



E.V.A.

Equally Valued Attorneys

**Code of Conduct between Clients and Law Firms
Gender Equality in the Procurement of Legal Services**

First Edition

1 BACKGROUND ⁱ

This Code of Conduct, governing the relationship between clients and law firms, has been created to address challenges related to gender equality, within both the legal services industry and the business community at large. This Code of Conduct is based on a shared insight that the level of gender equality within both client organisations and law firms may be influenced, positively or negatively, by how clients and law firms act towards each other.

This Code of Conduct is built upon insights from an interview study and a series of joint workshops involving both clients and law firms. The interview study, comprising 17 interviews which were contextualised within relevant organisational research, identified six critical factors that tend to perpetuate gender inequality in the relationship between clients and law firms: long-standing and personal relationships, network, perceived risk and uncertainty, working conditions, performance-based self-esteem and culture. These factors served as the foundation for the workshop series, where the discussions focused on how to collaborate to make the relationships more gender equal.

The purpose of this Code of Conduct is to ensure that gender equality is not merely an ambition but is pursued through practical and measurable actions that are monitored and followed up throughout the entire relationship between clients and law firms.

2 HOW TO USE THIS CODE OF CONDUCT

This Code of Conduct should be used actively throughout all phases of the collaboration between clients and law firms, including:

- When establishing new business relationships and during procurement processes.
- When following up on ongoing projects.
- When discussing ways of working and gender equality in project meetings.
- When working together to promote a sustainable and inclusive working environment.

This Code of Conduct should be a document that is used continuously to ensure that gender equality becomes a natural part of the collaboration between clients and their law firm – not simply an objective, but an active effort that is regularly evaluated and improved.

3 A MUTUAL COMMITMENT TO GENDER EQUALITY

We commit to actively fostering gender-equal conditions within our business relationships. This means that we shall jointly strive to create a working environment and a collaborative structure in which women and men are given equal opportunities to be seen, to contribute and to grow. Decisions in the relationship – such as the selection of attorneys or the allocation of assignments – shall be based on criteria such as competence, experience and current needs. We actively commit to avoiding bias or gender stereotypes in our decision making.

4 LONG-STANDING AND PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS ⁱⁱ

It is common that the relationship between clients and law firms relies on long-standing and personal relationships, often between persons of the same gender, rather than between two organisations. This creates built-in inertia, where certain attorneys, often male, repeatedly receive preferential access to legal assignments. Since these relationships are long-standing and seldom replaced, female attorneys may not receive the same opportunities to obtain important assignments, and, as a result, may find it more difficult to build valuable professional relationships. The nature of long-standing and personal relationships may also contribute to gender inequality within the client's own organisation.



Client's Commitment

We commit to promoting equal opportunities by ensuring that the selection of law firms and attorneys is based on competence and experience. We strive to ensure that personal networks and structural factors do not limit access to assignments for attorneys of different genders.

Example: We use transparent selection processes and ensure that both female and male attorneys are included in networking and business meetings.

Law Firm's Commitment

In our relationships with clients and others, we commit to actively promoting and raising the visibility of employees with relevant competence and experience, regardless of gender.

Example: We ensure that both female and male attorneys are given opportunities to lead and be visible in key business projects, and that their contributions are acknowledged and appreciated.

5 NETWORKS ⁱⁱⁱ

Many sectors within the business community remain male-dominated, particularly at the senior level, and men (as well as women) often rely on their networks when selecting attorneys. Female attorneys therefore risk having less access to certain types of business relationships and assignments, potentially giving them less visibility and recognition. If both clients and law firms actively broaden their networking structures to include more women, this can significantly strengthen gender equality within the legal services industry.



Client's Commitment

We commit to ensuring that attorneys, regardless of gender, are provided with equal opportunities for professional success by granting them equal access to networking meetings, conferences and other professional events.

Example: We ensure to include both female and male attorneys in our business networks and invitations to key industry events to give them equal opportunities for visibility and experience.

Law Firm's Commitment

We commit to providing all employees, regardless of gender, equal opportunities to build and participate in network meetings, conferences, and other professional events.

Example: We ensure that both female and male employees are included in seminars, networking events and similar professional activities.

6 PERCEIVED RISK AND UNCERTAINTY ^{iv}

In situations where a client considers the stakes to be high, for example, cases involving significant economic consequences or other factors deemed to be high-risk, a situation can easily arise where clients choose attorneys they regard as more credible, more experienced or part of established networks. This often results in male attorneys receiving preferential access to legal assignments. This perception of risk and security can create a structure in which female attorneys receive fewer opportunities to work on complex and high-profile cases, even when they have the relevant competence and experience. If decisions are made on the basis of objective assessments of qualifications, rather than perceived security, this can positively impact gender equality, both within the law firm and across the wider legal services industry.



Client's Commitment

We commit to ensuring that the selection of law firms and attorneys, including for major or high-stakes assignments, is based on competence and experience, not on perceptions of risk or security.

Example: We use transparent selection methods and consciously include both female and male attorneys in procurement processes or other situations where a law firm or attorney is to be chosen.

Law Firm's Commitment

We commit to managing clients' perceptions of risk and uncertainty through sound professional advice, while maintaining our commitment to equal visibility and opportunities for all employees with relevant competence and experience, regardless of gender.

Example: We actively ensure that both female and male attorneys are given opportunities to build relationships and trust with our clients.

7 WORKING CONDITIONS ^v

Working conditions – including working hours, deadlines and expectations of availability – affect the ability of all employees to combine a career in a law firm with a sustainable private and family life. Historically, working conditions in law firms – often characterised by long working hours and tight deadlines – have had a greater negative impact on women as a group than on men as a group, since women have traditionally taken on more domestic responsibilities. Although family structures and the division of domestic responsibilities have changed to some extent, persistent perceptions can still lead to women being regarded as less available. To promote inclusive and gender-equal working conditions, both clients and law firms need to be aware of this and actively contribute to creating working conditions that enable everyone to contribute fully and to develop long-term in their professional roles, for example, by offering flexibility whenever possible.



Client's Commitment

Together with law firms and based on the conditions of each individual matter, we commit to discussing and agreeing on time frames and working conditions. Our goal is to promote long-term, sustainable and gender-equal conditions in all assignments.

Example: We strive to ensure that deadlines are reasonable in relation to the scope and complexity of the assignment, and that our expectations on deliverables do not lead to an unmanageable workload or working conditions that may, in the long term, limit attorneys' opportunities for recovery and professional development.

Law Firm's Commitment

We commit to ensuring that working conditions are sustainable and reasonable for all our employees, and that we do not contribute to working conditions that may lead to burnout or unreasonable workloads. A sustainable work-life balance is a prerequisite for high-quality and long-term success.

Example: We ensure that deadlines and workloads are continuously discussed and adjusted if needed so that all our employees can work in a way that, over time, gives them more energy than their work consumes.

8 PERFORMANCE-BASED SELF-ESTEEM^{vi}

In the environment of business law, high demands are placed on quality, precision and availability. A consequence of this is that many attorneys, particularly at the beginning of their careers, develop a strong inner drive to perform at the highest level, sometimes at the expense of recovery and self-compassion. Research shows that this so-called performance-based self-esteem – where self-worth is closely linked to work performance and validation from others – is more common among women than men (even if both genders experience it), which can create unequal conditions.



Client's Commitment

We are aware that high-performance demands can affect different people in different ways. Therefore, we strive to give clear assignments, communicate respectfully and provide nuanced feedback to promote every individual's opportunity to succeed and develop within the collaboration.

Example: We are clear in our expectations. We avoid supporting unhealthy performance ideals.

Law Firm's Commitment

We commit to an awareness of how high-performance ideals can affect our employees, and to actively promote a working culture where it is safe to ask for help and to demonstrate uncertainty. Our senior employees are expected to highlight and to show appreciation for the contributions of all colleagues.

Example: We encourage a culture where it is accepted to ask for help and where continuous learning is promoted. By setting clear structures for mentoring and support, we strive to ensure that employees, regardless of self-esteem, feel safe in their professional development.

9 CULTURE ^{vii}

The internal culture within client organisations and law firms, as well as the culture that develops between them, can affect the opportunities for women and men to reach their full potential. This may, for example, involve environments where men receive more visibility and recognition than women. Exclusive cultures, where men's ways of acting and communicating are affirmed more than women's, can result in women not receiving the same recognition for their achievements, not feeling equally involved in decision-making and not experiencing the same level of comfort and engagement as men. The working culture can affect both women and men, on the client's side and the law firm's side.



Client's Commitment

We commit to actively working within our organisation and in our relationships with law firms to create cultures of equality and inclusion where everyone, regardless of gender, feels welcome, seen and valued.

Example: We avoid gendered terminology, maintain modern leadership principles, run our organisation on healthy values, and adopt an inclusive perspective towards all employees of the law firm.

Law Firm's Commitment

We commit to actively working within our organisation and in our relationships with clients to create cultures of equality and inclusion where everyone, regardless of gender, feels welcome, seen and valued.

Example: We avoid gendered terminology, maintain modern leadership principles, run our organisation on healthy values, and adopt an inclusive perspective towards all employees of the law firm.

ENDNOTES

- i. This Code of Conduct focuses solely on the ground of discrimination based on sex, as defined in Chapter 1, Section 5 of the Discrimination Act.
- ii. For a research overview on the theme of Long-Standing and Personal Relationships, see, for example:

Stainback, K., Tomaskovic-Devey, D., & Skaggs, S. (2010). Organizational approaches to inequality: Inertia, relative power, and environments. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 36(1), 225–247.

Kay, F. M., & Hagan, J. (1999). Cultivating Clients in the Competition for Partnership: Gender and the Organizational Restructuring of Law Firms in the 1990s. *Law & Society Review*, 33(3), 517–555. doi:10.2307/3115103.
- iii. For a research overview on the theme of Networks, see, for example:

Suseno, Y., Pinnington, A. H., & Gardner, J. (2007). Gender and the network structures of social capital in professional-client relationships. *Advancing Women in Leadership Journal*.

Fearfull, A., & Kamenou, N. (2006). How do you account for it?: A critical exploration of career opportunities for and experiences of ethnic minority women. *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, 17(7), 883–901.

Haynes, K., & Grugulis, I. (2013). Gender and diversity challenges in professional services firms. *Managing Services: Challenges and Innovations*, 1, 66–82.
- iv. For a research overview on the theme of Perceived Risk and Uncertainty, see, for example:

Cockburn, C. (1991). *In the Way of Women: Men’s Resistance to Sex Equality in Organizations*. Macmillan.

Gorman, E. H. (2006). Work Uncertainty and the Promotion of Professional Women: The Case of Law Firm Partnership. *Social Forces*, 85(2), 865–890.

Berdahl, J. L., Glick, P., & Cooper, M. (2018). How masculinity contests undermine organizations, and what to do about it. *Harvard Business Review*, 10, 30–36.
- v. For a research overview on the theme of Working Conditions, see, for example:

Walsh, J. (2012). Not worth the sacrifice? Women’s aspirations and career progression in law firms. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 19(5), 508–531.

Bacik, I., & Drew, E. (2006, March). Struggling with juggling: Gender and work/life balance in the legal professions. In *Women’s Studies International Forum* (Vol. 29, No. 2, pp. 136–146). Pergamon.
- vi. For research on the theme of Performance-Based Self-Esteem, see, for example:

Hallsten, L., Josephson, M., & Torgén, M. (2005). Performance-based self-esteem: A driving force in burnout processes and its assessment. *Work & Stress*, 19(2), 149–160.

Harari, D., Swider, B. W., Steed, L. B., & Breidenthal, A. P. (2018). Is perfect good? A meta-analysis of perfectionism in the workplace. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 103(10), 1121–1144.

vii. For a research overview on the theme of Culture, see, for example:

Rutherford, S. (2001). Organizational cultures, women managers and exclusion. *Women in Management Review*, 16(8), 371–382.

Gorman, E. H., & Kmec, J. A. (2009). Hierarchical rank and women's organizational mobility: Glass ceilings in corporate law firms. *American Journal of Sociology*, 114(5), 1428–1474.

Cortina, L. M., Kabat-Farr, D., Leskinen, E. A., Huerta, M., & Magley, V. J. (2013). Selective Incivility as Modern Discrimination in Organizations: Evidence and Impact. *Journal of Management*, 39(6), 1579–1605.

Trzebiatowski, T., McCluney, C., & Hernandez, M. (2023). Managing the double bind: Women directors' participation tactics in the gendered boardroom. *Organization Science*, 34(2), 801–827.



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