

The rise of the Women's White Collar Defense Association

Michael Griffiths, 6 June 2018



Karen Popp addressing a WWFDA meeting

Karen Popp at Sidley Austin in Washington, DC, a co-founder of the Women's White Collar Defense Association set up some 20 years ago, spoke to GIR about the association's raison d'être.

In 1999, Popp and Beth Wilkinson, then a newly minted partner at Latham & Watkins, founded the Women's White Collar Defense Association (WWFDA). The idea for it came when the pair attended the American Bar Association's Annual National Institute on White Collar Crime that year, after having only recently returned to private practice from senior positions in the US government. At the conference, the pair noticed something that bothered them.

"There were no women on panels and only a handful of women in attendance," Popp said.

Popp said that at the time, the white-collar world was dominated by men, a stark difference from her previous experience as she regularly worked with women while in government, whether it was during her time as an assistant US attorney at the US Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of New York, as an attorney in the US Department of Justice's (DOJ's) Office of Legal Counsel and when she was associate counsel to US President Bill Clinton.

As a step towards redressing the gender balance, Popp and Wilkinson founded the association in 1999. The WWFDA was formed just as the white-collar practice area was, as Popp puts it, "on the verge of becoming a major practice area". She said that at the time "a lot of women that were in the government – like Beth and I – were going back to private practice".

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Fast forward to 2018 and the association has over 1,400 members, including the first female deputy attorney general Jamie Gorelick, now a partner at WilmerHale, former chair of the US Securities and Exchange Commission Mary Jo White, now a partner at Debevoise & Plimpton, and former US Attorney General Loretta Lynch.

The association's members are dotted across the globe, with local chapters in The Netherlands, France and Hong Kong. Popp told GIR that the WWCDAs plans to continue adding new chapters and will soon launch in Australia, Ireland, Brazil and China.

Most chapters regularly organise events that are open to female defence lawyers of all seniorities, but only senior lawyers with a track record in white-collar defence can become members. However, the association does have a Young Lawyers Committee, comprising members that have been practising for up to 10 years, which aims to provide networking opportunities and training to younger lawyers.

Elizabeth Robertson at Skadden Arps Slate Meagher & Flom spearheaded the opening of the WWCDAs London chapter – the first outside the US – in 2007. She said the association is “a great tool for networking”.

The WWCDAs helps female defence lawyers across the globe to connect with each other either through events, held throughout the year, or through the informal referral network that the association has created.

As well as its annual lawyer meeting, which occurs the day before the American Bar Association's Annual National Institute on White Collar Crime, chapters also organise their own events. The London chapter holds a handful of social events each year while the senior members have a teleconference once a month.

The association actively promotes its members' achievements through publicising female lawyers' articles, promotions or public mandates. The WWCDAs also tries to get a wider variety of women on panels at events by suggesting names to conference organisers.

For Popp and Robertson, increasing work referrals between female lawyers has been one of the association's great successes. Both lawyers said they receive about two or three referral emails a day from lawyers across the world.

“On any given day there's an email that goes out looking for a lawyer somewhere. Last week an email went around asking if anyone knew a good lawyer in Iceland,” Popp said.

Alison Geary at WilmerHale in London is a member of the association's local chapter. She said that the organisation helps her connect with female practitioners across the globe. “I benefit from both the experience of practitioners in other markets and from getting to know who to pick up the phone to in other jurisdictions,” she told GIR.

However, as white-collar is still a male-dominated practice area, women can be at a disadvantage as a result, Popp said: “Often with the referral of business, people are going to refer to their friends, which in a male-dominated industry, are also often men.”

Robertson said that male referral bias is an issue that the legal community as a whole needs to address. “Women often also refer matters to men, because they see them as decision makers, so it's an area where women need to improve as well, in terms of identifying talented women to support,” she said.

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The WWCDA has attracted some of the most prominent women in government enforcement. Janet Reno, the first female US Attorney General, spoke at the organisation's first event in 2000 and Kathryn Ruemmler, counsel to former US President Barack Obama and now co-chair of the white-collar defence and investigation practice at Latham & Watkins, spoke at an event held before the 32nd ABA Annual National Institute on White Collar Crime in San Diego in late February.

Popp says the association has grown as more women have entered the white-collar world. "I've seen an increase in the number of women partners at law firms and the number of women coming in as associates across the board," Popp said, adding that this increase matches up with more women in-house, in government and in "the director's rooms".

Looking to the future, Robertson said: "We are looking to open more chapters; become increasingly sophisticated in terms of our offering to each other and to clients, particularly female GC; and to develop our training programme".

In association with the Women's White Collar Defense Association, GIR is organising its first-ever Women in Investigations conference in London on 28 June. The event is co-chaired by the 2017 GIR Lifetime Achievement Award Winner, Lucinda Low at Steptoe & Johnson in Washington, DC, and Martina de Lind van Wijngaarden at Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer in Frankfurt. Leslie Caldwell, the former assistant US attorney general of the DOJ's criminal division, now a partner at Latham & Watkins, will deliver the keynote speech.

All attendees are invited to attend a networking dinner hosted by PwC, where GIR will unveil the 100 nominees included in the 2018 Women in Investigation survey.