

Law Firm Fraternization Policy Leads to Lawsuit

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Romantic relationships in the workplace can often wreak havoc. However, one law firm's fraternization program is now the basis for an employment lawsuit.

Kimberly A. Elkjer is suing her Texas law firm over its policy of prohibiting male and female employees from being "alone together," both in and out of the office. Elkjer further claims that although the policy has since been rescinded, the segregated office environment that it created makes it more difficult for [female lawyers to advance in the firm](#).

"Scheef & Stone LLP has fostered a culture that generally encourages sex-based stereotypes, impedes female attorneys' ability to develop professional relationships with male attorneys at the firm, promotes greater income and business opportunities for male attorneys at the firm as compared to female attorneys at the firm, and undermines female attorneys' perceived and actual ability to perform work," the suit maintains.

Elkjer, a partner at the firm, contends that she raised her concerns to the firm's managers, but faced push back. "Indeed, the firm has met opposition to unlawful employment practices with expressed hostility and/or unwarranted threats," the complaint states. She is now seeking an injunction as well as compensatory and punitive damages for [gender discrimination](#).

Meanwhile, Scheef & Stone L.L.P. argues there is "no evidence" to support Elkjer's claims, stating that other female attorneys do not agree with her characterization of the work environment. "In fact, objective evidence and our business records will clearly show that Ms. Elkjer disagrees with legitimate business decisions based on objective non-discriminatory criteria by the firm's management that have nothing to do with gender and apply to all attorneys in the firm," the firm maintained in a press statement.

As this case highlights, fraternization policies can be a double-edged sword. While they can help protect a company from sexual harassment claims, they also have the potential to create a segregated work environment in which female employees may not have access to the same opportunities.