

# FIRMS SIGN ON TO CHARTER

THE LIV CHARTER FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN REQUIRES SIGNATORIES TO ESTABLISH FAIR AND TRANSPARENT SEXUAL DISCRIMINATION AND HARASSMENT COMPLAINTS PROCESSES. **BY KARIN DERKLEY**

Legal workplaces signing on to the LIV Charter for the Advancement of Women say the charter represents a confirmation of their values and aspirations to support women in the legal profession.

The charter, which is based on the NSW Law Society's Charter for the Advancement of Women, aims to promote and support strategies to retain women from all backgrounds in the profession over the course of their careers. It also requires signatories to establish procedurally fair and transparent sexual discrimination and harassment complaints processes.

Elit Lawyers principal Danielle Snell says her firm was proud to be among the first signatories to the charter. "The core mission of the charter is distinctly aligned with our own commitments to facilitate change within the industry," she says.

"We are deeply committed to advancing the position of women in our industry, but we believe that adopting the charter is just as important for our clients, stakeholders, lawyers from other firms who we deal with on legal matters, and future women who have not yet entered the legal sector," Ms Snell says.

Argent Law principal Melissa Patterson says the charter has been a rare bright spot in a year filled with challenges. "With all the negativity around at the moment and the terrible things happening to women in Afghanistan it was just so nice to see something so positive for women in this country and in our profession." The charter represents everything the firm already values, she says. "Promoting and supporting women in their careers has always been a natural focus of the firm.

"Now more than ever our people expect to and want to work for organisations with values that reflect their own sense of community and fairness. Signing the charter is part of our firm's fundamental commitment to workplace respect."

City of Melbourne chief legal counsel Kim Wood says he jumped at the chance to sign up to the charter. "What the charter does is put into one document everything our organisation is committed to in regard to promoting and supporting women.

"We were already complying with everything it sets out, but it's given us an ability to actually measure what we are doing and establish that we are well and truly in compliance," Mr Wood says. The charter fits alongside the City of Melbourne legal office's embrace of the Equitable Briefing Initiative and Court of Appeal president Justice Chris Maxwell's Champions of Change coalition, he says.

Curium Legal managing principal Sarah Gee says the charter is "a simple summation of what every law firm should be thinking about, talking about with their leadership teams, measuring and being accountable to."

Ms Gee established her own commercial law firm a little over one year ago after experiencing what she says were "all of the same issues, biases and constraints that women invariably report" as she tried to meet her employer's expectations while also being a mother. Ms Gee's business is staffed by four women based in regional areas who work flexibly and remotely around day care and other family responsibilities.

"I challenge any law firm manager who thinks this is not something that needs to be measured in their firm, to listen to the disruptors, the statistics around women leaving the profession, the lack of diversity, the rates of burnout and depression and tell me that something doesn't need to change."

Gadens CEO Mark Pistilli says the charter aligns to other initiatives and programs that Gadens is already a signatory to, including the Law Council of Australia's Equitable Briefing Policy, their Diversity and Equality Charter, and the NSW Law Society's Charter for the Advancement of Women in the Legal Profession.

"By signing the charter, we are making a visible statement that the advancement of women is important to our firm and the profession more broadly. We

hope to share knowledge and ideas within the legal industry to improve the experience for all female practitioners, regardless of where they work."

Lander & Rogers CEO Genevieve Collins says adopting the charter is part of the firm's commitment to its people "that we promote a gender-balanced workplace and will always take action to ensure equality." The firm is already a signatory to the NSW Charter for the Advancement of Women.

Adopting the charter is part of being an employer of choice, Ms Collins says. "Now more than ever our people expect to and want to work for organisations with values that reflect their own sense of community and fairness. Signing the Charter is part of our firm's fundamental commitment to workplace respect."

Allens chief people officer Jane Lewis says the firm's diversity and inclusion framework is aligned with the commitments in the Charter. "Signing the charter is a continuation of our work on inclusion and diversity. We hope it demonstrates our commitment to gender equity and helps to build a culture where everyone is empowered to reach their full potential."

## Charter for the Advancement of Women

Atticus director Alexandra Doig says the charter is a great initiative she hopes will encourage firms to stop and think about the decisions they make when offering roles and promoting staff. “I’ve been a solicitor for 10 years now, and when I started I was struck by the massive contrast between the number of young female lawyers working in junior roles and the number of women working in management and higher roles. Ten years later I can’t see a massive difference, which I think is really a shame.

“The reality for women is that we’re still living in a society where men have all the power and are the ones who are making the decisions about who gets promoted and who gets the roles and who steps into their shoes.”

The charter “is a way of saying we are going to take time at intervals during the year or at those big decision-making moments and say what females do we have in our own ranks that we should be looking to develop to a position that they should be moving up into?” Ms Doig says.

“And if they’re not, what are we doing wrong in our organisation that’s stopping women from wanting to move up, or what’s stopping them from being able to move up?”

Among the measures recommended by the charter is more generous parental leave, flexible working policies and better support for women to return to their role after maternity leave without being penalised. Firms who have signed up to the charter say they have already embraced those measures.

Allens’ Jane Lewis says the firm’s approach to parental leave does not distinguish between primary and secondary caregivers, provides a temporary break from billable expectations for legal employees when returning to work and pays superannuation on the unpaid component of leave. “This package has been crucial to creating cultural change for working parents and supporting the shifting roles within families,” Ms Lewis says.

Gadens has a similar parental leave policy and a flexible work policy that supports its people to balance their personal and professional lives. The firm also conducts regular unconscious bias training and consciously reviews for gender equality in recruitment, promotions and rewarding performance. “In addition, our firm seeks opportunities to support women in the legal profession through university mentoring and networking events,” Mr Pistilli says.

At the City of Melbourne Mr Wood says the legal office already offers flexible hours, and ensures that meetings are not conducted early in the morning or late at night. “Those types of practices are so obviously going to affect women more than men.”

Mr Wood says it is essential that men sign up for the charter and commit to its recommendations. “Men need to commit to these things instead of saying it’s for women to do. Women have done more than enough. We have to do it.”

LIV president Tania Wolff says she is delighted that more than 40 firms have already signed up to the charter and hopes more will do so over the coming months. “It is great to see that the legal profession is recognising the need to deal proactively and preventatively with this issue. There are very real obstacles holding women back from progressing in their careers, whether it be a lack of family friendly policies or a failure to provide a safe and inclusive workplace. We need to do what we can to create conditions not only for women to enter the profession, but to remain in it.” ■



Argent Law principal Melissa Patterson



Gadens CEO Mark Pistilli



Lander & Rogers CEO Genevieve Collins