

# International Women's Day #Embrace Equity

08-03-2023

Muireann Bolger



Vikky Mir / Shutterstock.com

## More on this story

- [International Women's Day: 'Break the bias'](#)  
08-03-2022
- [UN International Day of Women and Girls in Science: a perspective](#)  
10-02-2022

## Other related

- [Positive strides: WIPR's diversity and inclusion survey](#)  
02-06-2020
- [Levelling up diversity: tech is one of the ways forward](#)  
02-10-2020
- [Disabled lawyers barely represented in in-house legal roles](#)  
06-04-2020

**As we mark International Women's Day, female IP leaders share their thoughts on how equity is fundamentally different to equality, and why recognising this distinction is crucial.**

It's a reassuring refrain that most of us are taught from an early age "to be fair, treat everybody equally".

But as we grow older, the reality—in a world where systemic inequalities remain rife—is swiftly exposed as being far more nuanced and complex.

Sadly, the provision of equal opportunities to men and women, while laudable, simply isn't enough: that's where equity comes in.

The theme of this year's International Women's Day, #EmbraceEquity, aims to get the world talking about the fact that while equality means providing the same to all, equity recognises that, in most cases, men and women do not start on an equal footing.

And this calls for strategies and measures that go some way towards alleviating the historical and social disadvantages that prevent women from operating on a level playing field with men. In this way, equity can lead to equality.

The United Nations puts it in succinct yet devastating terms: "Everywhere, women are worse off than men—simply because they are women. The reality for women from minorities, older women, those with disabilities and women migrants and refugees is even worse."

While there has been some progress, on average women in the global labour market still earn 20% less than men.

In law, that figure is even worse. When pay analytics company Gapsquare [analysed](#) hourly pay rates provided by law firms under the statutory gender pay reporting guidelines for 2022, it found a gender pay gap of 25%—a figure that has remained largely unchanged since 2017

So how can women achieve greater equity in IP? Female IP leaders around the world tell *WIPR* about their own interpretations of this year's campaign theme—and why it's a timely one.



**"EQUITY IS ABOUT PROVIDING BETTER ACCESS TO THAT ALL-IMPORTANT ROOM"— [CLAUDIA MARIA ZERAIK](#), MONTAURY PIMENTA, MACHADO & VIEIRA DE MELLO ADVOGADOS, BRAZIL**

"This year's theme brought to mind a quote I once read: 'Diversity asks, Who's in the room? Equity responds: Who's trying to get in the room but can't? Whose presence in the room is under constant threat of erasure?'

"This quote by feminist US scholar [Dafina-Lazaru Stewart](#) highlights the necessity of transforming diversity and inclusion rhetoric into efforts to promote equity. It also provides a way of reflecting on the distinction between these concepts. We all understand the importance of diversity, but we also need to understand equity as well.

"Diversity is about embracing differences, while equity is about providing better access to that all-important room."



“SOCIETY’S PERCEPTIONS CAN SHIFT FOR THE BETTER” - [ISOBEL BARRY](#), PARTNER, CARPMAELS & RANSFORD, UK

“This year’s theme of equity is particularly important, because it involves recognising that the world we live in is set up to aid some people and to hinder others, so individuals and groups need to be given resources and opportunities appropriate to their needs.

“It also recognises that the world can be changed; the structures that benefit some and hinder others are not inevitable, but rather the result of accidents of history or a failure to take account of the requirements of different groups.

“It's encouraging to think about how quickly society’s perceptions can shift—for example, look at the changes in attitudes to LGBTQ+ rights in many countries over the past century. It’s incumbent upon us to ensure that future shifts go in the direction of a more equitable world.”



“WHEN I STARTED IN IP, WOMEN WERE TREATED WITH SUSPICION, AND EQUAL PAY WAS NON-EXISTENT” - [MARIËTTE DU PLESSIS](#), PARTNER, ADAMS & ADAMS, SOUTH AFRICA

“Equity is a subject that is incredibly important to me. I joined the legal profession at the time when there were mostly men involved in the profession in South Africa. Women were treated almost with suspicion and the concept of equal pay was non-existent.

“I felt intimidated, often alone and somewhat lost; however, I persevered and became the first female partner at my previous firm. Fortunately, the profession has changed enormously. After being in IP for 30 years, I feel that as women, we have to embrace equity. My generation experienced being excluded from the ‘men’s club’. Now we have an opportunity to enforce real change.”



“THE SELF-IMPOSED STRESS OF ‘HAVING IT ALL’ LIMITS US” - [VALENTINA NIESS](#) PARTNER, NOERR, GERMANY

“Societal pressures, stereotypes and the mostly self-imposed stress of ‘having it all’, ‘leaning-in’ and ‘breaking the glass ceiling’, can easily lead to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt that tend to limit us and hold us back.

“Self-acceptance is such an important aspect of good mental health and can help us feel more confident and empowered in our professional lives.

“This also means recognising and challenging negative self-talk and limiting beliefs and replacing them with positive affirmations. Women remain largely underrepresented in IP leadership positions. In this context of systemic disparities, equity means more than just equality; it is not a ‘nice-to-have’ but a ‘must-have’.”



“MOST WOMEN IN IP CAN SHARE AT LEAST ONE EXPERIENCE OF FEELING EXCLUDED” - [MANITA RAWAT](#), PARTNER, MORGAN LEWIS, US

“Having grown up as a South Asian immigrant in North Dakota, I knew what it was like to be in the minority and to be treated differently because I looked different [from] others.

“The racism and sexism I experienced early in my life prepared me for being the only woman in my advanced maths courses in college.

“I then found myself being one of only a handful of women patent attorneys in the software field. Most women in IP can share at least one experience of feeling excluded or ‘not good enough’. Even when we see many female associates at law firms in the patent law field, the numbers at the partner level are still relatively low.

“The best way to embrace equity is to first accept that inequality still exists for women today in IP, and accept that having equity is important to drive innovation and the world’s economy.

“For example, the USPTO, under the leadership of a female director, Kathi Vidal, is ensuring that positions in her administration are filled with qualified women. Such leaders are finding ways to increase the participation rates of women in their IP systems, which will only further and help develop their countries’ economies.”



“NO ONE SIZE FITS ALL” - [RAQUEL FLANZBAUM](#), FOUNDED PARTNER, OJAM BULLRICH FLANZBAUM, ARGENTINA

“In our experience, without equity there is no diversity. If we do not create the conditions so that each person can satisfactorily carry out the tasks he or she is charged with, equity will not exist and therefore diversity will be impossible.

“Work conditions, if they are equitable, promote diversity. One size does not fit all. The circumstances surrounding women and gender issues, for instance, are different from the situation of a disabled person, or a senior person, and so on. Each person is different and unique, regardless of gender, ethnicity, age, religion, culture, disability and sexual orientation. Therefore, equity is always our starting point for progress.”



“DO NOT MAKE WOMEN QUESTION THEIR CHOICES” - [LIZ LENJO](#), FOUNDER, MYIP LAW STUDIO, KENYA, AFRICA

“No woman should be unfairly treated because of a tough pregnancy or because they have an infant to take care of. Special consideration should be granted to them: do not make them question their choices or their place; support them.

“For example, lactation rooms with good sanitation facilities at the workplace should not be a luxury. But unfortunately, that is still the case in some, if not most, workplaces.

“Embracing equity means offering emotional, physical, financial, and spiritual support to any woman in need. It means delivering fair and flexible practices at work, and taking policy and infrastructure considerations into account.”

Diversity and Inclusion, International Women’s Day, equity, United Nations