On Equal Pay Day 2025, the legal sector's gender pay gap is double the average

According to recent statistics published by Law360, male employees at the UK's top law firms are considerably out-earning their female counterparts, with a typical 26% differential in pay. And just in time for Equal Pay Day, which took place on 22 November 2025 this year, the Bar Council published a report which demonstrates that women are earning less than men across all experience levels at the self-employed Bar.

What is equal pay and how does it relate to the gender pay gap?

The principle of equal pay refers to the concept that men and women should receive equal pay for equal work, a principle which has been enshrined in UK law for more than five decades. Concerns regarding equal pay arise where there is a disparity between what men and women earn for doing the same/similar work or work of equal value. This can be between two individuals who have the same title or substantive role or do work of equal value or by reference to groups of male and female employees who have comparable roles or who argue that they do work of equal value. There have been several high-profile cases in the retail sector where mainly female shop-floor workers have argued that their work is of equal value to higher paid mainly male warehouse workers. For further detail on those cases, see our previous briefing here.

The gender pay gap refers to the gap between the average rates of pay for all men and women in the labour market, regardless of job role. The gender pay gap in the UK as a whole in April 2025, as reported by the Office of National Statistics, was 12.8%, down slightly from 13.1% in 2024. However, the gender pay gap differs quite significantly by sector.

Since 2017, all private and voluntary sector employers with 250 or more employees have been obliged to report statistics related to their organisation's gender pay gap. These reports have tended to show the underrepresentation of women at the most senior and highly paid levels within organisations. The aim of such reporting is to shine a light on the disparity and to encourage employers to close these gaps, such as by taking proactive steps to improve progression of women to senior levels. For further information on gender pay reporting, see our more in-depth briefing here.

What is Equal Pay Day?

Equal Pay Day marks the point in the calendar when, as a result of the average gender pay gap, women are no longer earning compared to men. Each year, it is calculated by the Fawcett Society based on data obtained from the Office for National Statistics.

How does the gender pay gap affect law firms, and why?

The gender pay gap in UK law firms stands at an average of 26%. The figures and conclusions published by Law360 follow their review of gender pay gap reports from over 100 law firms, which show wide variation within the legal sector. The

data is taken from mandatory pay gap reports for employees, as well as voluntary partnership pay gap reports provided by 51 of the 100 firms (there being no legal obligation to report on partnership pay gaps).

Notably, the analysis shows that many firms report far greater pay equality at the junior level, with the median employee gender pay gap varying between 1.9% and 65.3%, but with the majority of firms' figures sitting between 20 – 30%. This is significant compared to partner-level roles, where nearly one third of the reporting firms had partnership pay gaps of over 30%, with the highest reported gap of over 100%.

Where partner figures are included within a firm's overall figure this leads to a stark increase in their median pay gap; the highest combined employee and partner pay gap reported was 48%, and even firms whose employee gap was as low as 2.4% reported a much higher combined pay gap of 27.7%.

Statistics for the gender bonus gap also varied significantly, with eight firms reporting a 0% difference but over 20 firms reporting a gap of at least 40%.

Putting the very wide-ranging variations between law firms to one side, it is clear that the overall pay gap within law firms is considerably higher than the current UK average pay gap of 12.8%. So why is the legal sector lagging so far behind when it comes to pay equality?

Law360's analysis suggests several key factors that may be contributing to this.

Lack of leadership representation

While improvements are slowly being made, law firms have historically been (and largely remain) male-dominated at the senior levels. This can, in itself, be a factor that deters women from seeking promotion, as they are less likely to see themselves taking on those roles in future. Equally, it may contribute to attrition away from male-dominated firms towards firms that already have a strong female leadership presence, or even towards other industries that are seen as offering more opportunities for advancement. It is worth noting that smaller firms are not required to produce gender pay gap reports (although many do voluntarily), and, therefore, the available figures are skewed towards larger firms where the senior leadership has been dominated by men.

Law360's analysis notes that women in leadership positions are more likely to encourage enhancements to benefits and policies, such as parental leave and flexible working. The lack of representation at decision-making levels may mean slower improvements to those benefits which may directly impact the ability or motivation of women to remain at certain firms long enough to reach a senior role and access the highest levels of pay. This is a problem across many sectors but the slow speed of change in the legal profession may mean that its impact is more pronounced.

Unique promotion cycle

The slow rate of progress to improve the gender pay gap within law firms may also be impacted by the difference between many firms' partnership processes and traditional promotion paths in other sectors. Partnership processes in larger firms are

often only run annually, with opportunities in many cases depending on the retirement or departure of another partner. There is often fierce competition between candidates (including external candidates) for only a few potential roles and, depending on business demand, in some years there may be no opportunities available at all.

A considerable amount of work is often required to prepare a business case to join a partnership and, as noted by those interviewed by Law360, the timing of partnership will often coincide with motherhood. Periods of time spent on maternity leave at this crucial career juncture may mean a candidate is "out of sight and out of mind" and/or their business case appears less compelling. Undoubtedly, the fact that women still bear a higher proportion of responsibility for childcare within families – and may work part-time as a result – has an impact too. While many law firms have taken steps to address the impact on candidates for partnership, it remains a factor. Could an uptick in men taking longer periods of shared parental leave and assuming greater childcare responsibilities level the playing field?

Or are these just attempts to explain away systemic discrimination and the general undervaluing of what women do?

As noted by the Financial Times, men are more likely to be optimistic about their client book, which can lead to them being more successful in landing available roles, as well as demanding higher compensation, particularly when moving firms.

And becoming a partner is only the starting point: remuneration between partners within a practice area or more widely across a firm continues to vary greatly.

Practice area disparities

Differences in the level of fees earned across practice areas can be stark. This can disproportionately benefit men, who are both more likely to be hired into the most profitable practices within firms, and more likely to stay in those areas long-term. As published by the Financial Times, 80% of partners hired between 2019 and 2024 into corporate and finance practices (often the highest-billing departments in commercial law firms) were male. By contrast, employment and private client practice areas were closer to 50/50 in terms of partners hired but higher billing practices such as private equity had a significant majority of male compared to female partnership hires.

It is clear that lack of participation in these more lucrative practice areas has an impact on women's ability to achieve the highest levels of remuneration. At the employee level, this is particularly notable when it comes to bonuses. As Law360 noted, even objective factors such as billing targets can indirectly disadvantage women. Such targets tend to favour the highest-billing (and most likely male-dominated) teams, where there is generally a steady demand for long hours of work or a lot of ebb and flow of work with periods of time when exceptionally long hours are required (on deals for example). Women (especially mothers) may face more practical challenges in reaching their targets if they are juggling the competing demands of caring responsibilities.

In addition, discretionary bonuses have a big impact on overall pay which can be difficult to unravel, particularly where there is a culture of avoiding pay transparency and colleagues are discouraged from comparing remuneration. This can make it harder for women to identify any disparities, to

advocate for themselves and call out unequal treatment. We know that any difference in pay early in a lawyer's career is likely to compound over time and affect the starting point for any pay or bonus negotiations in subsequent years and on moving firms.

Not just law firms: the gender pay gap at the Bar

It is not only women working in law firms who are affected by the legal sector's gender pay gap. The Bar Council's recent report found that:

- Women were earning less than men across all experience levels at the self-employed Bar.
- Junior women were earning 76% of what junior men were earning.
- Women silks were earning on average 72% of their male colleagues' median gross earnings.
- Earnings gaps persist across every level of seniority at the Bar: the highest earning men were consistently earning more than the highest earning women.
- There were earnings gaps in every area of practice. The widest gaps were in commercial and Chancery practice, where women at 11-15 years PQE were earning 63% of their male colleagues' median fee income.

- During the previous 4 years (2021-2024), median earnings at the Bar increased for both men and women. However, women's earnings increased by less than men's. This means the gap is still increasing.

There is always a temptation to speculate about the "reasons" for the gender pay gap, but where it is so significant and persistent, is it not reasonable to assume that it arises from a difference in value assigned to work depending on whether it is done by a man or a woman – the very evil that equal pay law has been attempting to address for over five decades?

How does gender pay reporting help?

In addition to revealing the limited level of progress made in closing the gender pay gap within UK law firms, Law360's analysis of law firm pay gaps reveals an element of scepticism within firms towards gender pay reporting. They note that gender pay gap reporting can be seen as a "blunt tool" incapable of fixing a complex and historic cultural problem for firms, and a sense that statistics can be too easily skewed.

Reporting is seen by some as a 'tick box' exercise rather than an active commitment towards closing the gender pay gap. On International Women's Day this year, the Law Society Gazette noted a report from 2022 by the 'Next 100 Years Project' which revealed that while 92% of legal professionals agreed that the gender pay gap is a concern, 62% said that fixing it is not a priority for their firm's senior management. This report also

noted that 84% of female lawyers believed they would not see true gender pay equality in their working life and that, at the current rate of change, the legal sector remained 86 years away from achieving pay equity.

This lack of faith in the effectiveness of gender pay reports is particularly interesting in the context of the Government's plans to expand pay reporting obligations even further. Under the Equality (Race and Disability) Bill, employers will be required to report on their ethnicity and disability pay gaps as well as their gender pay gap. Whilst some firms have already made such reports voluntarily, it appears that most are unprepared and there are significant concerns around firms' abilities to obtain the required data. In addition, through the Employment Rights Bill a new obligation will be introduced to produce gender equality plans to explain what steps are being taken to address the gender pay gap, as well as simply reporting it.

While there is scepticism about the value of gender pay gap reports, it is clear that the current Government sees pay gap reporting as a mechanism to drive pay equity: shining a light on the problem in the hope that what gets measured gets managed.

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