.

Adine S. Momoh

You have to set the expectations, whether it's the client, the internal client, or the colleague that you're working with. You have to be mindful when are you responding to the email, *is this really an emergency?*

Kim Lowe

In my first 10 years of practice, I didn't take a vacation because I worked 2,000 hours a year. I was in a large firm and that's what we all did in corporate work. It's a little different now, because to whom you are accountable is different when you own your own firm and you're answerable to your clients. They don't care because they're juggling the same thing.

Marlene Garvis

That's when you talk about well-being [and] taking care of yourself, when you have to say I don't have to answer this now. I can answer this six hours from now. And I've started to do that over the weekend. "Call me on Monday. Don't call on my Saturday." But it's really hard to do because you're right, you're the person that they're contacting.

Sonia Miller-Van Oort

I sometimes talk about if you don't like the rules, change them, so I've changed them. Changing how you operate a law firm and what those expectations are and what the metrics are so that you have the benefit of really smart women who only want to work part-time. Or you want to have the flexibility for your male attorneys—any parent attorneys, [or] attorneys who are caring for their parents. I think I helped create that in a firm, so I guess that's kind of my contribution, but when you're running a firm and you're the chief manager you don't always get the benefit of it yourself. But I at least feel like I've helped the situation, perhaps for others.

Kim Lowe

I think everybody is getting overwhelmed with technology, though. This is not gender-specific, it's not a [particular] generation. I think all of us are constantly available. It's everywhere and it's not getting better. You just have to pick that battle, I think, and figure out how you want to do it. I think the economics of law has really changed too. I think the real answer on how much money lawyers are going to make, the business of law, how that is, that's changing and it's not unchanged since the Great Recession and I think there's a real eye opener on how much lawyers are really going to continue to make.

Courtney Ward-Reichard

I mean there are ways that firms are really realizing—at least my firm realizes—that it's important to keep people that are talented.

"My kids know, Mom's going to be at our things, but she's going to have her work bag with her. So, the technology helps you to do it, which is a good thing, but it's also a bad thing."

— Sonia Miller-Van Oort

Our firm has an electronic "out" list and 20 years ago you wouldn't have imagined a male attorney putting on there, "home with a sick kid today," but now that's very common.

Kim Lowe

Now both parents are participating in parenting. Men and women equally. My male partners are spending just as much time parenting their children as their professional wives are. There's now this complete expectation that it's different than it used to be, where men can stay at work and women have to go home and deal with this, where now I think you just find so much more where both parents are participating in the parenting.

Adine S. Momoh

I don't like the phrase work-life balance because the balance always changes. I try to set priorities. I don't think of it as work-life balance, am I getting enough of it? I think that's too stressful. I don't think that helps with respect to the wellness conversation. For me, as long as I have my priorities in check, which would be my family and faith at the top, career number two, and the friends, social gatherings, etc. number three. Family is always going to be there, but career is fleeting at the end of the day.

Courtney Ward-Reichard

I remember very early on in my practice just absolutely dying if a mistake was made on a file or if something wasn't as good as I thought it would be. I realized that the men around me, not only the associates, but also the more senior partners, had a "been there, done that; that's the human condition" attitude.

It's going to be fine, and you're going to figure it out, it's not the end of the world. Maybe the male associates around me were just so confident. Learning to not sweat something happening that you don't want to have happen, [understanding] it's not going to be the end of the world, you lost the motion, and you figure out how to move forward. That was really an important lesson for me in terms of that work-life balance, not taking it home with me and not panicking constantly like I did when I was 23.

LEADING THE BAR

Sheryl Ramstad

One of the things that I really value as I look back over my career was bar association involvement. I feel very fortunate that I had the opportunity to make friends not only locally, but statewide, nationally, and internationally through the profession. Having now gone into health care, when people say, "Do you miss the law?" I say the law informs my thinking and everything I do. I maintain my bar memberships. I just don't want to give that up because it's part of who I am.

Courtney Ward-Reichard

The history of the association was always really meaningful to me.... I would sit in meetings and think about that a lot. I would think about somebody who was president of the association in 1928 and how different the practice would have been then, and how the world would have been then. It just meant a great deal to me to be a part of that legacy.

Jewelie Grape

The thing that sticks out for me the most was how everyone wanted me to succeed. Whenever I discussed being HCBA president with a fellow attorney, one of the first things that most said was—let me know if there's any way I can help you. It reminded me what a collegial bar we have and how grateful I was for their support.

Jean Holloway

That year, I worked with the Minnesota Chief Justice to lobby the State Legislature for full funding for the judiciary as well as responsible limits on gun control. We were more successful on the former than the latter, but I learned a lot—particularly how important the HCBA voice can be.



Adine S. Momoh

I remember when I was on the leadership track and really during my president-elect year, so many kept asking me, are you ready for this? Do you think your practice is going to survive? I'm thinking, why are you expecting me to fail? Why are you putting all this doubt in my head? When I started my presidency, I just wanted to stay afloat. I wanted to raise the bar, but why are you being so negative? I thought I'm not slowing down my practice, I'm not taking time off, I'm going to continue my practice, build it, travel. I have my family. I'm just going to keep it moving and on top of that, I'm going to be president. Looking back on it, people ask, how was it? Do you feel relieved? Now I'm so glad to be past it. It's that same negativity, why are you looking at it that way? This was such a gift and a blessing to have. I feel looking back that I accomplished a lot. The team I worked with accomplished a lot. A lot of people were excited. I'm happy with the time I had.

Kim Lowe

[Bar presidency] does set you up for a lot of other responsibilities. You have training to do other things that you don't think about. Experientially, it just moves you further along in a food chain of experiences that allows you to do other things than just go to court.

Adine S. Momoh

How many of us can say that we've walked into a room and spoken to about 300-some people? People can't say that. It's not an attorney thing. Many people cannot say that they have spoken to a crowd, or had the benefit to advocate on this position, or got to appear in front of the Supreme Court on this issue. It opened so many doors. It takes you out of your comfort zone in ways you can't even imagine. You're so vulnerable. You're writing and talking about so many things....We have to be positive when we reflect upon our experiences because that's the only way that younger attorneys and women are going to want to do this.



HCBA WOMEN PAST PRESIDENTS

2010s



2018-2019
Adine S. Momoh



2015-2016
Kim Lowe



2011-2012
Jewelie Grape



2010-2011
Courtney Ward-Reichard

2000s



2008-2009
Mary Vasaly



2007-2008
Sonia Miller-Van Oort



2005-2006
Marlene Garvis

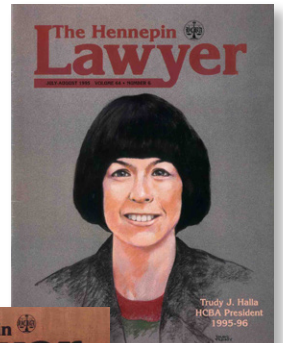


2002-2003
Jean Holloway



1999-2000
Susan M. Holden

1990s

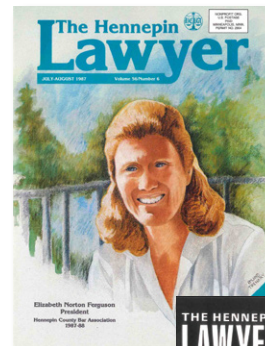


1995-1996
Trudy J. Halla



1991-1992
Sheryl Ramstad

1980s



1987-1988
Elizabeth W. Norton



1981-1982
Helen I. Kelly