



HERBERT  
SMITH  
FREEHILLS

8

DRIVERS FOR  
GENDER EQUITY

STRIVING FOR PARITY IN OUR FIRM



# THE 8 DRIVERS FOR GENDER EQUITY

Striving for gender equity is the right thing to do from an ethical perspective, and the business case is clear: it's a key priority for our clients, and **research shows** that businesses with greater diversity at the executive level are often more profitable and generally perform better.

Improving gender balance in the firm remains a key priority.

Since we first set gender targets in 2014, we've increased female representation in the global partnership from 18% to 31%, and the number of women partners has more than doubled. In addition, women now hold 31% of our key partner leadership roles, compared to 18% in 2014.

Our 8 Drivers for Gender Equity is our global framework to provide greater transparency about the steps we're taking to achieve gender equity.

# 01

## TARGETS

Improve progression of women into partnership and leadership roles, tracking progress against our gender targets.

We set targets in 2014 to increase the number of women in our partnership in recognition of the fact that women were under-represented in the partnership when compared to the underlying lawyer population. It was clear that we needed to disrupt the status quo to reinforce our commitment to gender equity.

Since we first set gender targets in 2014, we've increased female representation in the global partnership from 18% to 31%, and the number of women partners has more than doubled. Women also hold 31% of our key partner leadership roles, compared to 18% in 2014. Half our global practice groups already exceed our target to have 40% women in their practice partnerships by 2030. In some regions of our firm, such as Asia and Australia, we believe we can reach parity - 50% - by 2030.

Our target of having women make up 40% of our global partnership by 2030, with the interim target of 35% by 2025, is an aspirational goal - not a quota that requires us to reach a specific number by a set time. But it's ambitious enough to put pressure on the firm to ask ourselves: "What more could we do?"

Gender targets have fundamentally shifted the conversations we are having about the composition of our firm - particularly about the partnership pipeline.

### A focus on leadership positions

Our gender targets address both women in the partnership but also women in partner leadership roles. The Global and Regional Executives are committed to achieving our target of 40% women partners in leadership roles by 2030 with the interim target of 35% by 2025.

Increasing the number of women partners in leadership roles is important because:

- it more accurately reflects the composition of our current (and future) talent pool;
- visibility of women leaders is key to highlighting and role modelling our inclusive culture;
- diverse perspectives lead to better decision making;
- increasingly diverse client teams expect us to be likewise.

# 02

## ROLE MODELS

Increase access to a more diverse range of role models.

A lack of role models can be a key barrier in seeing a pathway to success. We need to continue to improve connections between junior and senior women across the firm, including recognising the additional responsibilities that supporting junior colleagues inevitably brings for many senior women.

Although it's important that people have access to role models who share similar identity and aspirations, we're increasingly hearing from junior lawyers that role models need not always be 'in their own image'. So we must also encourage all senior people to model inclusive behaviours and reflect on their 'leadership shadow' - the influence a leader has on others - regardless of whether they are part of formal programmes such as mentoring schemes.

Our multi-office [Gender Equity Matters \(GEM\) Network](#) focuses on bringing women together to share experience and knowledge. The GEM Network regularly hosts sessions featuring senior women at HSF, senior female clients or women within other sectors more widely, to showcase a diverse range of role models as well as different versions of what "success" might look like. Additionally, in London and Australia, our GEM Network has hosted mentoring circles focused on creating spaces for women to connect with each other.

No two women have the exact same experiences - and for many women, other facets of identity can exacerbate challenges. So, in further developing our work, we must ensure we are sensitive to intersectional challenges - for example, taking into consideration particular issues that minority ethnic or LGBT+ women may face.



# 03

## SPONSORSHIP

Increase access to mentoring and sponsorship.

We know from [research](#), as well from the experience of many women in our firm, that men are more likely to benefit from sponsorship relationships (where a more senior individual supports and advocates for the career progression of another) that arise 'organically' in the workplace. Sponsors often tend to take 'under their wing' people who are similar to them - and because we have more men in our partnership, beneficiaries of such relationships often tend to be men.

With that in mind, we've been focused on developing more structured approaches to sponsorship, including:

- Relaunching our Athena Forum - aimed at improving representation of women across our global Corporate practice which brings women together to hear from leaders on career progression and development and a similar programme across our EMEA offices, focused on sponsorship of high performing Senior Associates and Of Counsel/Directors;
- Taking a more formal approach to how we consider the development needs of all our junior partners;
- ensuring senior partners see the sponsorship of one or more junior partners as integral to their role in strengthening the future of the firm;
- Improving understanding and awareness of what good sponsorship looks like, from the perspective of both the sponsor and sponsoree;
- fostering a stronger culture of informal mentoring and sponsorship, including via our [GEM Network Chapters](#).

# 04

## WORKING PARENTS

Increase support for parents including more structured support after returning from parental leave.

Returning from parental leave can often be a difficult period in terms of rebuilding client relationships and maintaining career progression. We need to continue to improve the support we provide for returners – not only for the benefit of those coming back to the firm, but also to demonstrate to their colleagues that taking parental leave doesn't have to come at a long-term cost to career.

We continue to review parental leave policies to ensure they are competitive in our markets, and we are improving support for returners. This includes working to ensure managers have better (and more regular) conversations with their teams, and providing more structure and accountability around this process.

We have global corporate access to an online hub of resources on a range of topics, including parenting.

And, crucially, we are encouraging more men to take parental leave. By normalising the idea that all parents can take time out for childcare, we're hoping to challenge structures that see women taking on the majority of care – which we know can lead to gender disparities at work and in the home. We also want to make sure all parents have support, regardless of family structure, gender identity or sexual orientation.

## 05

## INCLUSION AND RESPECT

Encourage inclusive leadership behaviours and challenge biases and mind-sets that create barriers for women. Make gender equity everyone's responsibility.

Gender inequities exist because workplace systems and cultures have tended to favour men, or masculine traits, over women or more feminine traits. This isn't a 'women's issue' - it's a structural issue. People in leadership roles bear particular responsibility for bringing about change. To become inclusive leaders, we must become aware of our unconscious biases, and take steps to counteract them. The firm has hosted workshops and conversations on unconscious bias for a number of years, and we have put tools and techniques for counteracting bias in place to inform key milestone programmes and people processes - to ensure decision-makers are aware of biases and how these can be addressed.



# 06

## AGILE WORKING

Adopt **Agile 60** to give people flexibility.

Our careers are long, and our priorities shift and adapt over time - our Agile 60 - under which most of our people work in the office on average 60% of their time - aims to support flexibility. There's no one-size-fits all approach - open team communication and a flexible approach are key.



# 07

## CLIENTS

Engage with our clients to improve gender equity across the legal sector.

Clients have been a powerful force in our progress on diversity and inclusion, including requesting information on the diversity of their matter teams as part of tender processes.

To bring about change across the wider sector, we need to work in partnership with clients, particularly in relation to work practices and flexibility.

To support this, we run annual GC Inclusion Forums in some of our larger offices, and we are a lead partner on the gender work stream of the [GCD&I initiative](#).

# 08

## ACCOUNTABILITY

Hold the firm's leaders – at the top, and all other levels – accountable for progress.

Everyone has a part to play in improving gender equity at the firm: we're all responsible for challenging our own biases; supporting our colleagues; and looking out for opportunities to amplify the voices of those who are less represented in more senior roles.

Our Global Executive is ultimately accountable to the Council for progress against our gender targets, and, in turn, holds regional and practice group leaders accountable for progress in their parts of the firm.

The responsibility for developing equitable pipelines to partnership sits with each practice group Managing Partner (who in turn reports to the Executive Partner, Practices). Our Diversity & Inclusion team meets regularly with each practice group leadership team to scrutinise the group's pipeline.

We also expect Managing Partners to address inclusive leadership behaviours in partner performance reviews.





For a full list of our global offices visit [HERBERTSMITHFREEHILLS.COM](https://www.herbertsmithfreehills.com)

---