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Appropriate attire for female attorneys

Earlier this month I had the privilege to attend a local alumni event sponsored by my alma mater, Albany Law School: "Successes and Challenges Facing Women Attorneys."

It featured Lauren Stiller Rikleen, attorney and author of "Ending the Gauntlet: Removing Barriers to Women's Success in the Law." Stiller Rikleen gave an amazing presentation full of depressing statistics about the fate of women lawyers in our profession.

I think my favorite depressing fact was that women lawyers who are married see decreases in income, while married men see increases. The statistics regarding the disparities in the career paths and incomes of women attorneys versus male attorneys was striking, but not unfamiliar to me. At this stage of the game, men and women simply fare differently in our profession for any number of reasons.

The Chicago Bar Association this month held an event targeted to law students, "What Not To Wear Fashion Show," which was covered by the Above the Law blog — <http://abovethelaw.com/2010/04/fashion-dos-and-donts-from-the-windy-city-if-you-have-a-tramp-stamp-it-may-already-be-too-late>. The show's panel consisted of judges, law professors, lawyers and fashion industry experts who offered advice on appropriate attire for lawyers.

Apparently, the event should have been called "What Women Lawyers Shouldn't Wear," since the vast majority of the advice centered on appropriate attire for women attorneys, with male attire being a mere afterthought.

One issue that appeared to be of great concern to the panelists was that women should avoid revealing their "form," lest they "tempt" the "married men at law firms" or "distract" the judges.

Yes, apparently the panelists, one of whom was a judge of the feminine persuasion, actually suggested that it is the job of women lawyers everywhere to hide their "form" in order to ensure male attorneys stay focused on the task of practicing law.

One wonders how male gynecologists manage to perform their job in the face of seemingly insurmountable distractions, but I digress.

The panel reminded me of one with a similar focus, held in Memphis in 2008, at which a group of lawyers and judges met to discuss the issue of a dress code proposed by a number of Memphis Bar Associations.

The proposed rule at issue was: "All attorneys should wear

appropriate attire. Men shall wear coats, ties, slacks and appropriate footwear, which does not include athletic shoes or shoes without socks. Women shall wear professional and conservative attire, such as dresses with jackets, suits or pantsuits (with appropriate tops), and appropriate footwear, which does not include cocktail shoes or sandals or athletic shoes."

I think my favorite part of the rule is that the attire for women is specifically described as "conservative." For some reason, men need not dress "conservatively." Presumably 1970s-style leisure suits would be perfectly appropriate for men to wear court.

One also wonders how cold-weather-climate attorneys such as myself are expected to handle the issue of boots in the winter. Boots most certainly are not "appropriate footwear" under the proposed rule. They are an absolute necessity, however, when you have to walk a few blocks to court in the middle of an Upstate winter.

Men have the luxury of slipping "rubbers" over their (flat) shoes. Many wear the unattractive foot coverings into court as well, and I've never heard any complaints about that particular practice.

The Memphis panel, like the Chicago one, seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time complaining about the fashion choices of women lawyers, paying mere lip service to the choices of men. Another day, another sexist panel.

One day, perhaps, "fashion" panels that seemingly exist solely to criticize women attorneys will be looked upon as tacky tribunals of generations past.

One day, there no longer will be a need to hold panels focusing on gender disparities in promotions and pay.

One day, the gender of an attorney will be a mere afterthought.

When I entered law school I assumed, naively, that day had long since arrived. Now I simply hope that day will come at some point in my lifetime.

*Nicole Black, a Rochester attorney, co-authors the ABA book *Social Media for Lawyers: the Next Frontier*, co-authors *Criminal Law in New York*, a West-Thomson treatise, and is currently writing a book about cloud computing for lawyers that will be published by the ABA in early 2011. She is the founder of *lawtechTalk.com* and speaks regularly at conferences regarding the intersection of law and technology. She publishes four legal blogs and can be reached at nblack@nicoleblackesq.com*



By **NICOLE BLACK**

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Columnist