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Re: Why Do So Few Women Reach the Top of Big Law Firms?  
(Business Section, p. 1, 19 March 2006)

*via email: letters@nytimes.com*

To the Editor:

As a lawyer and consultant who studies the country's largest law firms for a living, I read "Up the Down Staircase" with great interest. You focus a rare public spotlight on a chronic, disheartening problem, which has received too little attention both inside and outside the profession.

While observers offer a number of theories for the paucity of women at the top (inadequate mentoring, not belonging to "the club," being permanently derailed after even the briefest of Mommy detours, reluctance to say "I want," plain old sexism), I believe the legal profession is decades behind the times on this score for reasons intrinsic to how lawyers are trained to think:

- We are taught to be analytic, cerebral, adversarial, and consummately "risk averse" in the sense of focusing on what could go wrong, not what could work. Our job is to critique the proposal for holes, not to find and burnish the hidden gems.
- When a law firm entertains a proposal about how they might do business differently, the all-but-universal, immediate question is, "Who else is doing this?" And when the answer is, "no one really," the initiative's fate is sealed.
- The combination of these two ingrained attitudes—risk-aversion and crowd-following—add up to the decision, when serious change is seriously proposed, not to decide. Which is of course a vote for the status quo.

Nevertheless, it is a profession I am deeply honored to be a part of, and I find my work as "enormously satisfying" as does Bettina Plevan at Proskauer Rose. Let their progressive example be the lasting import of your story.

Best regards,

Bruce MacEwen

Disclosure and identification: The author writes the widely read site on the economics of law firms, AdamSmithEsq.com.