

ALVAREZ FIGHTS SEXISM

ALVAREZ FIGHTS SEXISM IN COOK COUNTY LEGAL SYSTEM

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Women know their place: in court ; Most prosecutors here are female, but some say sexism lingers

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Time and success have soothed the sting, but Anita Alvarez , the third-highest-ranking attorney in the Cook County state's attorney's office, hasn't quite forgotten the chauvinistic snubbing she experienced in the late 1980s.

Back then, Alvarez was a young assistant state's attorney trying misdemeanor cases, often teaming with a male prosecutor. When the defense attorney on a case wanted to cut a deal, he'd sidle up to Alvarez's partner for a man-to-man chat, completely ignoring her.

"It was almost inevitable; they would go for the male, even in situations where I had more experience than the other prosecutor," Alvarez, 43, recalled recently.

Most veteran and former Cook County women prosecutors can dust off similar tales from the good ol' boy days, stretching back to the 1950s, when women lawyers were a rare and exotic breed whose stockings routinely got more scrutiny than their legal briefs.

But the scales have shifted. Last month, for the first time in the history of the state's attorney's office, 60 percent of the incoming freshman class were women. And for the last two years, women have held a slim majority in the office.

Reflecting the changing make-up of law schools nationwide, 527 of the 978 lawyers in the Cook County state's attorney's office are now women. Of the four highest-ranking attorneys in the office, two are women: Alvarez and Chief of Staff Adrienne Mebane.

What accounts for the shift? It depends on whom you ask.

"Here, you get immediate experience, experience that wouldn't be offered at a law firm," said Assistant State's Attorney Rhonda Crawford, who was sworn in last month. "My first day here, there was an assignment with my name on it. By early afternoon, we were writing our first briefs to submit to the [state] appellate court. I said, 'No tour? No videos?'"

Others might be arguing a criminal case before a judge or a jury after only two weeks on the job.

Women also aren't as eager as men to leave the state's attorney's office in search of better paying private practice jobs.

Alvarez suspects, ironically in such changing times, that may be because women are less likely than men to be the sole bread winners in their families.

"I've had male partners who left simply because of the money," she said. "They had three or four children, and the state's attorney's salary wasn't cutting it after a while."

Also credit American law schools, where about half of incoming students are now women, legal experts say. Evolving societal views on the role of women in the workplace and a shortage of male law school applicants during the Vietnam War era, among other things, helped clear the way for females, said Deborah Rhode, a law professor at Stanford University.

In days gone by, law school administrators cited a lack of women's bathrooms in denying female applicants, Rhode said.

"No excuse was too trivial," she said.

Several women assistant state attorneys chuckled at the notion that an "old girls" network now might be developing, and several insist subtler forms of sexism still thrive. But the shifting numbers have clearly given women unprecedented opportunities.

"Women are now more used to working with each other," said veteran Cook County assistant public defender Marijane Placek. "You'll have [more] women teaming up with one another and trying cases. You will have more women helping women break the glass ceiling."

There isn't a concerted effort to hire women attorneys, nor is there a philosophy in the state attorney's office that women necessarily bring a unique set of innate talents.

"A good prosecutor is a good prosecutor," said Cook County State Attorney Dick Devine. "Certainly, a large number are women, but a good prosecutor is a person who is dedicated, works long hours and cares about victims, families and the victims themselves."

Still, there was a time not so long ago when such blanket statements were less common.

In the early 1960s, Illinois Supreme Court Chief Justice Mary Ann McMorrow, then an assistant state attorney in the appellate division, was told by one of her supervisors that she couldn't argue a case before the Supreme Court because women weren't allowed to do that. In fact, there was no such ban at that time.

"I was terribly disappointed because I had been prepared to argue," McMorrow recalled recently.

For Sheila Murphy, a public defender working in the 1970s at the Cook County Criminal Court at 26th and California, the sexism was blunt and crude. One day, someone secretly dropped a photograph of a urinal on her desk. Written on the picture, as Murphy recalls, were the words, "If you can't use this, you don't belong here."

Almost three decades later, sexism still lingers, some say. One assistant state attorney who didn't want her name used, said there still aren't enough women supervisors — those who can better understand a woman's needs in balancing a career and family.

Placek notes that women, unlike men, still can't simply be themselves in front of a jury.

"If you play it like a little girl, you will be pushed aside by the opposition, and if you play it like the boys and try to be hard, you will be put down as a bitch," Placek said. "Really, the way to do it is to play it like a nun, someone who is firmly involved in their vocation of the law and is there to teach the jury."

Mebane agrees — to an extent.

"Women still have to walk the line between being a convincing advocate and being a bitch," she said. "And so you have to be careful what you do. But . . . men have to be careful not to be overly aggressive. No one wants to see a prosecutor pummeling a witness."

Placek also said she sees women in leadership in the state attorney's office being given more "traditional" roles, such as head of the domestic violence or juvenile crime departments.

John Gorman, a spokesman for the state attorney's office, bristled at that suggestion. He pointed out that Alvarez formerly oversaw the gangs unit, among other departments. Gorman sees nothing wrong with assigning women, rather than men, to certain departments.

"We should have a woman in charge of domestic violence," he said. "Women prosecutors who are dealing with battered women, they certainly are going to empathize more with victims, and victims will definitely be more comfortable with them."

But Gorman wasn't finished.

"The women in the state attorney's office aren't here baking cookies," he barked. "They are experienced, qualified women who have risen through the ranks on their own merits."

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