

There is much I don't remember about my first day of law school. However, the hallmarks that won't leave me include my sweaty palms, the blisters from my yet-to-be broken-in heels, and the emphasis on building a network. The first two issues faded quickly, but the final has only grown. The legal world runs on a continuum of who you know. Entering this field without access to those connections is not only daunting but also keeps many from walking through the door in the first place. This paper argues that affinity groups serve a necessary, corrective purpose in addressing the inequalities in professional legal pathways and, when implemented alongside education, serve a unifying rather than a divisive purpose.

The demographics of the legal world are changing. As of 2024, a majority of law students are women, at 56.2%.¹ Additionally, 41% of lawyers are women, and women are on track to be the majority of full-time faculty in law school ranks.² While these strides are valiant and worthy of celebration, the chasm between men and women in the legal field is far from closed. The positions at the pinnacle of the field remain homogeneous. Men make up 67% of federal judges and 72% of law firm partners.³

Beyond the gender divide, the field is also overwhelmingly white. Only 23% of lawyers are people of color.⁴ Similarly, just 12% of law firm partners and 26% of federal judges are

¹ American Bar Association, *New ABA Report Spotlights Rise of Women in the Law*, (Nov. 18, 2024), <https://www.americanbar.org/news/abanews/aba-news-archives/2024/11/new-aba-report-spotlights-rise-women-in-law/>.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ American Bar Association, *Demographics*, Profile of the Legal Profession (2024), <https://www.americanbar.org/news/profile-legal-profession/demographics/>.

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nonwhite.⁵ There are no reliable statistics on the total number of LGBTQ+ lawyers, but the percentage of LGBTQ+ lawyers at firms is around 4.6%.⁶ Despite these changing statistics, the legal world, especially the upper echelons, remains mostly straight, male, and white.

This can create unique problems for those who fall outside of this mold. Despite this slow progress, it is a progression into a system designed by individuals who predominantly inhabit it. This issue exceeds culture. It is structural. To combat a structural issue, an effective remedy lies within a structural solution. Affinity groups can provide the missing infrastructure for underrepresented groups navigating a space that was not made for them but that they still belong in. Affinity groups do not act as an overcorrection, but rather as a way to even the playing field.

Power replicates itself if left uninterrupted. Since the legal world is built on networks, and many underrepresented groups lack connections to established individuals in these spaces, this creates a negative feedback loop. Opportunities continue to circulate among those already looped in, while newcomers remain excluded through informal, often unseen, barriers. At best, doors are closed to these individuals; at worst, they are unaware that the doors exist.

Sponsors often serve as an integral bridge for women entering the workplace. Employees who have sponsors are promoted nearly twice as often as those without.⁷ Women often have fewer sponsors in the workplace than men, especially at the entry level, where they are half as

⁵ *Id.*; American Bar Association, *Judges*, Profile of the Legal Profession (Nov. 18, 2024), <https://www.americanbar.org/news/profile-legal-profession/judges/>.

⁶ ABA Demographics *supra* note 4.

⁷ McKinsey & Co. & LeanIn.Org, *Women in the Workplace 2025*, at 5 (2025), <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/women-in-the-workplace>.

likely as men to have multiple sponsors.⁸ They are also half as likely to have sponsors in a senior-level role, which can most influence career movement.⁹ This lack of support leads to the “ambition gap” in which young women initially express greater interest in advancement than men, but experience declining aspirations after prolonged stagnation in entry-level roles.¹⁰ This is likely due to a lack of career support. It is shown that when women and men are given similar levels of support from senior colleagues, the desire gap closes.¹¹ Additionally, salient aspects of identity beyond gender leave many employees feeling limited. Many male and female LGBTQ+ employees alike fear their sexuality negatively impacts them in the workplace, at 25% and 19% respectively.¹² With the greatest concern of all female racial groups, almost one in three Black women fear their race will hold them back.¹³

Affinity groups interrupt this feedback loop by consolidating power and knowledge to create a greater impact. Their impacts can create tangible change in overcoming hurdles faced by underrepresented groups. One of the first, and biggest, roadblocks in women’s professional careers is the difficulty of getting an initial promotion from entry-level to manager, described as the “broken rung.”¹⁴ For every 100 men promoted, 93 women are promoted, and 74 women of color are promoted.¹⁵ As described before, one of the roadblocks to these promotions are lack of sponsors. Affinity groups provide opportunities for those in underrepresented positions to access

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.* at 10.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.* at 14.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ Alexis Krivkovich, Drew Goldstein & Megan McConnell, *Women in the Workplace Key Findings* (2025), McKinsey & Co., <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/women-in-the-workplace>.

¹⁵ *Id.*

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sponsors they would not have otherwise. A formalization of these encounters through affinity groups removes much of the guesswork, secrecy, and gatekeeping for underrepresented individuals, giving them the opportunity to both hear from those who understand their unique position and to find intentional mentorship. As sponsorship is directly correlated with career advancement in professional realms, the role of affinity groups is to help level a deeply uneven field.

Aside from the social benefits of encouraging workforce diversity, there is a positive professional impact on careers and the legal profession. Research has shown that diversity benefits workplaces, as diverse teams focus more on facts and are more innovative.¹⁶ A 2006 Tufts University psychological study placed 200 individuals into mock juries that were either entirely white or ethnically diverse and were shown a video of a Black defendant and white victims.¹⁷ The diverse juries made fewer factual errors and introduced considerations that the all-white juries did not, including possible racial bias.¹⁸ Additionally, workplaces with gender diverse teams are more likely to produce radical innovations than those without the same levels of diversity.¹⁹ In the legal profession, where precision and problem-solving are essential to good lawyering, these benefits translate into improved decision-making and advocacy. Teams with diverse perspectives at all levels of the workplace hierarchy are not just good social practice but are vital to the integrity of the legal field.

¹⁶ David Rock & Heidi Grant, *Why Diverse Teams Are Smarter*, HARV. BUS. REV. (Nov. 4, 2016), <https://hbr.org/2016/11/why-diverse-teams-are-smarter>.

¹⁷ Samuel R. Sommers, *On Racial Diversity and Group Decision Making: Identifying Multiple Effects of Racial Composition on Jury Deliberations*, J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 597, 602 (2006).

¹⁸ *Id.* at 607–08.

¹⁹ Díaz-García, C., González-Moreno, A., & Jose Sáez-Martínez, F. (2013). *Gender diversity within R&D teams: Its impact on radicalness of innovation*. INNOVATION, 149, 158. <https://doi.org/10.5172/impp.2013.15.2.149>.

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While many appreciate the professional benefits of diversity, some oppose the use of formally structured affinity groups to promote it. A common argument is that these groups dissuade the natural integration of diversity through unofficial or organic pathways and, as a result, create a more factional workplace. This argument assumes that the current structures that support integration are neutral and accessible to all. Given that women are still underrepresented in high-ranking legal positions, even though they make up 41% of the legal field, there seems to be a fundamental disconnect for women in these traditional pathways.²⁰

Additionally, while there is some evidence that diversity initiatives can have negative, unintended effects, these impacts are tied to outsider perceptions rather than tangible results.²¹ A 2025 review found that diversity initiatives are successful in achieving their intended effects of representing groups and fostering inclusion, but the negative impact stems from perceived unfairness by outsiders.²² A documented strategy to address this issue is to provide structural explanations for why initiatives are in place rather than individual ones.²³ So while it may seem that these initiatives can create divides, they are largely successful in achieving their goals, and resulting divides can be addressed through education rather than abandoning the initiatives.

The legal field touches the lives of every individual, whether intentionally or not. However, it has been largely shaped by individuals who are not representative of the population it governs. The impacts of this are far-reaching. Not only does it affect who holds power within this institution, but also how laws are written, interpreted, and enforced. Affinity groups help

²⁰ ABA Report *supra* note 1.

²¹ Lisa M. Leslie, Y. Lillian Kim & Emily R. Ye, *Diversity Initiatives: Intended and Unintended Effects*, 61, CURRENT OP. PSYCHOL. 101942 (2025).

²² *Id.* at 2–3.

²³ *Id.*

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address this chasm for underrepresented individuals in the field and allow them to participate more fully, despite knowledge being closed off through traditional pathways. For many, affinity groups are necessary to advance in a system that relies on informal access. Until the systems in place ensure equal access to resources for all, affinity groups remain essential to the success of those who live outside the mold.