Dear Colleagues,

June 10, 2013 marks the 50th anniversary of the passage of the Equal Pay Act, which prohibits wage discrimination on the basis of sex. Yet despite the Act, equally educated women and men in the same occupations with similar work experiences bring home very different paychecks. Overall, the average white woman earns 77 cents for every dollar that a man earns. For women of color, the gap is worse. Including wages, benefits and bonuses, the financial “hit” for a woman, and her family, over the course of her career reaches into the hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of dollars.

Women lawyers are not immune from income inequality. Women partners in law firms earn substantially less than their male colleagues even when they perform exactly the same work, have similar books of business, and make similar (or even greater) contributions to firm administration. Unequal compensation diminishes women’s prospects for success, and unfairly undervalues the material contributions of women to their firms. Plus, pay inequities have a profound effect on a firm’s performance and profits. When women suffer pay inequities, they speak with their feet and leave. Firms lose well-trained, talented women lawyers; clients lose outside counsel with critical knowledge and experience. The pay gap sends a negative message to all lawyers in firms: no matter how talented, hard working or successful they are in client relationships, women are worth less than men. Ultimately, gender inequity in compensation strikes at essential law firm functions – recruiting, maintaining robust client relationships, and ensuring a talented and diverse cadre of senior partners and leaders.

The ABA has long been committed to equality. I am proud of our work to ensure that, someday soon, women and men in our profession will share the same opportunities and rewards. We have made significant progress to achieve equal pay and equal opportunity since 1963, but we have not reached our goal.

Inequality in compensation is a problem that we can and must fix. In August 2012, I appointed a blue-ribbon Gender Equity Task Force and charged it with the mission of recommending solutions to overcome gender inequity.

As a past president of the Chicago Bar Association and now as President of the ABA, I know that bar associations on all levels are pivotal if we are to level the playing field. As a bar leader and as an opinion leader in your community, you can help! With that goal in mind, the Task Force developed the enclosed partner pay equity toolkit. Use these materials to educate your
local or state bars – and your communities – about gender inequity and what we can do to remedy it.

Together, we can ensure that the legal profession operates at full capacity by reaping the benefits that every lawyer contributes — regardless of gender.

Sincerely yours,

Laurel G. Bellows
President, American Bar Association