

Women Rising in White-Collar Defense



By Sarah Kellogg

Back in 1999, during an American Bar Association conference on white-collar crime, Karen Popp of Sidley Austin LLP noticed very few women lawyers in attendance and hardly any on the panels. At the time, Popp had just left the government, where several strong, prominent women held positions of power, so it was surprising for her to find there weren't more women in the private sector.

Susan Bozorgi experienced the same sense of isolation when she entered private practice in 2000. "I was one of the few women criminal defense lawyers in private practice," says Bozorgi, partner at Bozorgi Law PLLC and founder of the *Women Criminal Defense Attorneys* blog.

In 2015 Bozorgi wrote "Finally Statistics for Criminal Defense" after the ABA Commission on Women and the American Bar Foundation published the report *First Chairs at Trial: More Women Need Seats at the Table*. The "first of its kind" study found that of women appearing as lead coun-



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sel in criminal cases, 69 percent appear for the government and 31 percent for defendants.

For Bozorgi, the statistics showed that “women excel in the public sector, but things shift as they enter the private sector.” One can extrapolate from general criminal trials to white-collar cases.

For decades, the white-collar bar was dominated by male attorneys, but the past 25 years have ushered in a quiet yet undeniable transformation. From the courtroom to the corporate boardroom, women are remaking white-collar defense practice in the United States,

leveraging their expertise, resilience, and formidable referral networks. Still, while progress is tangible, the future isn’t entirely female.

“The imbalance in the number of women and men in white-collar practice continues to be quite apparent in my day-to-day practice,” says Holly Drumheller Butler, principal at Miles & Stockbridge. “It’s still not unusual for me to be the only female at the table, whether it’s with general counsel, defense counsel, the government, or clients. That being said, over the last 5 to 10 years, there really has been a shift, an increase in the number of women in the practice.”

WOMEN SUPPORTING WOMEN

Grassroots networks have played a pivotal role in empowering women lawyers within white-collar practices, fostering meaningful change in the profession while cultivating mentorship for the next generation of female attorneys. Among these networks, the Women’s White Collar Defense Association (WWCDA) stands out as the preeminent organization in the field.

Established in 1999, WWCDA encompasses 50 chapters across the world, representing a global community of more than 4,000 practicing members. “Networks play a critical role in any law field, and historically those networks were male-dominated in white-collar criminal defense,” according to Popp, WWCDA global chair and cofounder. “That’s why, early on, WWCDA focused on creating referral networks and platforms to advance women. We collaborated with other organizations like the American Bar Association to put women on panels, and WWCDA has used our platforms to promote their successes and to help them achieve recognition through rankings in publications.”

Referrals are the lifeblood of the white-collar bar, a practice defined by its distinctive nature and discretion. Unlike traditional litigation, Drumheller Butler notes, there are no public dockets that broadcast the names of companies embroiled in legal disputes or under investigation. Often, court records are sealed, and by the time a matter surfaces, the client has already retained counsel.

Moreover, white-collar practice differs fundamentally from traditional corporate law, where firms might represent clients for decades, says Popp. These cases demand precision, strategy, and the expertise of a “hired gun” capable of orchestrating a targeted, surgical response. In such a specialized arena, trusted referrals are not just advantageous — they are indispensable.

“To be successful, you have to be able to bring in business, and that means you’ve got to have developed a name,” says Popp. “You’ve got to have a referral network, and it helps to be at a firm that can help generate business. A key part of being able to advance women is to help women build their books of business.”

In this, WWCDA has fulfilled its core mission: growing a powerful referral network for women attorneys in private practice who specialize in white-collar defense. By all accounts, it has exceeded expectations. “Put simply, no longer are women in the field on an island by themselves,” Bozorgi says.

WWCDA’s storied origins trace back to a legendary meal. In 1999, a close-knit group of assistant U.S. attorneys (AUSAs) in the Department of Justice (DOJ) gathered for a lunch, with U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno as their inaugural speaker. That intimate gathering of 10 laid the foundation for WWCDA’s Washington, D.C., chapter later that year, a spark that soon ignited chapters in New York City and Boston.

“That generation of women who were at the DOJ in the 1990s experienced real responsibility and respect as federal prosecutors,” says Drumheller Butler. “They led sections. They mentored people. When they left government service, it made sense to do what men in their positions had done for years, which is go work in white-collar defense. They found out the transition [wasn’t] as easy for women AUSAs as it had been for men. They took a different path.”

Another reason for the growing diversity in the field is that those veteran women white-collar leaders have vigorously embraced their responsibility as mentors to the next generation of young women lawyers. Through WWCDA, in law firms, and through the D.C. Bar, these women attorneys are passing on knowledge and contacts.

“All my mentors were men because female mentors weren’t available to me,” says Bozorgi. “Today, I am the managing partner of an all-female law firm where it’s a priority for us to mentor young female lawyers.”

SEEN, HIRED, AND TRUSTED

Progress has been hard-won. Today, women are not only chairing high-stakes cases and leading white-collar practices at major law firms but also running in-house counsel offices and influencing legal hiring deci-



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sions from the inside out. These leadership roles are instrumental not only for individual advancement but also for cultivating a professional environment where women lawyers can thrive, innovate, and lead.

“Clearly, we have been moving the needle through our networking by promoting women in law firms and in the companies [that] become our clients,” says Anne K. Walsh, director of Hyman, Phelps & McNamara, P.C. “I think all of that reflects more acceptance of women lawyers, and it has led to getting more women seen, hired, and trusted in this space.”

A new generation of women attorneys is assertively reshaping the landscape of white-collar practice, infusing it with fresh perspectives and forward-thinking strategies to dismantle long-standing barriers. At the same time, law firms are undergoing a cultural revolution, increasingly recognizing that diverse teams are not merely a talking point or moral imperative toward fairness but a strategic advantage in a competitive market.



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As corporations themselves grow more diverse, law firms are expressing the need to mirror this evolution to effectively serve their clients. In high-stakes cases, cultural fluency is not a luxury but a critical asset — one that enables lawyers to navigate the subtleties of a client’s background and deliver nuanced, strategic representation.

“You don’t have to change your standards to hire a woman lawyer,” says Ilene Jaroslaw, partner at Elliott Kwok Levine Jaroslaw Neils LLP. “You have more qualified women out

there in the pool because they’re underutilized. You’ve got this pool of incredibly talented people, and you would be foolish not to hire them.”

INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS PERSIST

One of the enduring challenges for women in white-collar practices lies in the continued dominance of male partners at law firms, many of whom remain active well into their 80s, and in some cases, their 90s. These senior figures, often regarded as pillars of the firm, can unintentionally act as gatekeepers of client business.

Despite frequently carrying the lion’s share of client work, including relationship management, women still feel overlooked when it comes to receiving credit. “While firms are making meaningful progress through diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives — bolstered by the advocacy of male allies and firm leadership — there is still significant ground to cover,” says Reem Sadik, a partner in Steptoe LLP’s white-collar defense practice.

“A male partner might have originated a client 10 or 15 years ago,” continues Sadik, “but today a female partner might be managing the relationship — attending dinners, overseeing document production, and

providing day-to-day support. Despite that, the male partner often receives the credit.”

Encouragingly, there has been some progress, particularly within the general counsel offices of Fortune 500 companies. Corporations are implementing their own frameworks for assigning cases, determining credit for client relationships, and evaluating compensation for legal service providers. “Clients are driving the change,” says Walsh. “They have their own goals to reach for diversity.”

In addition to credit recognition, women in white-collar defense face persistent challenges surrounding work–life balance, a particularly pronounced issue in a field defined by demanding hours and high-stakes cases.

However, the pandemic has served as a catalyst for change, accelerating shifts in workplace culture. Many firms have embraced flexible work arrangements and have begun placing greater emphasis on mental health and well-being, changes that hold promise for a more inclusive and sustainable future within the profession.

A BRIGHTER FUTURE

Despite continuing hurdles, the outlook for women in white-collar defense remains one of steady progression and promise. In 2023 women for the first time constituted the majority of law firm associates, according to the ABA’s *2024 Profile of the Legal Profession*. Additionally, women now represent 41 percent of all practicing attorneys in the United States, a figure that, while increasing gradually each year, underscores a slow but constant shift in the legal landscape. Today women comprise 56.2 percent of law school enrollment, consistently outnumbering men, a gap that continues to widen year after year.

The scope and frequency of government investigations and litigation have accelerated progress on diversity within the field. Two decades ago, such investigations were relatively limited in scope, but today they span all levels of government and touch companies of every size and sector. This broadening landscape presents a wealth of opportunities for women to showcase their expertise and leadership.

Popp says the rise of women in white-collar defense is a powerful testament to perseverance, exceptional talent, and the strength of collective action. Over the last two decades, women have redefined the industry by shattering barriers and setting new benchmarks for excellence. Through determination and ingenuity, they have forged pathways not only in the profession but also for the clients they serve.

Jaroslaw emphasizes the significance of building meaningful connections and nurturing opportunities for others. “If you build relationships by referring people to new business, at least stochastically, I believe it comes back to you,” says Jaroslaw. “I have found through experience, the more business you’re doing and the more you’re a connector to other people, it will redound to your benefit.”

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