

**Bridging the Gender Gap:
Creating a New, Post-Law School Reality for the Woman Lawyer**

By Susan E. Polk

In August 2007 the Nation was riveted by the tragic, evening rush-hour collapse of the I-35 West Mississippi River Bridge in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The culprit cited for the collapse: a design flaw. The same could be said of the current approach for solving the problem of gender diversity in the legal profession. By all outward appearances the gender gap has been bridged, but closer inspection reveals that reinforcements and an ideological redesign are needed or we risk collapse. The “bridge” to gender diversity should be reinforced by implementing “real world” programs designed to further educate legal professionals on the topic and heighten awareness of gender diversity issues in the workplace.

First year law students commonly are seminared on tolerance and diversity, which is largely sufficient. Today’s new lawyers possess a remarkable ability to transcend arbitrary lines affixed by gender and other “hot button” issues. Further, women have attained a laudable number in the ranks of our law schools and the legal profession as a whole. Society has progressed, and attitudes have changed. The Nation has just elected its first African American President, and, for only the second time in our Nation’s history, a woman was braced to have become our Vice President. The Nation is ripe for change, and, as legal professionals, let us heed the challenge to bring about change in an area in which change is so desperately needed.

The real design flaw in our approach for solving the gender diversity problem is that it focuses primarily on those entering the legal profession rather than those already working in the trenches of the legal community. Women lawyers are being prepared to enter a workforce which they initially perceive as gender diverse, only to be disillusioned with the post-law school reality

that women lawyers are still being cast into stereotypical gender roles and, further, being asked to perform secretarial or administrative tasks that are not requested of male colleagues. Disheartening? Yes. Inexcusable? Certainly!

The solution is to develop and implement mandatory top-to-bottom management and staff training, to engage in a series of informal discussions within our ranks, and to launch a print-advertising campaign in our professional journals to underscore that although the gender gap in the legal profession has been bridged, this “bridge” is in dire need of maintenance and repair. As women lawyers, let us speak up for ourselves with professionalism and strength, never conceding that change is out of our reach. As men lawyers, let us be mindful that we took the same professional oath and do unto others as we would have done unto us. Let us see past our differences and embrace our similarities to create a new, post-law school reality for the woman lawyer. Change either begins or ends with each one of us.