



## **BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING – WOMEN IN SENIOR LEADERSHIP ROLES IN INDIAN LAW FIRMS**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Times without number, the esteem of the legal profession in a country has been considered one of the promising professions for time immemorial. There are sectors of highly reputable professions that have been and are still contentious through gender disparities, especially in leadership aspects. Today, women are increasing in numbers at law schools and are being absorbed into the increasing legal workforce. This does not seem to reflect the topmost rung in law firms, the judiciary, or the corporate legal departments. It is not just inhibiting the development of a more representative legal system but also systematic biases. Addressing gender disparities in legal leadership is key to realizing equal opportunity and a justice system that mirrors society's diversity. This is not born in any particular country, and it is a global issue for women who have yet to secure full access to senior positions and equal pay or to demolish age-old cultural or institutional walls. The glass ceiling phenomenon still looms large as a barrier to upward movement into higher law positions for women, qualified and competent as they may be<sup>1</sup>.

### **OVERVIEW OF WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN LAW FIRMS**

Women's empowerment at the representation level in a law firm has gradually improved over the years; however, a contrast is more visible between entry-level representation and leadership levels<sup>2</sup>. Female law graduates either match their male counterparts or tend to exceed them in number. Still, the numbers are significantly lower in partner positions, judicial appointments, and senior counsel roles. Such disparity is undoubtedly not an issue of competence or ambition

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<sup>1</sup> Manisha Mirdha, "Need to Break Benevolent Glass Ceiling to Empower Women in Legal Profession | Policy Circle" *Policy Circle* (September 20, 2024) <https://www.policycircle.org/society/glass-ceiling-legal-profession/>

<sup>2</sup> Marc Brodherson, Laura McGee and Mariana Pires Dos Reis, "Women in Law Firms" (*McKinsey & Company*, October 31, 2017) <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/gender-equality/women-in-law-firms>

but structural impediments that create bottlenecks in progression. Much of the shaping of male and female legal career trajectories involves implicit biases and societal expectations. Most women face stereotypes in being able to do things like litigation under pressure and are proficient in negotiations for business, which develops complicated legal strategies. The fact that women have to balance their professional and personal lives creates an extra burden that makes the climb up to the corporate ladder more complex compared to their male counterparts. Taking a closer look at law firms shows how many women usually undergo recruitment as associates only to discover that they have to encounter several barriers to access their partnership positions. Women are not well catered to through strong mentoring programs, sponsorship opportunities, and leadership training. In many law firms, office culture still values inputs where the employees work for long hours, and this is another factor that makes it difficult for women who usually take most caregiving responsibility at home.

### **PERSISTENT CHALLENGES OF THE "GLASS CEILING"**

The 'glass ceiling' is a phenomenon that occurs everywhere, including law, where invisible barriers stop women from moving upward even if they have the necessary qualifications and experience. In law firms and other institutions, there are ways that these barriers manifest, which may include equal chances to high-profile case assignments, limited networking opportunities, unconscious male-biased promotion, and appointment into leadership.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the biggest obstacle for women in penetrating the glass ceiling is the gender pay gap. Research has consistently shown that female attorneys earn less than male colleagues, even when controlling for experience and billable hours. And it is not just a financial difference that reflects the institutional undervaluation of women's contributions in law practice.

In addition, bonuses and long hours often work against women with family obligations by their very definition. Inflexibility about work arrangements or a lack of supportive parental leave policies usually compels a talented woman lawyer to exit the field or accept a position that belittles her leadership and career potential. Very much crucial in the redress of imbalance is the role of mentorship and sponsorship. The difference between sponsorship and mentorship is that mentorship involves simply giving advice and support. In contrast, sponsorship includes an active aspect in providing the person with high-visibility opportunities and promoting them to leadership positions. However, most women in law firms claim not to have such access to

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<sup>3</sup> Shruti Sud & Apurv Amanesh, "Breaking Glass Ceiling in Leadership Roles" *SHRM* (November 16, 2023) <https://www.shrm.org/in/events-education/breaking-glass-ceiling-leadership-roles>

strong sponsors. In addition, the cultural definitions of leadership often equate it with traditional masculine characteristics, making it difficult for women to be seen as authorities in the legal profession. Female lawyers usually face resistance to their self-assessment in negotiations or courtroom proceedings, thus adding weight to the belief that leadership in law is male territory<sup>4</sup>.

## OBJECTIVES

1. This involves assessing women's representation in law firms, the judiciary, in-house corporate legal departments, and legal education and comparing entry-level positions to leadership positions.
2. The study will also evaluate the effect of the glass ceiling, implicit biases, workplace discrimination, challenges in work-life balance, and lack of flexible work arrangements on career advancement for women in legal leadership.
3. This involves observing how men get paid more than women in legal capacities, with distinguishing features such as billing rates, opportunities for advancement, and access to leadership roles.
4. The utility and effectiveness of the availability of mentorship and sponsorship programs will be assessed in the development of women and their aspirations toward leadership within the legal profession<sup>5</sup>.
5. This would set out the recommendations with actionable measures that could aid in gender equity efforts in legal leadership through policy reforms, diversity initiatives, flexible work policies, and leadership development programs.

## CURRENT STATE OF WOMEN IN LAW FIRMS

Although the representation of women in law firms has drastically improved over the years, the gap remains unalterably wide, especially in senior positions. The liberalization of the Indian economy considerably changed the practice of the law, which saw a gradual influx of women into litigation and, subsequently, into corporate law. The increasing number of women law graduates has also helped fill law firms. However, there are still obstacles: the working

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<sup>4</sup> Megha Katheria and Megha Katheria, "Can Women Lawyers Break the Glass Ceiling in Indian Courts?" (*The Leaflet*, September 23, 2020) <https://theleaflet.in/judiciary/can-women-lawyers-break-the-glass-ceiling-in-indian-courts>

<sup>5</sup> Ann E Lemmo, "The Importance of Female Mentorship: Tips for Lawyers on the Rise" *The Legal Intelligencer* (July 1, 2020) <https://www.law.com/thelegalintelligencer/2020/07/01/the-importance-of-female-mentorship-tips-for-lawyers-on-the-rise/?slreturn=20250301124030>

environment is not always gender-diverse. For example, some district courts do not provide basic infrastructure, like women's restrooms, which reflects poorly on the profession and further impinges on female lawyers.

1. **Women Statistics on Junior Vs. Senior Legal Avenues:** Women are primarily represented in junior associate positions in law firms, but there is a diminishing representational curve to partnership levels. Statistics suggest that 22-27% of partners in top corporate law firms in India consist of women, amounting to 4,500-5,000 female partners at present. Interestingly, 42-45% of newly appointed partners in the last three years were women, thus showing an upward trend toward gender diversity in senior positions.<sup>6</sup>
2. **Regional and Global Perspective on Gender Diversity in Law Firms:** Worldwide, female representation in the legal profession has been slowly increasing. In the United Kingdom, for example, women comprised 53% of lawyers in 2021, up from 48% in 2015. However, they account for only 34% of equity partners in major firms, meaning the path to gender parity at the highest levels remains challenging. Compared to that, Indian law firms specifically strive for inclusivity. Seven out of the top ten firms have better gender diversity ratios than the national average, the most gender-balanced being AZB & Partners and Shardul Amarchand Mangaldas & Co. While the trend is indeed encouraging, regional and global data call for sustained resolve for the advancement of women towards senior legal positions. Work-life policies, mentoring programs, and fair recruitment practices are some of the measures required to reach acceptable gender parity within the profession.

## CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

Women lawyers in India face many challenges that make the road uphill for climbing the career ladder and getting their rightful representation at leadership positions—the challenges differ and are many including work-life balance, unconscious bias, lack of mentorship, and pay gaps.

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<sup>6</sup> Areeb Uddin Ahmed and others, “International Women’s Day 2022: Eight Indian Women Who Broke the Legal Profession’s Glass Ceiling” (*Bar And Bench - Indian Legal News*, March 8, 2022) <https://www.barandbench.com/columns/indias-first-women-who-broke-social-barriers-in-the-legal-field>

### Challenges faced by Women in Leadership:

1. **Work-Life Balance and Family Responsibilities:** The practice of law involves an intensity of practice qualities that often university being married with sake expectations from women in society. It is hard to combine long working hours and inflexible schedules with the professional balance of personal responsibilities. Most female respondents identified work-life balance as one of the biggest problems they face, with an increasingly flexible work schedule and availability of affordable childcare making it worse.
2. **Unconscious Bias and Gender Stereotypes:** There's a lot more participation of women in law now, yet deep-seated gender bias and stereotypes remain. Women have faced discrimination in showing pay disparities and exclusion from critical cases and client meetings. They are made to listen to inappropriate remarks and behaviour by their male counterparts, contributing to a stressful working atmosphere, thus making them feel less confident and stunting their professional growth.
3. **Lack of Mentorship and Sponsorship Opportunities:** The male-dominated nature of the profession makes it difficult for women to gain mentorship and sponsorship opportunities. The professional networks that would have been used to advance the career ladder are unavailable to female lawyers, making them ineffective in jobs and slowing their advancement into leadership. A critical element is the absence of female role models, plus many women have no proper guidance to navigate their careers well<sup>7</sup>.
4. **Pay Disparity and Unequal Career Progression:** The concept of gender-based pay gaps spreading like wildfire is a common catchphrase in the legal profession, as it holds when women are said to earn less than men for similar positions. This wage difference is usually evident at district courts where women junior lawyers are deemed less competent and worthy of half or none of their salaries. It demotivates women and hinders their career advancement, which is reflected in fewer women in higher positions.

Multifaceted remedies to these challenges include government policies to support flexible working arrangements, well-formulated mentorship programs, and combating unconscious biases or pay inequity. Hence, in the legal profession, India can gainfully harness its women workforce and develop a more diverse and effective legal system.

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<sup>7</sup> TS Bureau, "Breaking the Glass Ceiling: It's Time India Inc Made Way for More Women in Boardrooms" *The Secretariat* (April 8, 2024) <https://thesecretariat.in/article/breaking-the-glass-ceiling-it-s-time-india-inc-made-way-for-more-women-in-boardrooms>

## STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING WOMEN IN LEGAL LEADERSHIP

Advancing women in legal leadership should be executed through different complementary strategies that look into systemic barriers as well as the creation of an inclusive environment.

Some key strategies include the following:

1. **Mentorship and Sponsorship Opportunities:** Mentorship and sponsorship provide the world's most precious resources that can help advance women's careers in law. Mentorship in guidance, support, and sponsorship involves senior leaders advocating for a fair share of the spoils through opportunity and reward for promising women lawyers. For instance, Proskauer Rose LLP has an integrated Women's Sponsorship Program that matches senior partners with mid- and senior-level women lawyers for advice about and active promotion at the firm.<sup>8</sup>
2. **Law Firm Policies Promoting Gender Diversity and Inclusion:** Implementation of policy promoting gender diversity and inclusion is essential. It can be done through organizing diversity training, building bias-reduction procedures, and formulating family-friendly policies, including flexible work schedules and parental leave. Works done by the National Association of Women Lawyers (NAWL) indicate that such initiatives are aimed at the retention and progression of women at law firms.
3. **Changing Workplace Culture and Unconscious Bias:** Workplace culture should be challenged and changed because unconscious bias will remain in place, which will not help women take the next step in their careers. Studies have shown that unconscious gender bias exists in the fabric of society, promoting inequity even in the absence of open discrimination. In this face, the firm must take at least one continuous education and accountability measure for an inclusive culture.
4. **Advocacy and Policy Reforms for Gender Equality:** Advocacy should extend to policy reform in the organization or at the broader levels of society to realize gender equality. Part of such policy advocacy involves affirmative action policies and equal pay legislation for women's leadership participation. Recent legal cases, such as the one against King & Spalding's diversity program, testify to such ongoing arguments and the call for the existence of policies with matching legal scrutiny.

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<sup>8</sup> Akshay Pathak&Nbsp;and&Nbsp; Neha Kumari and Akshay Pathak&Nbsp;and&Nbsp; Neha Kumari, "Glass Ceiling in the Legal Profession—A Curse to the Indian Legal System - LHSS Collective" (*LHSS Collective* -, July 18, 2023) <https://lhsscollective.in/glass-ceiling-in-the-legal-profession-a-curse-to-the-indian-legal-system/>

## SUCCESS STORIES OF WOMEN IN THE LEGAL PROFESSION

Women in India's legal profession have achieved enormous feats, challenged societal situations, and risen to top leadership positions in law firms. Their journeys provide an insight into the challenges women face and the enablement of gender diversity in the legal profession.

1. **Zia Mody – Founding Partner, AZB & Partners:** Zia Mody is a leading light in corporate law in India. As a founding partner at AZB & Partners, one of the largest law firms in India, she has contributed vigorously to the firm's making and reputation. Contrary to societal expectations, Mody went overseas for her legal education and returned to India to start a thriving practice. In some ways, her journey signifies the essence of courage against traditional expectations in pursuit of excellence<sup>9</sup>.
2. **Indira Jaising – Co-Founder, Lawyers Collective:** Indira Jaising has been a forerunner in human rights and gender law in India. In 2009, she became the first female Additional Solicitor General of India. Jaising co-founded the Lawyers Collective in 1981 to provide legal aid to marginalized communities. Among the many landmark cases in her career is Vishaka's case, which gave birth to guidelines against sexual harassment in the workplace. Jaising's career exemplifies the use of legal knowledge as an instrument for social change.
3. **Arundhati Katju – Advocate:** Arundhati Katju has been one of the leading figures for several landmark legal reforms in India. For over 15 years, she played a key role in the repealing of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalized consensual same-sex relations. Her commitment to constitutional law and civil liberties has carved out her place in promoting LGBTQ rights in India. The journey of Katju brings home the fact that reforms in law demand persistence and commitment to justice.
4. **Priyanka Khimani – Co-Founder and Lead Partner, Anand and Anand & Khimani:** Priyanka Khimani has emerged as a towering name in entertainment and intellectual property law. As co-founder and lead partner of Anand and Anand & Khimani, she represented several blue-chip clients in the entertainment industry. Her journey from humble beginnings to establishing a niche practice herself defines the true meaning of resilience and creating tailored fields of expertise within the legal profession<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Law Prep Tutorial, "Indian Female Lawyers: 17 Most Famous Women Advocates" (*Law Prep Tutorial Blog*, August 16, 2024) <https://www.lawpreptutorial.com/blog/greatest-women-in-law/>

<sup>10</sup> Admin, Admin and Admin, "Women in Law: Pioneers and Influencers" (*Clat Possible* -, August 20, 2024) <https://www.clatpossible.com/blogs/women-in-law-pioneers-and-influencers/>



5. **Sheila Ahuja KC - Partner, A&O Shearman:** Sheila Ahuja KC is one of the most prominent lawyers ever in international arbitration and dispute resolution. Apart from being a partner of A&O Shearman, she dedicates her work to international commercial arbitration and investor-state disputes, mainly within Asia Pacific and South Asia. Ahuja was appointed King's Counsel in 2025, a title for which the applicant needs to be a barrister, thus making history as one of the few female solicitors to achieve such honor. Her life reflects great dedication to advocacy and legal excellence across jurisdictions.

These narratives exemplify how the glass ceiling within the legal profession in India can be shattered through sheer perseverance, specialization, and a commitment to justice.<sup>11</sup>

## THE FUTURE OF WOMEN IN LAW FIRM LEADERSHIP

The emerging trends and positive initiatives have made much difference in the evolution of women's leadership in Indian law firms. The spearheading of women's advancement is being given by the legal institutions and firms, which initiate the change by formulating policies and creating an environment conducive for women to work.

### Emerging Trends and Initiatives for Gender Equality

1. **Greater Numbers of Women in Law Firms:** A recent study found women occupying a sizable percentage of elite law firms in India, setting up to about half the employees of these organizations. This trend indicates an extended outreach in employment practices and comprehension of women and work, adding value to the legal profession.<sup>12</sup>
2. **Institutional Support and Policy Implementation:** Legal institutions, such as the judiciary, bar associations, and law schools, actively enhance gender equality through antidiscrimination policies and provisions of equal opportunity for women's professional growth and leadership in the careers of women lawyers. This measure establishes an environment that tackles systemic biases, thus providing a forum upon which women's advancement in the legal field can thrive.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The Colleges of Law, "6 Famous Female Lawyers & Their Impact | The Colleges of Law" (*The Colleges of Law*, February 14, 2024) <https://www.collegesoflaw.edu/blog/2021/03/24/6-famous-female-lawyers-and-their-impact-on-the-field/>

<sup>12</sup> Matt Adams, "The Future of Women in Law" (*Practus, LLP*, May 10, 2024) <https://practus.com/news/the-future-of-women-in-law/>

<sup>13</sup> Taylor Palmer, "Advancing Women in Law: Progress, Challenges, and Opportunities" (*Practus, LLP*, August 30, 2024) <https://practus.com/advancing-women-in-law-progress-challenges-and-opportunities/>



3. **Corporate Initiatives for Gender Diversity:** Many Indian employers are taking initiatives to increase women's participation at different levels. Reports indicate that 54% of Indian employers have measures to increase women's representation; this number is higher than the global average of 46%. These often include mentorship programs, leadership training, and flexible work arrangements designed to facilitate women's career advancement<sup>14</sup>.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Nevertheless, the future of law firm leadership for women in India continues churning under the rub of some hefty rocks that must be pried apart to achieve equal gender space. Although female representation, policy reforms, and corporate initiatives are clear positive signs, the troublesome issues of unconscious bias, inequitable progression, and inadequate mentorship remain challenging. Institutions and firms in the legal field must, thus, confront stronger diversity policies against equal pay, build leadership management programs, and relentlessly work towards eliminating bias to catalyze real change. Real empowerment will come from strong encouragement for mentoring, the identification of successful women leaders, and the development of inclusive work environments.<sup>15</sup> They will work towards ensuring an equal platform for women and men to succeed in legal leadership. With systemic and cultural change still being pushed at a walk toward the horizon, the legal profession of India may find itself in a better place where "women will break the glass ceiling" and lead as equals to their male counterparts.

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Rummel, "Law Firms Work to Close the Gender Gap in Leadership and Management - Law Week Colorado" (*Law Week Colorado*, April 1, 2024) <https://www.lawweekcolorado.com/article/law-firms-work-to-close-the-gender-gap-in-leadership-and-management/>

<sup>15</sup> Saurabh Kumar Mishra, "Women in Indian Courts of Law: A Study of Women Legal Professionals in the District Court of Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India" [2015] *E-cadernos CES* <https://journals.openedition.org/eces/1976>