

LAW WEEK COLORADO

‘Balancing the Scales’

Veteran attorney presents documentary film on women in the law; explores gender inequality

BY SARAH GREEN
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As it is often discussed in the media, in politics and in law offices around the nation, women still face obstacles in the workplace like lower wages, poor representation in the governmental stratosphere and struggles with home-life expectations.

However, one documentary film specifically illustrates the struggle many women attorneys face — legal professionals who choose to balance both the cultural pressures as well as the law.



ATTORNEY AND DOCUMENTARIAN SHARON ROWEN SPEAKS ABOUT THE IMPACT OF HER FILM, WHICH HIGHLIGHTS THE ISSUES SURROUNDING GENDER INEQUALITY WITHIN THE LEGAL PROFESSION.

“Balancing the Scales” is a short film about gender equality among women within the legal profession. Producer, equality activist and attorney, Sharon Rowen, a personal injury and probate attorney and partner based in Atlanta, has been conducting interviews for the film for the past 20 years and has been touring around the U.S., promoting the documentary.

The film was presented Wednesday in Denver by the Center for Legal Inclusiveness.

SUPERWOMEN

After a brief exploration of the American women’s suffrage movement, the film addressed women in the legal profession from the 1940s through the present, highlighting the pioneers of the field and the obstacles they have overcome, why gender equality within the legal profession is still elusive and what the future of the field will bode for young women attorneys. The film also explores how American firms compare to European firms in both compensation and work-life balance.

Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg reflected on her time at Harvard Law School from 1956 to 1958, where, at the time, only one women’s restroom existed within the two teaching buildings she spent most of her time in.

“Suppose you’re taking an exam, this very intense examination, so you have to make a mad dash from one building to the next,” she said in the film. “...there were impediments to women — and they were rather formidable.”

A decade earlier before Ginsburg’s time at Harvard, Phyllis Kravitch, a senior Circuit Judge on the United States Court of Appeals for the 11th Circuit, said she wasn’t even allowed to apply to the prestigious law school and was swiftly denied the opportunity to submit admission paperwork.

“I received a letter ... which informed me, politely but firmly, that Harvard did not accept women students,” she said in the film.

Now, more than half a century later, women make up 50 percent of law school graduates, however, as the documentary illustrates, of those graduates, only 17 percent become equity partners in American firms.

Rowen said that the problem with gender inequality within the legal field is not with what women have achieved, but what they are expected to do. In fact, she said, women have caught up to men in terms of education and actually surpass men in educational achievement, but they have even greater expectations in both their work and home environments.

The problem lies within the “superwoman myth,” where “women attorneys try to balance work and family and end up carrying nearly all of the caregiving responsibilities,” she said.

THE BOYS CLUB

Rowen, who is one of the few women attorneys who has made partner in her Atlanta-based firm, said the obstacles women often face date back to the 1930s and 1940s when women were just entering the workforce, and that the “old boys club, which is usually made up of white, male attorneys,” is still very competitive.

“The legal profession is conservative. They’re not subject to direct pressure such as retail or some corporation that (sells) a product,” she said. “They’re run by directors and managing partners who are usually white males who have been there for a long time.”

However, in modern law firms, Rowen said that although those managing partners are willing to listen, they’re not quite

ready to ditch the traditional organization of the law firm, thus hindering a woman’s “ability to become a rainmaker.”

“It’s not that they don’t want to listen, they’re just not willing to tear down the structure,” she said. “They kind of just want to patch holes, by offering (incentives) such as mentoring programs ... and maternity leave, but those are some of the smaller things that will not get to root of the problem.”

The film digs deeper, however, exploring the roles women are often expected to fill — in addition to their job duties. Women often endure explicit and implicit pressure to take care of their children and elders, Rowen said, which are both professional and cultural issues.

“Women feel like they’re the ones who have to step back in caregiving situations; it’s just assumed that it’s the woman who is going to step back,” she said about women who choose to also have children or take care of loved ones in addition to work — a pressure that often forces women to leave their legal careers.

“Women are opting out of continuing in the legal field,” Rowen said. “They just don’t buy into the ‘superwoman’ myth anymore.”

Danielle Felder, an associate at Rollin Brasewell & Fisher, attended the Denver screening of the documentary. She said she felt drawn to the film because like many female attorneys, she has also considered leaving her career as an attorney.

“The last couple of months have really made me think about if I still want to be a lawyer, which is odd, because I wanted to be a lawyer since I was young,” she said. “I took a big hit these last few years with my commitment to law as a woman, and I’m trying to find it again.”

Felder, who is the first lawyer in her family, said that despite the flexibility and the excitement she feels about shaping the future of her young firm, if she does leave, she will leave the legal field completely.

“I think I’d probably go into teaching, which is female dominated — but it feels like giving up though and I want to leave on my terms,” she said, adding that she hopes the documentary will

give her some inspiration.

“This film is poignant mainly because of the political atmosphere and the environment we are going into,” she said. “I think a lot of women attorneys took a big hit — whether we voted for (Trump) or not — there is still something to be said of a woman lawyer who was up for president and the process that that entailed,” she said, referencing Hillary Clinton’s presidential race against President Donald Trump. “The sad news is that we still have a long way to go. We’re not even close.”

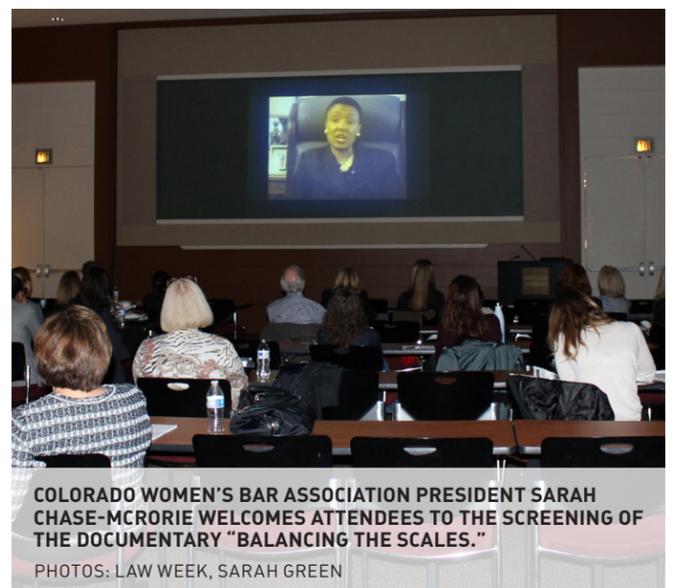
A CULTURE TO BE RECKONED WITH

One of the film’s interviewees, Therese Stewart, an associate justice on the California 1st District Court of Appeals, said that any institution, whether it be a law firm or a business, will not succeed without acknowledging not just women, but the diversity of America as a whole.

“The bottom line is that we are a culture and a society that has a lot of different people from different cultures, sexual orientations and genders, and to have any institution not reflect that, to some degree, is going to make that institution not as competitive in the long run,” she said in the film.

Rowen said that she would like to “jump-start a discussion in our society about how everyone — men and women — can have both career and family, with no preconceived notions about whose career is considered more important,” and that “only when our current assumptions are finally recognized as a problem can we then start seeking real solutions.”

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COLORADO WOMEN'S BAR ASSOCIATION PRESIDENT SARAH CHASE-MCRORIE WELCOMES ATTENDEES TO THE SCREENING OF THE DOCUMENTARY “BALANCING THE SCALES.”

PHOTOS: LAW WEEK, SARAH GREEN