

Professional Advancement of Women in the Profession of Law:
New Jersey Women’s Law Association Scholarship Essay
Carolyn (Carly) Rothman Siditsky
January 2019 (updated March 2019)
Word count: 1289

When heat is applied to a kernel of popcorn, pressure builds slowly inside the hull until, suddenly, the starch bursts into its final form. This process also, essentially, describes how I decided to become a lawyer.

I felt the heat during an interview for my first job out of college. “Your smile will get you anywhere,” the boss said, staring at my mouth instead of my resume. It flared when a trusted mentor suggested we go to a motel during a coffee break. Again, when a new supervisor warned me not to get pregnant. And again, when I became pregnant and an influential person said he could no longer picture me in a leadership role.

Just a handful of stories, shocking only because they are so unextraordinary.

I have been a working woman long enough to know how lucky I am. Thanks to a combination of support, strategy, hard work, and good fortune, my experience with gender bias has not derailed my career. It has fueled my ambition. But the research is clear. Structural barriers and cultural bias block too many women—especially women of color—from reaching their professional potential, impairing their personal safety and dignity and threatening the financial security of their families, the vitality of their industries, and the strength of our shared economy.

In my previous career, I did something about it. As Director of External Affairs at New Jersey Policy Perspective, a Trenton-based think tank with expertise in state tax and budget policy, I helped launch the Fair Work, Fair Care Project. The initiative was created to support analysis and advocacy for public policies to support working caregivers, who are predominantly women. I also created the Kathleen Crotty Fellowship for aspiring policy analysts, especially those interested in gender issues. These efforts have already yielded promising results, including an influential report on New Jersey's family leave insurance program. Produced by the very first Crotty Fellow in 2016, and advanced through the Fair Work, Fair Care Project, the report presented important recommendations to make the program more robust, accessible, and inclusive. Governor Murphy recently signed legislation containing many of these recommendations.

But this work was not my core focus at New Jersey Policy Perspective, nor later at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities in Washington, D.C. As I supported friends coping with gender bias in their careers and immersed myself more deeply in the literature on workplace gender and racial bias, I recognized the time had come to make a personal change.

I realized I want to counsel working women and caregivers about their rights in the workplace, help them evaluate their options when problems arise, and advocate for them when necessary. I want to advise business and nonprofit leaders on how to serve corporate interests by enabling *all* employees to achieve their potential. I want to help design and advocate for public policies that enable women and working caregivers to be

treated with equity and dignity in the workplace, and to be compensated fairly. And I understood, in a burst of clarity, that I could be most effective as a lawyer.

As a first-year law student, I am still exploring the avenues available to pursue these goals. I have a strong interest in working in government to help form, implement, and enforce laws and regulations to address workplace bias. And I believe public interest law and/or a private consulting practice could yield fruitful opportunities to leverage my legal experience with my background in nonprofit management and communications.

There is a catch-22 here, presenting a question: Will gender bias within the legal profession stop me from doing my best work to combat gender and racial bias more broadly? No, for two reasons.

First, I am entering the field with two children and more than a dozen years of experience navigating life as a woman, worker, wife, and mother, in various demanding jobs. Past encounters with gender bias have only deepened my commitment to this work. If (when) I encounter these roadblocks again, I know with the confidence of experience that with creativity, courage, and discipline, I can make my way forward. My priorities are clear. My expectations are realistic. And my family shares and supports my goals.

Second, I strongly believe repairing the world starts with getting one's own house in order. My efforts against gender bias must include taking steps to make my own profession more inclusive. Already, my time in law school has illuminated two changes that could help level the playing field for attorneys of any gender.

I have attended multiple panels and trainings at which female law students were encouraged to alter the way they dress or communicate to land a job or negotiate a salary. Such guidance may well be necessary to help women launch careers in a male-dominated field. After all, a seat at the table starts with a foot in the door. But when women are not also taught to recognize these norms as symptomatic of broader patterns of gender bias, and when they are not armed with resources to confront underlying cultural and structural concerns, this type of advice merely perpetuates harmful models. It sends the message that women must maneuver within an unfair system, rather than work with each other and those in power to change the system itself. Therefore, beginning in law school, lawyers must be trained to recognize and deal with biased norms as systemic barriers, not personal obstacles. I hope to help develop such training and have begun discussing possibilities with others in the Rutgers community.

A second, related concern: Too many conversations about gender bias take place among women alone. Yet gender bias is *not* women's problem. It is *everyone's* problem. It hurts employee retention, running up costs for recruitment and retraining. It reduces productivity by creating toxic work environments. It makes it harder for every person, regardless of gender, to meet both their personal and professional goals. Therefore, starting in law school, more conversations must engage men, enabling them to enter their competitive early years of practice with a clear sense of how their actions affect female colleagues, how they can interrupt harmful behavior among peers, and how they also benefit from a more equitable system.

As a practicing attorney, there are three ways I believe I can make a difference within the profession—first, as an ally to female colleagues, especially those of color. Simple steps can help position women as valuable colleagues and workplace leaders. These include echoing, crediting, and lauding other women’s ideas in meetings; promoting female colleagues in conversation with others; and recommending (with their permission) other women for jobs, promotions, or prestigious projects. An upside of this strategy: Advocating generously for colleagues can strengthen relationships and build sturdy networks for support and information. I can also make a difference by advocating for myself or colleagues in systemic terms when bias rears its head, seeking solutions that benefit not just myself or another individual, but the workplace community.

A second way I can help is as a mentor, particularly to lawyers managing work and caregiving responsibilities. I know firsthand that in trying times, a supportive mentor’s validation or advice can make the difference between surviving and thriving.

Finally, I believe I can make a difference as a role model, living a life and building a career that reflect my values on gender equity. If I achieve a leadership role again, I am committed to continuing the introspective work necessary to identify, acknowledge, and correct my own blind spots on implicit bias; to supporting my staff’s understanding of implicit bias through ongoing dialogue and training; to fostering a culture that rewards communication, cooperation, and respect; and to implementing best practices that confront and interrupt bias within our workplace.