

STUDY AIMS AT WOMEN LAWYERS OF COLOR

Initiative Seeks Ways to Stem Exodus From Private Practice

BY JILL SCHACHNER CHANEN

It may be 2005, but women lawyers of color still are not advancing in the legal profession. In fact, they are leaving the private practice of law in droves.

According to two National Association of Law Placement studies conducted over the last decade, greater than two-thirds of women lawyers of color leave private practice within six years of being hired, and the problem is growing.

Those who remain often find themselves isolated and alienated, with persistent problems plaguing their advancement, according to a panel at a Saturday seminar of the ABA Commission on Women. The commission introduced a new study called "The Women of Color Research Initiative."

The initiative, to be released next spring, will provide both qualitative and quantitative information on the experiences of women attorneys of color, said Arin Reeves, a Chicago lawyer and commission member who is co-chairing the project.

While the ABA has studied the experiences of minority attorneys and women attorneys, no one has looked at the specific experiences of women attorneys of color in the profession and offered strategies to address their needs, the panelists said. The initiative is expected to fill that gap.

"In the early '90s it became clear that women of color often fall through the cracks," said Commission on Women Chair Diane C. Yu.

The initiative, launched last year, commissioned the Chicago-based National Opinion Research Center to conduct a quantitative national survey of 1,347 attorneys of all demographics—women of color, men of color, white women and white men—for comparative purposes. The results were used as guidelines to gain qualitative information from focus groups of women lawyers of color who have worked in law firms with 25 or more attorneys in five metropolitan areas.

Former commission member Sheila Thomas, an Oakland, Calif., lawyer, said the qualitative results of the survey are extremely important because they support the numbers and reinforce the experiences of women lawyers of color. "A lot of qualitative evidence is dismissed because it often is just seen as one person's personal story," she said.

Reeves said there is an "enormous problem" in the legal profession because women of color are choosing not to be a part of the private sector.

The initiative is expected to show that few, if any, law firms have addressed how the combination of race and gender contributes to keeping women lawyers of color from advancing.

Most law firms instead have relied on strategies that embrace the parallel tracks of race and gender, said Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, a law professor at Columbia and UCLA, who is a member of the initiative's advisory board.

According to Crenshaw, the tools often used by most law firms to address the problems of women and minorities—including informal networking groups, informal one-on-one mentoring and the unmonitored process of doling out work assignments—do not work for women lawyers of color because they do not allow those women to pass the "locker room or living room test." She

was referring to the belief that male lawyers of color or white women lawyers often succeed through these informal programs because their white male counterparts can either envision them in the locker room or their home living room.

That is not so for women lawyers of color who have no "axes of familiarity" with the majority, Crenshaw said.

After the results are completed, Crenshaw wants to use the initiative to help develop programs or strategies that can be used in law firms to strengthen diversity training, develop formal channels of communication among women of color, and make other lawyers ask themselves whether they are being completely inclusive.

ABA President Robert J. Grey Jr., in opening remarks at the program, called the initiative an "important project" for the future of the profession and praised the members' hard work. "We recognize that if we are not leaders in promoting diversity in the profession," he said, "it will not get done for the next generation."