**Steptoe Hit With Equal Pay Act Suit By Ex-Associate**

Share us on:  *By****[Melissa Daniels](https://www.law360.com/articles/939187/steptoe-hit-with-equal-pay-act-suit-by-ex-associate%22%20%5Co%20%22%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)***

*Law360, Los Angeles (June 27, 2017, 10:06 PM EDT) -- A former [Steptoe & Johnson LLP](https://www.law360.com/firms/steptoe-johnson-llp%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) associate hit the firm with a putative class action alleging she and other female attorneys earned tens of thousands of dollars less than their male counterparts, the latest in a string of suits against major law firms alleging gender-based pay inequality.

Ji-In Houck, who worked at the firm's Century City office for about three years, filed the suit in California federal court on Thursday alleging Equal Pay Act and California Fair Pay Act violations. In addition to failing to pay women at the same rates as men, Houck claims the firm’s male-dominated leadership tends to favor men for high-profile promotions and assignments — and only pays "lip-service" to diversity efforts.

“Like other firms that operate without transparency, consistency and accountability, Steptoe’s partnership tends to value male attorneys more than female attorneys,” the complaint said. “The firm’s overall corporate culture and the uniform policies, procedures and practices inevitably result in systemic pay discrimination to the disadvantage of the firm’s female attorneys.”

Among the allegations, Houck claims her base salary of $160,000 as a fourth-year attorney in January 2015 was about the same as what her male counterparts earned when they were fresh out of law school. Meanwhile, her male counterparts earned $210,000, or about 30 percent more than she did.

Steptoe employs nearly 500 attorneys around the world. The firm issued a statement Tuesday saying it strongly supports women lawyers and professionals, noting that two of its four departments are headed by women, half the partners on the compensation committee are women and the firm’s general counsel is a woman — and so was the immediate past chair of its associates committee.

“In January 2016, the firm promoted a new partner class that was 50 percent female, and in January 2017, the new partner class was 80 percent female,” the firm's statement said. “The allegations of associate pay discrimination in this lawsuit by a former junior associate who was hired as a contract attorney and stayed with the firm for less than three years are completely without merit, and we will vigorously defend ourselves against such baseless claims."

Houck’s suit isn’t the first action taken against a BigLaw firm bringing claims of gender-based discrimination. A [Sedgwick LLP](https://www.law360.com/firms/sedgwick-llp%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) partner agreed to drop her suit after reaching a settlement with the firm****[earlier this month](https://www.law360.com/articles/938092/sedgwick-partner-settles-in-gender-discrimination-suit%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)****, [Proskauer Rose LLP](https://www.law360.com/firms/proskauer-rose%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)****[was sued](https://www.law360.com/articles/923857/proskauer-partner-says-bias-complaint-led-to-firing-threat%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)****by an anonymous partner alleging women were paid less than men, and Chadbourne & Parke LLP is facing a proposed $100 million gender bias action****[filed last year](https://www.law360.com/articles/915473/chadbourne-votes-out-partner-behind-gender-bias-suit%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)****[.](https://www.law360.com/articles/915473/chadbourne-votes-out-partner-behind-gender-bias-suit%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)

Lauren Rikleen, a former law firm equity partner who now consults through the Rikleen Institute for Strategic Leadership, told Law360 that while pay gap issues have existed since women joined the profession, it appears that "the floodgates have opened" for lawsuits around the issue.

"As long as we've been collecting data, we've seen a substantial compensation gap and nothing has substantially changed to lessen the gap," she said. "What we are seeing now is a movement taking these issues into the courthouse."

In this case, Rikleen said it was notable to see claims coming from a former associate, whereas other cases were filed by partners who may face even greater pay gaps due to the discretionary types of pay involved at that level.

Houck, a Georgetown University Law Center graduate, began working at Steptoe in 2013 earning $85,000 a year as a contract attorney. But numerous male colleagues who were admitted to the bar the same year as she earned almost double at $165,000, the suit says.

Houck’s base salary increased to $100,000 in April 2014, and then to $130,000 that June when her official status changed to "associate." Some of her male counterparts at that time had $175,000 salaries, the suit says.

The complaint says Houck brought her concerns to higher-ups at the firm, including a former managing partner in Century City who suggested she talk to her assigned "champion," a New York partner she hadn't met that never responded to her email. She also submitted two memos to the associates committee about her concerns, the complaint said.

“Had Steptoe taken plaintiff Houck’s complaints seriously over the years — as it counsels its clients to do — this lawsuit would have likely been averted,” the complaint said.

In January 2016, Houck asked for a $50,000 raise, citing her pay history and favorable annual reviews to show how her salary was disproportionately low compared to her performance, according to the complaint. Though Houck’s salary was retroactively increased to $200,000 in March 2016, her male counterparts were earning $230,000, the complaint said.

Houck left the firm later that month. She's now a litigator at Stalwart Law Group, according to the firm’s website.

The complaint cites other examples of women attorneys at Steptoe earning less than men, including one associate with nine years of experience who was paid $190,000 upon joining the firm while her male counterparts were paid $250,000 to $280,000. Houck also says the firm fails to retain women employees in the long-term, saying that while slightly fewer than half of the firm’s associates are women, 19.2 percent of the 177 partners are women.

In addition to seeking relief for a national and a California class, Houck's complaint asks the court to order Steptoe to adjust the compensation of its female attorneys and establish new programs and a task force to address fair pay and equal opportunity issues.

“Given America’s commitment to — in the words ascribed above the door of the [United States Supreme Court — ‘Equal Justice Under Law](https://www.law360.com/agencies/u-s-supreme-court%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank),' a legal profession in which women lawyers are openly valued less than their male peers threatens the very legitimacy with which the public views our country’s laws, lawyers, judges and the justice system itself,” the complaint said.

Rikleen told Law360 that firms who want to solve issues around equal pay and the gender gap should start by asking questions that get to "the heart of the matter," including examining their compensation schedule and the metrics used to determine pay.

"You have to hold up a mirror that may not reflect really well," she said. "It may be an uncomfortable mirror to be holding up to a certain point in time, but those are the kind of things that will ultimately bring about change."

A representative for Houck declined to comment.*