

## Survey prompts call for 'real equality'

CHRIS MERRITT THE AUSTRALIAN DECEMBER 20, 2013 12:00AM



Family Court Chief Justice Diana Bryant. Source: News Limited

**FAMILY Court Chief Justice Diana Bryant has urged the nation's law firms to address the deterioration in the number of women at the most senior levels of the private profession.**

Her call for change was made in response to The Australian's partnership survey, which shows the proportion of female equity partners at the leading firms has declined to 16.7 per cent compared with 17 per cent this time last year.

Women account for more than 60 per cent of all law graduates.

"I urge the firms to do everything they can to address it," said Justice Bryant, who is patron of Australian Women Lawyers.

She called for "a real commitment" to ensuring truly equal treatment for female solicitors.

The survey, which was undertaken for The Australian by Beaton Research and Capital, shows that the overall proportion of female partners - equity and salaried - is roughly unchanged at 20.8 per cent. However, there has been a sharp decline in the proportion of women in this year's intake of new partners - down from 30.3 per cent this time last year to 25.8 per cent.

Justice Bryant urged female law students not to be discouraged by the survey's results.

"They need to stick in there and keep doing it.

"In the end, it probably depends on the individual and their commitment and how good they are," she said.

"If you are all of those things - yes, there are some impediments and there always have been - but in the end quality and commitment are going to be important."

Justice Bryant called on all firms to take action to retain more women solicitors so they were adequately represented in the pool of potential partners.

"Culture is a very important thing," she said.

"It is not just about flexible work arrangements. You have to match that with a real commitment to make it equal for them," she said.

The survey shows that the international firms have the largest proportion of female equity partners (18.8 per cent), followed by top-tier practices on 15.4 per cent and mid-tier practices on 14.9 per cent.

However, the international firms also experienced the sharpest reduction in the proportion of female equity partners - down 19.6 per cent to 18.8 per cent.

While women accounted for 25.8 per cent of this year's new partnerships, above average performances on this measure were recorded by several mid-tier, international and top-tier firms.

Maddocks and Henry Davis York both had partner intakes that were entirely female while Baker & McKenzie had the best performance of the big firms with an intake that was almost 70 per cent female compared with just over 21 per cent this time last year.

Baker's national managing partner Chris Freeland said the firm's performance on this measure came after it recognised that it needed to address the issue.

"We think it is really important to have diversity at the firm - in all ways, not just gender, it includes cultural diversity," Mr Freeland said.

"But in particular, we saw gender diversity as a strategic priority for us a couple of years ago," he said.

The firm assembled data that persuaded the partners to take action.

"We have made this a strategic priority of the firm.

"We raise this at partner meetings and have raised this when thinking about the intake of new partners, and in the context of talking about our 'partner pipeline'," Mr Freeland said.

At Clayton Utz, the intake of female partners has risen from 10 per cent last year to 37.5 per cent. Outgoing chief executive Darryl McDonough said most new partners who joined Clayton Utz from other firms have been male but most internal promotions to partnership had gone to women.

He believed women would continue to make up the majority of the internal promotions to partnership because the firm's legal workforce was predominantly female. "Over the next five years I think you will see a dramatic shift in the profile of the partnership from being predominantly male to getting more and more of a balance," Mr McDonough said.

While the private profession has historically lost many senior women to government and the corporate sector, Mr McDonough said it made good business sense to increase the retention rate. "The last thing you want to do is bring people through to a senior associate or special counsel level and then have them leave you.

"We have developed a greater emphasis on meeting expectations of our people as opposed to establishing our own expectations."

