

WOMENLEGAL

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A WOMAN'S WORLD?

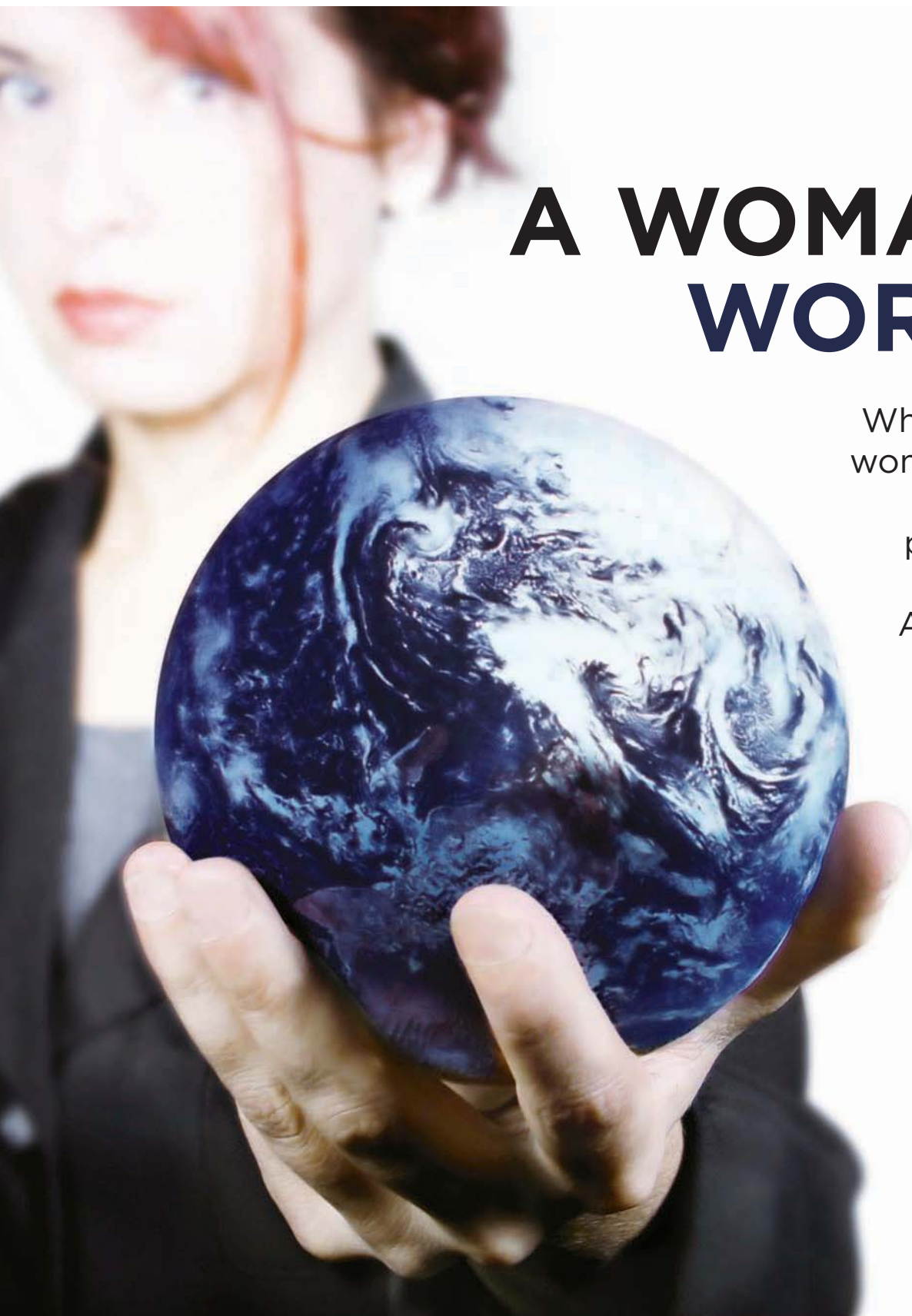
What issues do women working in the legal profession in the US, UK, Australia and Asia face today?

FOCUS FEATURE

An insight into the American Bar Association Commission on Women in the Profession's latest report.

MASTERCLASS

How to overcome the obstacles facing women aiming for partnership.





Conversations with Christofferson

Karen B. Kahn, principal, KM Advisors LLC, discusses ‘super lawyers’, sexism and the Los Angeles Sparks with O’Melveny & Myers’ Los Angeles-based managing partner, **Carla Christofferson**.

When I coach lawyers and executives, the first question I ask them is: “What would an ideal career look like for you?” When I ask women this, they often minimise their hopes and dreams and instead respond by saying: “I want to be a good lawyer.” This is a noble answer, but not an inspiring one. Carla Christofferson, managing partner of the O’Melveny & Myers’ Los Angeles office knows what she wants, what is important to her and, crucially, goes after it. She was raised on a sheep farm in North Dakota, won several beauty pageants, and graduated from Yale Law School. She was also recognised as a Southern California ‘Super Lawyer’ (2005–2008), was named one of the Top 75 Women Lawyers in California, and was recently named one of the ‘100 Most Influential Lawyers in California’ by the *Daily Journal*. Along with her close friend Kathy Goodman, she is one of the first women to purchase a sports franchise; the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) team, the Los Angeles Sparks. Christofferson models life as a ‘whole’ person: a passionate woman who is a successful lawyer, a leader dedicated to helping others succeed, and an individual who has figured out how to integrate the many aspects of her life.

Did you always want to be a lawyer?

No, although others later told me they weren’t surprised I became one because I liked to argue so much. When I first went to college, I wanted to be a teacher and coach. Then I changed my mind and wanted to be a journalist or go into public relations. Throughout my studies I knew that I wanted a life where I could make a difference. I considered being a lawyer but I wasn’t sure if

I could get in to law school, but I applied to schools at all levels and was accepted.

Did you have a vision of what you wanted to do as a lawyer?

No, I figured someone would just tell me what to do when I got to law school. I had no idea what being a lawyer would be like since I had never even known one. Interestingly, having no expectations and no set notions of what being a lawyer was like was freeing.

When did you feel comfortable being a lawyer?

Probably not until I had been at the law firm for about three years. Then I got comfortable in my own skin, and finally realised that I wasn’t going to be ‘found out’ and sent back to North Dakota. I was probably too concerned about not being good enough to enjoy law school. However, thinking that I was not doing as well as others probably helped my ambitions.

I was lucky to be interviewed for my first job by two remarkable women from O’Melveny & Myers. One is still at the firm and someone I still look up to and another is a great judge in Los Angeles. They excited me and gave me a vision of success. This made a huge difference to my confidence level and convinced me that O’Melveny was the right place for me to start my career.

How did you get to be a managing partner of a major law firm at age 40?

When I was at a junior level, those at O’Melveny allowed me to have various leadership positions. I am grateful for this as it gave me the opportunity to learn and try to make a difference for

others. For example, I was a hiring partner before I was a partner; I was the talent development partner before we had an official 'Talent Development Programme'. With respect to becoming a managing partner, it was good timing. Our current chair, AB Culvahouse, made a specific decision to promote more junior partners into leadership positions in order to develop the next generation of leaders. I am so lucky to be part of an organisation that focuses on leadership development.

What do you think has made you a successful woman leader in a field where there are so few?

I have been described as very persistent and direct. Some people think I am pushy, but I rarely offend people – I just plow forward. To be successful you have to be willing to do what is necessary and not complain. People who are negative and cynical do not inspire confidence and have difficulty getting things accomplished. My strategy is to focus on what I can control. To me, there is nothing worse than advocating undefined change in the form of criticism with no solution.

How can women attain the kind of leadership experiences that you have had?

It depends on the institution, but asking for the positions you want can never hurt. One of the mantras my Sparks co-owner, Kathy Goodman, and I always use is 'Don't ask; don't get.'

What do law firms need to do to develop strong women leaders?

First, provide professional opportunities. Potential women leaders need the same opportunities to succeed that men do. The assignment process must be equitable so that women get on good cases and deals. Second, I think advancements in technology will help women. Much of what lawyers do does not have to be done at the office. Third, I think we often get stuck by 'boxing shadows'. What I mean by this is battling issues that exist but are hard to identify and attack. Blatant sexism such as someone saying "I don't want to work with a woman lawyer" is relatively easy to challenge. But when people claim that all barriers based on gender are gone, it is more difficult to effect change. We cannot let our guard down. We must look for situations where there are inequities even when they exist unintentionally. Finally, as strange as this may sound, sometimes it is helpful to act as if organisations are further along in their development to promote women than they may be. When we are acting 'as if', our behaviour changes and institutions eventually catch up.

Which of your guiding principles might help other women?

1. Success for the sake of success is not rewarding. Success in a case is great but the feeling is usually fleeting. Being an agent of change in your organisation or society is rewarding and it becomes your legacy;

2. When you get knocked down, get back up. If you are a woman in the legal world, you are going to get knocked down more than you might have first predicted. Sometimes you will want to come up swinging, and sometimes it's best just to walk away. But the important thing is that you keep getting up;
3. Understand that sometimes, no matter how hard you try, you won't win. Even if you should. Men are often better than women at attributing losses to external forces. We tend to put it on ourselves when we lose. Let go of losses. Go on to the next challenge;
4. Life is most successful and fulfilling when you think of it as a team sport. It is important to encourage your teammates, situations are rarely just about you. In addition, it's more fun to win as a team and less crushing to lose. Together we can create change, opportunities and success. It is important to continue to fight for success for yourself and also help other women. For me, seeing other women succeed is more rewarding than succeeding myself.

What's next for you?

I feel like I have a lot of work to do to continue to make our law firm fun and more collegial. I have a great leadership opportunity. I plan to stay focused on the firm, our WNBA team, and supporting women in both arenas. That will do until the next adventure and challenge comes along.

The two things I admire most about Christofferson are her 'big picture' thinking and her zeal to make things happen. She knows what is important to her: good client service; supporting the development of other women lawyers; leading the effort to create a nurturing, successful and fun firm environment; contributing to the community, and spending time doing what she loves such as basketball, growing the Sparks franchise, and relaxing with friends and family. She has consciously created a life that integrates all of those elements. Christofferson's 'can do' attitude drives her and creates the energy necessary to take on her many activities and responsibilities. She finds ways to make her goals happen and pushes through road blocks. Her concept of team and constant effort to create teams around her gives her the experience of being a part of something larger than herself, as well as forming inclusive communities that motivate others. For women striving to take the next step, she presents an inspiring model of the power of teams and the success (and fun) that can come through passion, determination and desire. [WOMENLEGAL](#)

Karen B. Kahn is an executive coach who works with lawyers to help them create success 'their way' and become effective leaders. She is a principal of KM Advisors, LLC, which she cofounded with John Mitchell. She can be reached at Karen@KMAdvisors.com.