

## Advancing the Rights of Women

An Interview with Carol Robles-Román,  
President and Chief Executive Officer, Legal Momentum

**EDITORS' NOTE** Carol Robles-Román assumed her current post in April of 2014. She is former Deputy Mayor for Legal Affairs and Counsel to Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg. She was the first woman to serve as Counsel to a New York City Mayor and was a member of the city's executive leadership team for 12 years. Her career reflects a lifelong commitment to access to justice, diversity, and inclusion. As Deputy Mayor, she helped lead New York City's social justice programs including agencies that worked with judicial selection, women's issues, domestic violence, human rights and anti-discrimination, immigration, and the disabled. She is an experienced board member for large nonprofit entities and educational institutions, including the National Association of Women Lawyers and the City University of New York. She holds a J.D. from NYU School of Law, where she received the Vanderbilt Medal for extraordinary contribution to the law school community, and a B.A. from Fordham University at Lincoln Center.



Carol Robles-Román

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** Legal Momentum ([legalmomentum.org](http://legalmomentum.org)) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization founded in 1970 to advance the rights of women across the nation by using the power of the law and creating innovative public policy in three broad areas: economic justice, freedom from gender-based violence, and equality under the law. Successful initiatives include award-winning judicial education programs on sexual assault and domestic violence, successful advocacy for the landmark Violence Against Women Act since its inception in the early 1990s, and representing women in precedent-setting legal advocacy and litigation.

### Would you give a brief overview of the history of Legal Momentum and its mission?

Legal Momentum, formerly called NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, is a national civil rights organization that provides effective advocacy and education, and also litigates high-impact cases on behalf of women and girls. Our role is to educate the public and policy makers around gender equality, advocate for action, and litigate within the legal system to secure justice and equality for women. By using this three-pronged approach, we create a fair and just playing field for women and girls.

Legal Momentum's advocacy and policy work highlights the important economic safeguards that women need to raise a family today, especially single moms. We proactively safeguard women's employment

rights. We also work with court systems around the country to eliminate gender bias and educate judges, law enforcement personnel, and other service providers about sexual and domestic violence.

### How do you measure success in these efforts?

We look to be effective and credible in our efforts, working with organizations like The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights and entities like the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), the federal anti-discrimination agency. Last year, for ex-

ample, the EEOC brought charges in a case involving four female Legal Momentum clients, sheet metal workers whose construction company employer violated federal law by firing female workers and treating them differently because of their sex. We intend to work with other employers, especially those that operate in nontraditional work settings, to help them implement and follow new workplace policies that comply with the law and safeguard women's rights to a fair workplace.

Another example is our effective advocacy with federal agencies. Two years ago, Legal Momentum successfully helped urge President Obama to issue an executive directive that federal agencies institute workplace violence policies to help combat and prevent domestic violence in the federal workplace and provide assistance to affected employees. We work to ensure this will serve as a model for private employers as well.

We see direct results from strong advocacy. For example, a client who had been discriminated against by her employer when she got pregnant testified with Legal Momentum before the NYC Council last year. This helped lead to the passage of New York City's new Pregnant Workers Fairness Act. This was signed into law by then Mayor Bloomberg and took effect at the beginning of this year.

Last summer, when a judge in Montana gave a rapist a mere 30-day sentence, and made comments blaming the 14-year-old victim who had committed suicide, the director of our award-winning National Judicial Education Program worked with other women's groups to file an official judicial misconduct complaint. That judge has now been officially censured, and will retire. Also, the rapist's low sentence has been overturned, and he will serve at least two years.

Another measure is the ability to effectively assist and collaborate in new ways with women of color, teens, and young women. Most recently, Legal Momentum has taken a leading role in addressing

serious campus sexual assault. We are educating young people on campuses about their rights in Title IX cases, the federal law which ensures the right to a fair and equal educational environment. We recently filed a federal complaint with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights involving a student whose university failed to properly inform her of her rights, and didn't take adequate measures to ensure her safety after finding that she had been subjected to serious sexual misconduct by another student. We are meeting with the key Congressmen and women leading legislation in this area so our strong positions are part of this national agenda.

Our Poverty program addresses economic insecurity and poverty, and the disproportionate number of immigrant women and women of color who don't have access to the tools to move out of poverty, such as equal pay and paid time off. We're working to craft innovative solutions and partnerships to assist these women. We will work with community colleges, micro-lending organizations, and other entities that can provide innovative platforms to help disadvantaged women succeed.

### Are public/private partnerships critical to success in this work?

I have loved working on public/private initiatives to tackle some of the city's toughest problems. We worked with advertising giant Grey New York in developing *Let's Call an End to Human Trafficking* with foundation partners. We partnered with other government agencies, Avon, Verizon, and several philanthropies to create the state-of-the-art Family Justice Centers to combat domestic violence, which are now models for the rest of the country – and, in fact, the world.

We need to have the public and the private sectors working hand-in-hand to address gender equity. For example, increasing the number of women on corporate boards is a serious concern, as women are greatly underrepresented. Corporations and private companies can gain assistance from, for instance, the Direct Women Board Institute, Women Corporate Directors, Catalyst, or the 30 Percent Club. These female-led organizations have studied the low number of women on corporate boards and work to help companies bring talented female leaders to the board room.

Legal Momentum has also worked with large companies to help them develop workplace policies that address women's issues, and we recognize women's leadership in business and law, and companies that offer positive environments to women, with our annual Aiming High and Women of Achievement awards. ●