

Women in 'Rural' Practice: Opportunities, Challenges and Strategies to Thrive

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Introduction

Women formally won the right to entry into the legal profession in the early part of the 1900s. Victoria was the first state to remove legal barriers to women's entry in 1903 and the last was Western Australia in 1923.¹ Notwithstanding the removal of formal barriers, significant informal barriers continued for some time after, such that up until the 1970s less than 20 per cent of all law graduates were women.² The 1970s and 1980s saw a substantial increase in numbers and today women represent 62.3 per cent of all law graduates,³ 50.1 per cent of practising solicitors⁴ and around 20 to 26 per cent of the Australian bar, depending on the particular state or territory.⁵ Despite this considerable increase, many challenges to women's full participation in the legal profession persist. Women's work in the legal profession continues to be characterised by segmentation, and a range of discriminatory practices and gender stereotyping that operate to hold women back from career progression, and leading to much higher rates of attrition compared to men.

- 1 Alexandra Richards, 'Women in the legal profession: An overview' (2003) 83 *Australian Law Reform Commission Reform Journal* 14 <www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/ALRCRefJl/2003/15.html>.
- 2 Sharyn Roach Anleu, 'Women in the Legal Profession: Theory and Research' in Patricia Eastaugh (ed), *Women and the Law* (LexisNexis, 2010) 193.
- 3 Graduate Careers Australis, *Law – Bachelor Graduates* (2015) Graduate Careers Australia <www.graduatecareers.com.au/Research/GradJobsDollars/BachelorAll/Law/index.htm>.
- 4 Urbis, *National Profile of Solicitors 2016 Report* (August 2017) Law Society of New South Wales <www.lawsociety.com.au/cs/groups/public/documents/internetcontent/1378059>.
- 5 In NSW, the figure sits at approximately 20 per cent: NSW Bar Association, *2014-15 Annual Report* (2015) <www.nswbar.asn.au/docs/webdocs/ar2015_web_25092015.pdf> while in Victoria, it is around 26 per cent; The Victorian Bar Incorporated, *Membership Statistics* (June 2016) Victorian Bar <www.vicbar.com.au/uploads/publications/The_Victorian_Bar_Incorporated_Membership_Statistics_30_June_2016.pdf>.

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