

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Frankfurt's Barbara Shiers

Law360, New York (February 05, 2014, 11:18 AM ET) -- [Barbara E. Shiers](#) is a partner in [Frankfurt Kurnit Klein & Selz PC's New York](#) office, where she co-chairs the firm's estate planning and administration group, and chairs the charitable organizations group. She also serves on the firm's policy committee. She represents high-net-worth individuals, professionals and entrepreneurs in domestic and international estate, gift, and income tax planning, estate and trust administration, [IRS](#) audits, and probate and tax litigation. She advises individuals and fiduciaries in sophisticated estate transactions. She also advises public and private charitable organizations in a wide range of matters, including securing tax-exempt status, selecting tax-efficient organizational structures, and developing and negotiating donor agreements.

Shiers is a member of the Estate Planning Council of New York City Inc., the [New York State Bar Association](#), the [New York City Bar Association](#), [The Florida Bar](#), the [American Bar Association](#), and the Metro New York Philanthropic Advisors Network. She currently serves as a member of the New York State Bar Association Committee on Women in the Law.

Q: How did you break into what many consider to be an old boys' network?

A: I broke into the field of law upon graduation from law school in 1980. I'm not sure that the law was an "old boys' network" at that time, but there were certainly more men than women in positions of influence. The "break-in" entailed many years of hard work and careful cultivation of client and colleague relationships — hardly a break-in; more like a long, slow climb.

Q: What are the challenges of being a woman at a senior level within a law firm?

A: I sometimes think that the next frontier for those of us who dealt with gender issues early on will be age discrimination. Many of us who were sidetracked in the early years by family obligations feel we are just now able to focus fully on our work. Will subtle (and not so subtle) instances of age-related bias stand in our way? Time will tell ...

Q: Describe a time you encountered sexism in your career and tell us how you handled it.

A: I encountered sexism in the very early days, commencing with my decision to apply to law school in 1976. At that time, some men saw the decision as selfish, potentially displacing a male who would eventually need to support his wife and children. Later in my career, the "mommy wars" caused discomfort. At each stage, I have tried to take the criticism in stride, and treat it as a motivator rather than as a roadblock.

Q: What advice would you give to an aspiring female attorney?

A: Understand that life is long, and there will be many opportunities for personal and professional accomplishments — not all of which have to be achieved at the same time. We all have regrets (and guilt). You're lucky if you can look back and say "I might not have been a perfect lawyer, perfect mother, perfect spouse, but I was good enough."

Q: What advice would you give to a law firm looking to increase the number of women in its partner ranks?

A: Offer creative solutions to the work/life balance issues that affect all of us (male and female) at various times in our lives. Understand that you are making a long-term investment in your associates. If you can be flexible in the early years, you will be rewarded with loyalty in the later years.

Q: Outside your firm, name an attorney you admire and tell us why.

A: The attorneys I admire most understand that it's not just the substance that counts — although substance is obviously crucial. The other qualities that make a good lawyer include the ability to solve problems, manage professional relationships, maintain composure and never, ever lose a sense of humor about ourselves. I was fortunate as a young associate to work closely with David Abramson (now retired), who was whip smart, but always tempered his advice with practical wisdom and a twinkle in his eye.

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