

# Women Supporting Women Is Good Business

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*This article is brought to you by AHLA's Women's Leadership Council.*

My father encouraged me to go to law school, but it was my mother who sparked my lifelong interest in health care. I began my “career” as a 12-year-old candy striper at a neighborhood hospital and then went on to work as a behavioral health technician and admissions representative at an inpatient behavioral health facility before attending the health law program at Saint Louis University. At every stage of my working life, I have encountered professional women who demonstrate competence, leadership, and a willingness to help other women. I have benefited from women professors who checked in on me when I was struggling and women bosses who prioritize family commitments while serving in high-pressure positions of leadership. I also have formed friendships with women who I would have never had the opportunity to meet if it were not for my career as a health lawyer. These women are smart, capable, and confident. They are health care executives, governmental policy experts, and advocates for health care entities big and small. These women make a difference every day in health care, a \$3.8 trillion industry which makes up almost one-fifth of the U.S. economy.<sup>1</sup>

Female representation in health care has long outperformed other industries and health law continues to be attractive as a practice area.<sup>2</sup> In 2020, women made up 54.09% of students enrolled in ABA-approved law schools.<sup>3</sup> This is not a statistical blip. Women surpassed men in law school enrollment in 2016, and each year this increase gets a little more substantial.<sup>4</sup> At my own firm, Husch Blackwell LLP, women make up 52.7% of associates and 60.86% of those who assumed partnership roles in 2020. While across the industry, men still outnumber women in positions of leadership and board seats, the numbers don't lie—women continue to advance in a traditionally male-dominated profession.

Over the next five to ten years, more and more women will move into leadership positions as partners, general counsels, and board chairs. Women achieving leadership roles in significant numbers is not just good for equality—it is good for business. Studies show that companies that have women in senior positions are “more profitable, more socially responsible, and provide safer, higher-quality customer experiences.”<sup>5</sup> Women leaders drive success and are rated by their peers as effective leaders across key capabilities such as initiative, resilience, integrity, communication, and problem solving.<sup>6</sup> I imagine these findings are no surprise to you when you think about the women attorneys you know.

Law is a demanding profession—health law even more so. Our clients give 110% in everything that they do, and they have been stretched to the limit during the COVID-19 pandemic. We have been doing the same to support and advocate for them during this most difficult and stressful time. Although demanding, law is also a way to have a long and fulfilling professional career. Attorneys routinely practice for 40+ years through changes in jobs, growth of children, and family pressures. The women who enter this profession do so because they are smart, ethical, and inspired by the ability to provide a meaningful contribution to society. Many are caregivers in their own right and may even come to the field of health law after working as nurses, social workers, or in other direct care positions.

As we move through the different phases of our lives, health law affords many women the ability to achieve tremendous professional success while positively impacting the lives of millions of people. While we do need support to achieve balance as we raise children and care for aging parents, we also are smart, driven professionals who are committed to our clients and derive significant satisfaction from achieving our career goals. We went to law school because of these reasons and continue to enroll in law school in large numbers. Health law in particular will likely continue to attract women attorneys. I hope that seeing these statistics about women in health care encourages you to reach out to the women attorneys you know and get to know them as professionals. Invite them for coffee or talk to them about a difficult legal issue. Introduce them to your clients or invite them to speak with you about a topic of mutual interest. Ask that new mom in your office if she'd like to work on a challenging project. Even invite them to write a short article for a group like AHLA's Women's Leadership Council. These types of activities help solidify an attorney's expertise in a substantive area of law and builds their confidence in their abilities. These small actions don't just benefit that individual woman, but they also benefit her clients and her colleagues. It is just good business to support women in achieving their professional goals.

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**Noreen Vergara** is a Senior Counsel at Husch Blackwell LLP, where she is a transparent communicator and innovative problem solver with a deep background in operations and risk management.

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1 See Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, National Healthcare Expenditure Data, 2019 at

2 See Gretchen Berlin, Lucia Darino, Rachel Groh, and Pooja Kumar, McKinsey, *Report: Women in Healthcare, Moving from the Front Lines to the Top Rung* (Aug. 25, 2020) at <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/healthcare-systems-and-services/our-insights/women-in-healthcare-moving-from-the-front-lines-to-the-top-rung>. See also Mary Anne Pazanowski, Bloomberg Law, *Seven Reasons Why Women Attorneys Thrive in Health Law* (May 18, 2018) at <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/business-and-practice/seven-reasons-why-women-attorneys-thrive-in-health-law/>.

3 See [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal\\_education/resources/statistics/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_education/resources/statistics/).

4 Enjuris, *Report: Where do Women Go to Law School in the U.S.?* (Mar. 1, 2021) at <https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2021/03/01/2183996/0/en/Report-Where-Do-Women-Go-to-Law-School-in-the-U-S.html#:~:text=In%202016%2C%20the%20number%20of,percent%20of%20law%20school%20students>.

5 Corrine Post, Boris Lokshin, Christophe Boone, Harvard Business Review, *Research: Adding Women to the C-Suite Changes How Companies Think* (Apr. 6, 2021) at <https://hbr.org/2021/04/research-adding-women-to-the-c-suite-changes-how-companies-think>.

6 Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman, Harvard Business Review, *Research: Women Score Higher Than Men in Most Leadership Skills* (June 25, 2019) at <https://www.hbr.org/2019/06/research-women-score-higher-than-men-in-most-leadership-skills>.

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