

## NCWBA Conference on Gender Equity

By Karen Bovarnick



**On August 9, 2013**, the National Conference of Women’s Bar Associations held its annual conference in San Francisco, bringing together representatives from women’s bar associations throughout the nation to discuss this year’s theme of Gender Equity—Moving the Bar Forward. California was well represented at the conference and indeed, sworn in as the new the NCWBA President was Andrea Carlise, along with Barbara Harris Chiang, Teresa Beck, Kathleen McDowell, and Patricia Sturdevant.

Hastings Law Professor Joan Williams gave a fascinating talk with solid data about the way gender bias is subtly expressed, with themes of “Prove it Again” (i.e., never-ending challenges to competency) and “Tightrope,” (i.e., combating negative perceptions of acting “too male” or “too female”). She briefly mentioned two other areas of concern: “The Maternal Wall,” and “Tug-of-Wars,” when women turn against each other in the workplace because they perceive a scarcity of opportunity—a clear symptom demonstrating the presence of gender inequity. Professor Williams has posted strategies some women have used to address these issues at [www.newgirlsnet.com](http://www.newgirlsnet.com). Noreen Farrell with Equal Rights Advocates followed up on this topic by talking about gender pay inequity which is fueled by the lack of transparency in compensation. We also heard presentations on Twitter and Blogging for law firms, and the present challenges in achieving gender equity in the federal judiciary.

Former Congresswoman Patricia Schroeder was the keynote lunch-time speaker who repeated themes

about how bias continues to persist and undermine women’s progress. She began her talk by reading newspaper headlines with genders reversed, illuminating the pervasiveness of present-day gender bias in the media. She also spoke about her disappointment that measures she had championed, such as the Family and Medical Leave Act passed nearly 25 years ago, had served as a ceiling rather than a floor in expanding rights for women. She encouraged women to use economic power to influence change.

Conference representatives met together in small groups to brainstorm about raising awareness of gender equity issues on the national level, and ways to involve state and local bar associations. Some of the discussions focused on making men more aware of gender inequity, and balancing privacy concerns with the need for transparency to prevent inequity in compensation.

The evening’s reception featured a presentation by Nancy Newman of the newly launched International Action Network for Gender Equity & Law. After asking everyone attending if they ever felt “fired up” after a conference but too busy or distracted back home to get involved, Nancy recommended contacting her organization, which matches talented and inspired lawyers with gender-equity projects overseas.

While the conference underscored the tenaciousness required to “move the bar” on gender equity, it was empowering to join with talented, smart, creative and successful women from around the nation to work on this issue.