

A History of Women in Law in Michigan

Until the last decades of the 20th century, almost all lawyers and judges in the United States were men. As early as the 1860s a handful of women began studying law, and in 1871 [Sarah Killgore Wertman](#) was the first woman to graduate with a degree in law from the University of Michigan and to be admitted to practice in the state. However, when Wertman married and moved to Indiana a few years later, she could not practice because Indiana law only allowed males to be admitted to the bar. Even after official barriers came down, few women attended law school, much less worked as lawyers, because of societal attitudes toward women pursuing legal careers.

It was not until the 1970s that patterns began to shift. As a result of the women's rights movement, more women entered law school, practiced law, and became members of the judiciary. According to the "Women in the Law" issue of the [Michigan Bar Journal](#) (June, 1984), in 1974 less than 3% of lawyers in Michigan and less than 9% of law students in the United States were women. By contrast, a [report](#) from the American Bar Association indicated that in 2021 more than 38 percent of lawyers and 55 percent of all law students in the United States were women.

Timeline

1972 Justice [Mary S. Coleman](#) is elected as the first woman on the Michigan Supreme Court

1976 Then-Judge [Dorothy Comstock Riley](#) becomes the first woman to join the Michigan Court of Appeals

1978 [Mary S. Coleman](#) becomes Michigan's first female Chief Justice and only the fourth woman to serve in this position in any state. Then-Judge [Patricia J. Boyle](#) is named to the federal district court; she is one of President Carter's three dozen female judicial appointees

1981 Sandra Day O'Connor is sworn in as the first female Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court ([photo](#))

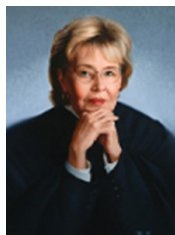
1997 Four women Justices serve together on the Michigan Supreme Court, making the state's first female majority; Michigan is second only to Minnesota's female majority, 1991–1994



Hon. Mary S. Coleman
Served 1973–1982



Hon. Dorothy Comstock Riley
Served 1982–1983, 1985–1997



Hon. Patricia J. Boyle
Served 1983–1999

Discussion Questions

- Do you believe you can choose any career you want to be?
- Justice Boyle graduated first in her law school class in 1963. But when she looked for a job as a lawyer, some listings said, "No women need apply." What advice would you have given her if you were her friend?

Additional Resources

Michigan Supreme Court Historical Society, [Women and the Law Project](#) and a [Timeline](#).

Michigan Women's Historical Center and Hall of Fame, [Timeline](#)

Stanford University, [Women's Legal History Project](#) (see Biographical Search, Bibliographical Search, Articles, and a [Timeline, 1619–Present](#))

