

# The Importance of Mentorship for Female Litigators

*By Geri Pinzur Rosenberg*

I sat perplexed in my office over 15 years ago. It was a Friday, nearing 5:00 p.m. Virtually every lawyer had left for the weekend. I received a motion to default my client via fax, set for first thing Monday morning. I had been practicing law for less than a month and had no idea how to respond to the motion. At that moment, Melissa Durkin, an experienced attorney in the office—now an associate judge—walked past me. She could have breezed past me and onto her weekend, but instead, she stopped for the next hour to explain the motion and help me draft a motion to vacate technical default. There began a mentor-mentee relationship, as well as friendship, which continues to this day.

Now in my 16th year of practicing law, I am training young, inexperienced attorneys. I am now the mentor. While I was extremely fortunate to have a superb mentor, many female attorneys are not as lucky. An excellent article appeared in *The Atlantic* in September, 2018, entitled “What It Takes to Be a Trial Lawyer If You’re Not a Man” (<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/09/female-lawyers-sexism-courtroom/565778/>).

Here are some of the jarring statistics from the article:

- “In 2016, for the first time, more women were admitted to law school than men. In the courtroom, however, women remain a minority, particularly in the high-profile role of first chair at trial.”
- “The New York State Bar Association...found in a 2017 report that female attorneys accounted for just 25 percent of all attorneys appearing in commercial and criminal cases in courtrooms across the state. The more complex the civil litigation, the less likely a woman was to appear as lead counsel, with the percentage shrinking from 31.6 percent in one-party cases to less than 20 percent in cases involving five or more parties. The report concluded: ‘The low percentage of women attorneys appearing in a speaking role in courts was found at every level and in every type of court: upstate and downstate, federal and state, trial and appellate, criminal and civil, ex parte applications and multi-party matters.’”
- “According to a 2006 report by the American Bar Association, nearly two-thirds of women of color said they had been shut out of networking opportunities; 44 percent said they had been passed over for plum work assignments; and 43 percent said they had little opportunity to develop client relationships.”
- “Women make up only 33 percent of federal trial-court judges.... The state-level statistics are just as dismal: 30 percent of trial-court judges are women. In 2015, according to the Women’s Donor Network, an advocacy group, 17 percent of elected prosecutors were women; women of color made up 1 percent.”

The article articulates what most female litigators face in the practice of law. There are few female litigators who are given the opportunity to try big cases. There are many female attorneys who are the only woman at their firm; or, if not the only woman, there are zero partner-level female attorneys at the firm to go to for guidance and mentorship.

Judge Durkin did not simply mentor me on how to practice law. She also taught me how to behave in court, how to negotiate, how to navigate opposing counsel, how to interact with clients, and, most importantly, how to still be genuine and be myself in a heavily male-dominated field. For female litigators, there is often a fine line between assertiveness and aggressiveness. My mentor-mentee relationship was uniquely special because Judge Durkin had navigated this path before me and could offer advice from first-hand experience.

It is imperative to understand that the mentor-mentee relationship flows both ways. Whenever I meet with first year lawyers, I provide the following advice regarding finding a mentor: (1) sometimes you need to actively seek out a mentor, so go to a more senior attorney in your firm/company and tell him/her you are

impressed with his/her work and ask if you can offer assistance on his/her cases; (2) say thank you, be appreciative and follow up with a thank you note or email; (3) make your mentor's life easier by offering to help out with court coverage, filing documents, printing out case law, preparing jury instructions, etc.; and (4) follow through—when a mentor gives you advice, listen and act on what he/she recommends.

Given my positive experience as a young attorney, I am extremely passionate about mentorship. I participate in Women's Bar Association of Illinois' L2L mentoring program. I regularly offer to meet new attorneys and law students for coffee to discuss their career ambitions, review resumes and offer suggestions and advice regarding finding a job and career advancement. For example, one young attorney I met at an event was the only female attorney at a small law firm. She was unhappy and reached out to meet for lunch to discuss her career. I listened and suggested she look for a position that would better fulfill her career goals. She is now at a firm she absolutely loves and thoroughly enjoys practicing law. I strongly feel it is my obligation to give back to the next generation of female attorneys. If you are a more experienced lawyer in a position to mentor, I implore you to get involved. I guarantee the experience will be incredibly rewarding.

*Geri Pinzur Rosenberg is a chief attorney at the Chicago Transit Authority, specializing in personal injury defense litigation.*