In the late 1980s and early 1990s, at the same time women were graduating from law schools in increasing numbers, the PBA undertook efforts to make sure it was providing services and support for the needs of women lawyers.

Allegheny County lawyer Anne L. Begler chaired the PBA Equal Rights Committee in 1989, and she credited the group with sowing the affirmative action seeds for women in the PBA. In the 1995 Special Centennial Edition of The Pennsylvania Lawyer, Begler said, “Many of these (early) discussions were difficult for women. They had to be somewhat confrontational to be heard.”

The committee pushed for more women in PBA leadership positions, a call to which PBA President Thomas L. Cooper responded in 1991 by creating the Task Force on Women and Minorities in the PBA.

On the recommendation of the task force, PBA’s bylaws were changed to add two new at-large seats to the Board of Governors, one for a woman governor and one for minority governor (a second minority governor seat would be added in 2011).

Concerned about losing women lawyers to a “boutique-type” bar association, in 1993, then PBA President H. Robert Fiebach created a Commission on Women in the Profession (WIP) to advance the role of women lawyers in the PBA and the legal profession.

Leslie Anne Miller became the first to chair the WIP and five years later would become the first female president of the PBA. Since then, four additional women have served as PBA president: 2010-11 President Gretchen A. Mundorff, 2016-17 President Sara A. Austin, 2017-18 President Sharon R. López (also the first Latina president) and current President Anne N. John.

In 1995, the WIP began its annual “report card” on the progress of women in the PBA and the broader profession. The 2019 report included a snapshot of the PBA in 2018, showing progress has been made but that work remains to be done. Among the findings:

• Women represent 32.5% of the PBA’s membership; that number was 24% in 1995. (The Supreme Court of Pennsylvania began collecting gender, racial and ethnic data by including a voluntary question in its 2018-19 annual attorney registration. According to the court’s most recent summary of results released in January 2020, of those answering the question, 37.94% self-identified as female.)

• Of the 386 members in the PBA House of Delegates, 38% were women; that number was 21% in 1995.

• Women represented 42% of the PBA Board of Governors; that number was 21% in 1995.

• Of the PBA’s 53 committees, 45% were chaired by women, either in a jointly chaired position or solo; in 1995, 32% of the 38 committees had women as solo chairs.

• Of the PBA’s 18 sections, 33%, or six sections, were chaired by women; in 1995, there was one section chaired by a woman.

Today, the WIP has more than 750 members, making it the largest committee of the association. It also is one of the most active, holding annual conferences in conjunction with the PBA Annual Meeting and spring and fall retreats. It also presents annual awards, including the Anne X. Alpern Award (recognizing female lawyers or judges who demonstrate excellence in the legal profession and who make a significant impact on women in the law), the Lynette Norton Award (recognizing female lawyers who excel in litigation skills and who are devoted to mentoring female lawyers) and the H. Robert Fiebach Promotion of Women in the Law Award (honoring Pennsylvania law firms, including solo practitioners, corporate law departments and other organizations providing legal services, either public or private, that instituted programs or initiatives helping women lawyers continue and advance in their professional careers while maintaining a work/life balance).

Information sources include an article written in 1995 for the Special Centennial Edition of The Pennsylvania Lawyer and the 24th Report Card compiled by the Commission on Women in the Profession, which can be found at https://www.pabar.org/pdf/pbawipreportcard2019.pdf.