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New Jersey Women Lawyers Association

Scholarship Application

“Like A Woman”

In the middle of a masculine and male-dominated sports competition—Super Bowl 2015—Always (maker of feminine care products) launched a groundbreaking campaign, #LikeAGirl. During the ad campaign, males and females were asked to show what it looks like to run, throw, hit, and in essence, act “like a girl.” Unanimously, each person ridiculously flailed their arms while running and pathetically flicked their wrists while attempting to hit. The ad sought to bring awareness to female stereotypes, questioning when, and perhaps more importantly why, is being “like a girl” an insult in the first place?

Stereotypes surrounding girls and women are deeply seeded in our society –what women should and should not do, what women can and cannot do. Women are supposed to be “feminine,” non-confrontational and passive. We can’t throw a ball, run correctly or hit properly. We cry too often and are overly emotional. If this is the definition of a woman, I’ve apparently spent my entire life identifying with the wrong gender. I played multiple sports growing up. In basketball, I nearly fouled out of every single game as a result of my aggressive style of play. Beyond the (basketball) court, I am

confrontational—like most aspiring lawyers—and I have never cried during a sporting or professional event. So, am I not “like a woman”?

Such questions are not just insulting; sadly, they have become barriers to women not just in sports, but also in the workplace. During my three years in law school, I have had the privilege of working at a law firm and interning at the United States Attorney’s Office. While both experiences have been completely rewarding and educational, they have also exposed me to the challenges that uniquely plague women lawyers. For instance, I have been told not to wear my engagement ring on interviews because it suggests I will start a family soon; to wear a skirt suit, not a pants suit because it is “too masculine;” to be heard but not loud; and to be opinionated but not “bitchy.” My fiancé, also a lawyer, never feared that his employer would find out about our engagement and question his dedication to his work. Women starting a family should never be questioned as to their commitment or workplace longevity. My fiancé is never told what to wear to an interview, other than to “be presentable,” and is never coached as to how to advocate or speak in general, fearing never to be “too asshole.”

It is easy to see how these stereotypes can have a significant effect on the behavior of women. This was noted in the #LikeAGirl campaign when Always interviewed young girls who expressed that these stereotypes make them self-conscious, scared to challenge themselves or to act adversely to social norms, and feel that society limits them.¹ Similarly, it affects women in the workplace by making them relentlessly question not just their clothing, but their tone of voice, assertiveness and overall

¹ See *Always #LikeAGirl-Unstoppable*, YOU TUBE (Jul. 7, 2015), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VhB3l1gCz2E>.

demeanor. Thus, these women, like the young girls in the campaign, feel limited by societal gender stereotypes, a fear that can cripple them in the professional workspace.

Opportunities for women in the workforce have significantly improved, as evidenced by more women occupying professional positions. However, women's place in the professional world is still being built, one woman at a time. For instance, women make up 57%² of the labor force, but lack a significant presence in top management positions³ and are paid 79% of what their similarly situated male counterparts are paid.⁴ These discrepancies can be partly attributed to the abovementioned stereotypes: painting an idea of what women should be like and thus conditioning women to behave in a way that actually hinders their professional success.

However, certain steps can be taken by both employers and women, to reduce and eliminate gender pay discrimination and promote pay equality. First, employers can adopt pay transparency policies. Making salaries and salary calculations public will allow women to be on notice of any discrepancy in gender pay and give them the opportunity to remedy these discrepancies. Women entering the workforce may not be familiar with what an expected salary is or how salaries are calculated. Accessible data and transparency from company management allow women to properly craft their argument in favor of pay equity. Much of the problem can be solved by bringing women,

² *Data & Statistics*, DEPARTMENT OF LABOR, http://www.dol.gov/wb/stats/stats_data.htm.

³ See Sharon C. Bolton, *Why there are so many female managers but so few CEOs*, THE WASHINGTON POST (Mar. 11, 2015), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/03/11/why-there-are-so-many-female-managers-but-so-few-ceos/>.

⁴ Catherine Hill, *The Simple Truth about the Gender Pay Gap* (Fall 2015), AAUW, <http://www.aauw.org/research/the-simple-truth-about-the-gender-pay-gap/>.

and the greater workforce, out of the dark, and onto the negotiating table with hard figures. Without those figures, women are left fighting without ammunition, coming across of course, as whiny and very needy. Once everyone sees the figures, women can articulately present their arguments as to why they should not be receiving anything less than their male counterparts at the company.

Once the numbers are made public and the playing field is equalized, employers should next promote deserving women to higher positions and positions that mandate greater salaries. Women in upper management are necessary to effectively support the pay parity problem. These women tend to be the ones nearest the decision makers who can raise awareness and remind upper management of the problems plaguing the workforce. In addition, the optics of having a woman in power will promote the morale of other female employees and not only give them confidence that they too can rise to that level, but also provide them with a mentor who can coach them on how to excel within the company.

Similarly, coaching negotiators would be beneficial resources for women. Coaches can teach women negotiation tactics and good negotiating skills. These coaches can be brought in by the employers and advertised as training for all employees willing to participate; women should not have to pay for the coaches themselves—upper management should make it a priority. Negotiation training will help improve a woman's confidence during negotiations and more importantly, increase their eagerness to even get to the negotiating table.

But we as women can also play a role in eliminating the existence of gender pay discrimination. As women, we need to push ourselves beyond societal gender norms and

be confident in speaking our minds, even at the risk of being labeled “bitchy” or “unfeminine.” We need to continue to be more assertive and confident in expressing what we want, need and deserve. In addition, we need to educate ourselves on the salaries of our peers in similar markets, so that we can be knowledgeable and confident when positioned at the negotiating table. Services such as Glassdoor and PayScale should be relied upon and spread throughout our female networks.

Most importantly, we need to collectively strive to eliminate these stereotypes and redefine what it means to be “like a woman.” Take hold of the definition and properly demonstrate that running like a woman means running as fast as you can. Hitting like a woman means hitting as hard as you can. Negotiating like a woman means strategically fighting to get the very best that you deserve. And dressing like a woman can involve a fashionable pants suit. We must force ourselves to rebuke all socially-conditioned norms; doing so will not only advance our professional lives, but also help destroy harmful stereotypes and allow future women professionals to live redefined lives with pay parity and gusto.