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Ugly as SIN

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Abstract

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As I said, not so long ago women were a rather scarce commodity in our firm. As they became less scarce, we had to try to figure out what the hell we were going to do with them. To give you some idea of how our firm struggled with the "woman problem" (as we used to call it), I've salvaged the minutes of a 1979 meeting of a subcommittee of our Executive Committee.

"What are we going to call ourselves?" asked Oscar Winters.

"I'm going to call myself Bob," answered Robert Mentor.

"No, I mean this subcommittee. We're supposed to deal with the woman problem, but I don't like the ring of 'Woman Problem Subcommittee.'" "

"We could call it the 'Subcommittee on Sexual Equality,'" suggested Stephen Falderall.

"Sounds very 1960ish. Sheldon Horvitz would love it," commented Mentor.

"I'm not sure *I* like it," said Nails Nuttree. "What does 'equality' mean, anyway? We may be opening a whole can of worms.

"Well, I certainly don't want to do that. I'm extremely anti-worm," announced Oscar.

"Why do we have to name the subcommittee anything?" asked Mentor.

"I'm pretty sure the firm handbook requires it. Anyway, it's traditional, and I don't think we should just thumb our noses at tradition because of some women," said Oscar.

"Okay, then why don't we call it something innocuous, like the 'Subcommittee on Sex in the Law Firm,'" suggested Stephen.

"No, nothing with 'sex' in it. And your suggestion doesn't form an acronym, anyway," complained Oscar.

"Fine, then how about 'Subcommittee on Institutional Non-discrimination,' SIN," suggested Stephen, which suggestion was adopted unanimously by the subcommittee.

"Exactly what do we consider to be the 'woman problem'?" asked Stephen.

"Well, we are getting more and more women lawyers around the firm," said Oscar.

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"Yes?"

"And they're, well, different," continued Oscar.

"I've noticed that myself," commented Nails.

"I mean, how can we send them out to clients? What would our clients think?" asked Oscar.

"Confidentially, I see that as something of a problem myself," said Robert. "I mean clients are guys. And guys talk about different things than girls."

"Such as what?" asked Stephen.

"Such as sports, for instance."

"What makes you think women can't talk about sports?" asked Robert.

"My wife knows more about the Bears than I do. And Stanley's secretary, Bertha, can tell you the lifetime batting average of Harry Chitti."

"Who the hell is Harry Chitti?"

"See what I mean. Harry Chitti was one of a long string of inept Cub catchers. A walk when old Harry was catching was as good as a triple for the opposition. The runner would go on the first pitch, Harry would play the ball off of the wall behind the plate and then he'd toss it into center field."

"Well, even if some girls can talk about sports, there are other things guys talk about that would not be appropriate for girls."

"For example?"

"Girls."

"Well, maybe guys would just have to not talk about 'girls,' as you call them, in front of women," said Stephen.

"It's not just talking about girls," explained Oscar. "Clients just aren't used to seeing girl lawyers. They wouldn't want anything important to be handled by them."

"Then we'll just have to show them that the women we've hired are every bit as good as the male lawyers we have," said Stephen.

"But there are some very practical problems," said Nails. "In my experience, women tend to have babies."

"You *are* a man-of-the-world," said Stephen.

"And when they do, they tend to disappear, right in the middle of a trial. Men don't do that, in my experience."

"Well, maybe we could hire around that problem," suggested Oscar.

"What do you mean?" asked Bob.

"Well, first of all, we could stay away from the married ones."

"It's against the law to ask if they're married," said Stephen.

"I'm too clever to fall into that trap. You don't have to ask, just look for the ring."

"You're clever alright, Oscar, but it's still illegal."

"Well, how about just hiring ugly ones, then? Ugliness isn't a protected class yet, is it?"

"No, as long as you're going to hire only ugly men, also."

"This is getting to be a hell of a pleasant place to work," said Nails. "Everyone walking the halls is going to be ugly as sin."

"Confidentially, I'm not that comfortable with the number of women we've been hiring," said Bob. "I'm afraid we'll get to be known around law schools as a women's firm. And then we won't be able to hire the guys we want."

"Yes, and besides, a lot of these women have husbands who have very good jobs," added Oscar. "I spoke to one whose husband was a doctor, for heaven's sake. They don't really need these positions, and they're taking them away from guys who do."

"Now, I'm not prejudiced myself," said Nails, "but I do have to say that I don't think women are tough enough to be litigators. I mean, not many of them have played football or served in the marines. If I found one who did, I'd be the first to hire her."

"I can hardly believe what I'm hearing," said Stephen. "I'd have expected it ten or twenty years ago, but not today. You're trotting out all of the old stereotypes that I thought we'd left behind. And *we're* the committee that's supposed to be dealing with the future of women at the firm. I think we need a woman on this committee."

"Impossible," said Oscar. "This is a subcommittee of the Executive Committee and we don't have any women on the Executive Committee."

"Well, maybe it shouldn't be a subcommittee of the Executive Committee then," suggested Stephen.

"But it is," insisted Oscar. "Just look around: We're all members of the EC. And if we were to put a woman on this committee, we couldn't have the sort of frank discussion that we're having now with just us guys."

"Well, this frank discussion isn't getting us anywhere. And it's a little too frank for me," said Stephen.

"I suppose we could invite one of our women lawyers, as a guest, to our next meeting," said Nails. "Of course, she wouldn't have a vote. And there might be a few times that we'd want her to excuse herself, go to the ladies room you know, so that we could talk man-to-man."

"Well, who would we invite as guest?" asked Bob.

"Ruth Tender is the most senior," observed Oscar. "So I suppose it should be her."

"No, if we have to invite somebody, how about that Jane Hokum-Cohen? I hear she was a damn good field hockey player. And she's vavavaVOOM, if you know what I mean," said Nails.

"Nails, Jane's married and so are you," reminded Oscar.

"Yes, but I'm not blind."

[STANLEY'S NOTE: Jane's guest appearance at the next SIN meeting was a turning point in the history of women at our firm. Not only did she refuse to excuse herself to go to the ladies room (she said she didn't have to go), but she insisted on reporting on the meeting to all associates. Shortly thereafter, the original SIN was dissolved.]