

EMPOWERING

# WOMEN

IN MASS TORTS

Women En Mass seeks to increase gender diversity in mass tort leadership positions and provide female attorneys with an extensive networking and resource system.

By || **AIMEE H. WAGSTAFF**

On Nov. 6, 2012, I had recently been appointed colead counsel in the transvaginal mesh multidistrict litigation, and I was dining at the Westin Atlanta Airport hotel with a fellow mesh road warrior. We began to pontificate about a trend I'd noticed: Often, I was the only woman in the room or in the courthouse. Were there just more male lawyers? Not really. Were the women not qualified? No. Plenty of women were qualified. Then what was going on? I asked our server for some napkins and pulled a pen out of my bag. For the next hour, we made a list—alphabetically by state—of every woman we knew who practiced in mass torts. The list was impressive. So where were they? Women En Mass (WEM) was born at that moment.



WEM is an annual retreat for female mass tort attorneys to come together, build new relationships, and strengthen existing ones. Held in Aspen, Colo., it is not your typical legal gathering. Although WEM hosts an impressive business session complete with lessons learned from our trailblazers, helpful practice strategies, and thoughts from the bench, there is no CLE credit available, and there are only a few presentations on substantive mass tort topics. Instead of presentations on the epidemiology of the newest litigation or instruction on how to defeat *Daubert* attacks, the conference schedule is designed for female attorneys to engage with each other, offering time to enjoy Aspen's outdoor playground and world-class dining.

WEM was not created to alienate men; some of my best mentors, biggest supporters, and closest friends are my male colleagues. Instead, WEM bands together women in mass torts, fosters a platform where we are stronger together than individually, and empowers women, hopefully leading to increased representation in leadership positions. The mass tort community includes some phenomenal female trial attorneys and leaders. Through WEM, I hope to foster an environment where the next generation of women can learn and grow from our trailblazers.

My expectations were exceeded when close to 60 women attended the first WEM retreat in March 2013. Attendance nearly doubled for the second retreat in June 2014. The third one is still nearly two months away (scheduled for September 28–29 at the St. Regis Resort in Aspen), and almost 200 people have registered. We have a directory of nearly 400 WEMbers and an active member list server network for referrals and substantive legal questions. Under the leadership of San Francisco attorney Lori Andrus, we have teams of attorneys working together on relevant and important WEM projects. We grow

stronger every day.

WEM is 100 percent funded by pledge sponsors: law firms and companies that pledge their support for WEM and the empowerment of women. Through their generous support, there are no fees to attend the WEM annual conference other than travel expenses. (For a list of past and current pledge sponsors, check out WEM on Facebook or visit [www.WomenEnMass.com](http://www.WomenEnMass.com).) After the retreat is fully paid for each year, any remaining money is donated to support WEM's mission.

In 2014, WEM partnered with retired Pennsylvania state court Judge Sandra Mazer Moss in her new role as executive director of the Stephen and Sandra


hire a Sheller fellow, who will conduct research and analysis in furtherance of the mission.

While at a legal conference in Denver recently, I went to lunch with several female trial lawyers from all over the country. I had never met any of them before, and only one of them practiced in mass torts. Quickly, the conversation meandered into gender inequality and women in leadership positions. I stayed quiet as each lawyer told her story. Each had her own version, but the theme remained the same: There are not enough women in the courtroom or in leadership positions. This is a conversation I have had dozens, if not hundreds, of times with different colleagues since

Each lawyer had her own version, but the theme remained the same: **There are not enough women in the courtroom or in leadership positions.** This is a conversation I have had dozens, if not hundreds, of times with different colleagues since I began practicing law.

Sheller Center for Social Justice at Temple University Beasley School of Law in Philadelphia to create the Campaign for Greater Diversity in Legal Leadership. The campaign's mission is to analyze whether women are being afforded an equal opportunity to obtain leadership positions across the country, and the campaign's initial analysis will focus on complex litigation cases in U.S. federal and state court systems. Temple Law School Dean JoAnne Epps and Moss will supervise the project's development, coordination, and implementation. WEM members helped craft the campaign's mission, and WEM donated its remaining 2014 pledge money to

I began practicing law. These conversations inspire me to change the legal landscape, and they underscore WEM's importance today.

In its short existence, WEM has proved to be an invaluable resource to women in the mass tort community. Women En Mass has many exciting days ahead. 

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