



# HARVARD LAW SCHOOL

312 Hauser Hall • 1575 Massachusetts Avenue • Cambridge, MA 02138

DAVID B. WILKINS  
*Lester Kissel Professor of Law*

*Vice Dean, Global Initiatives on the Legal Profession*  
*Faculty Director, Center on the Legal Profession*

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Dear Selection Committee,

Below, my former student and now Senior Adjunct Professor of Global Leadership and currently Senior Fellow at CLP Rangita de Silva de Alwis joins me in nominating Deborah:

I am delighted to join with Rangita de Silva de Alwis and other distinguished scholars and practitioners in nominating Deborah Rhode for the Margaret Brent Women of Achievement Award. I have known Deborah as a scholar, mentor, and friend since I entered the legal academy in 1986, and I cannot think of a more deserving recipient of this important honor. Through her pioneering scholarship and dedicated leadership in numerous academic and professional organizations, Deborah has been a tireless advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion in the legal profession and the legal academy, and in society as a whole. Indeed, what distinguishes Deborah from other important scholars and advocates, is the way that she consistently integrates theory and practice, while making inclusion a central part of everything that she does both professionally and personally. Although she is one of the most prolific scholars of her generation – and without question the most widely cited in the field of legal ethics – Deborah has never been content with just publishing influential books and articles. Instead, she has consistently rolled up her sleeves and done the hard work of institution building. And she has always made sure that people of color are a core part of her team, and her agenda.

Deborah's recent work on leadership is a perfect example. Deborah is, of course, one of the leading scholars in this area, having published several books and articles on this critical topic. But she has also been a driving force in translating these important scholarly ideas into action. In 2017, Deborah organized the first major conference on leadership at Stanford Law School, seeking out a diverse and inclusive range of speakers, including Chief Justice Tani Gorre Cantil-Sakauye and former Attorney General Eric Holder, who served as the conference's principle keynote speakers. The next year, Deborah became the founding chair of the Section on Leadership of the American Association of Law Schools, an organization which quite literally would not exist but for Deborah's tireless work. Once again, Deborah made sure that diversity

would be a central focus of the Section by ensuring that the Section's inaugural event would include a diverse panel of law professors.

In short, Deborah has always practiced what she preaches about diversity, equity, and inclusion. I know this first hand from her unwavering mentorship and support for my work over the years, and I have seen her do the same for countless others. As her well deserved recognition by the Obama White House underscores, Deborah is indeed a "Champion for Change." And as Rangita documents, Deborah's influence as a change agent for women of color and other marginalized groups has been felt around the world.

Best regards.



David B. Wilkins

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In 1993, in the first week of my arrival as a graduate student in the US, Martha Minow pulled out of her library Deborah Rhode's "**Justice and Gender**" as the first readings for an independent study on "**Women in Buddhist Ecclesiastical Law.**" Although Deborah's book in 1989 was the first investigation of gender and the law in the United States, she helped me investigate gender as a cultural construct in the reproduction of gendered hierarchy in Buddhist religious texts.

That began a passionate encounter with Deborah Rhode's writings on gender. Later in my career as an international women's rights lawyer, both with the UN and with Secretary Hillary Clinton, I worked with women policymakers around the world and searched for texts that would cut across borders. We found them in Deborah Rhode's work. My work as the Founding Director of Secretary Clinton's Women in Public Service Project was to ask the same questions that Deborah asked in her book "**What Difference Does Difference Make?**" Why are women so dramatically underrepresented in formal leadership positions—and what can be done to improve the situation? Her question as to the difference that difference made, shaped the first ever index to measure the difference that women in leadership make in terms of the passage of laws, policies and budgets. From Pakistan to Peru to Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, her work provided me the textual authority for the global policy work.

The power of Deborah's work lies in the fact that it impacts women in the US embarking on careers in law, politics, management and academia as well as women striving to find a seat at the table on boards. Running parallel to this American narrative is her international impact: the way in which her deeply humanistic vision of the world affected women in different economies in far corners of the world. These women, in Eleanor Roosevelt's words, inhabited spaces "little seen on the map," but were making momentous change in fragile democracies, like in the post Arab Spring-MENA region or in post-conflict transitional justice Zimbabwe. In her book on "**Women and Leadership,**" once again she questions the underrepresentation of women, and she unpacks the structural and cultural barriers they face. What separates her work is the in a way in which her research provides concrete strategies for women that can be replicated across the world, from the US to Tajikistan. In the chapter, "Women on Boards," Deborah writes of the Norwegian Minister of Trade and Industry, Ansgar Gabrielsen, who was "shit tired" of the "boys club" dominating Norway's corporate landscape. This story and her analysis had a profound impact

on my friend, the MIT-trained Minister of Innovation in Sierra Leone, David Sengeh, who famously carried his baby on his back while attending to state duties. He told me that Deborah was speaking directly to him.

Much is known about how Rhode pioneered the field of Gender and Law and Leadership. Less is known of her profound impact on the lives, work, and the philosophy on and of women in the world. These women have been shaped by her work, which has become the blueprint for their own endogenous reformist engagements.

In the lexica of the Iranian Judiciary, removing the Hijab in public is tantamount to advocating for prostitution. In 2019, Nasri Soutoudeh, the women's rights lawyer was sentenced to a lengthy prison sentence in the notorious Evin Prison for removing her Hijab in public and for her membership in a women's movement. She was a founder of the 2005 movement "The One Million Signatures Campaign for Equality under the Law," which aimed at collecting one million signatures to remove discriminatory laws against women. Both Nasrin and Shirin Ebadi, the exiled Iranian lawyer and Nobel Prize winner have not met Deborah, but I know from my own work with them of her shaping- influence on their brave resistance against tyrannical laws.

Currently, as a nation, we are embroiled in a crisis of leadership and a crisis of conscience on both gender and race. For years, I have taught International Women's Human Rights and dedicated the class to Deborah Rhode in addressing, through the law, the legacy of legal and cultural discrimination and human rights violations that women in the world face. The underrepresentation of women in positions of power is one of history's most pernicious human rights violations. In developing a new pedagogical approach and a companion class on Gender, Law and Leadership, I had the support and blessing of both Deborah Rhode and my co-nominator David Wilkins. In many mentoring sessions, David would often quote from Deborah's textbooks "**Leadership for Lawyers**" and "**Lawyers as Leaders.**" The legal profession is a key producer of national leaders, yet little attention is paid in law school's to teaching or training in ethical commitments to leadership, especially to those underrepresented in leadership.

My class on Women, Law and Leadership is anchored in Deborah's writings and is a forum for the next generation of lawyers to build a theory and practice of equitable leadership. Whether reading Isabel Wilkerson's "**Caste**" or Claude Steele's "**Whistling Vivaldi**," my students and I revert to foundational texts by Deborah Rhode on "**Diversity and Gender Equity in Legal Practice**" to understand the subtle intersectional biases, so insidious that they are invisible to the unseeing eye. In long and caring conversations, it is Deborah who teaches me to unmask what Wilkerson calls, "worn grooves of comforting routines and unthinking expectations, patterns of a social order that have been in place for so long that it looks like the natural order of things." In a world that is daily shrinking into an abyss of narrow and insular ideologies of exclusion and xenophobia, Deborah -- along with Judge Gertner, another Margaret Brent awardee, and David Wilkins -- has sustained me.

At a time of enormous upheaval -- the sweep of social movements like BLM and #MeToo, a public health crisis that has deepened fault lines, and a nation in grief over the loss of Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Brianna Taylor -- my students are searching for moral voice to sustain them and move forward.

Writing recently in "**MeToo: Why Now? What Next?**" Deborah shows her piercing insights and characteristic candor when she says: "much greater effort will be necessary to reverse the deep- seated inequalities that have plagued most of the nation's social-justice movements."

Tonight, my student Dana Dyer spoke to me of struggling with these dueling forces and trying to

find voice, meaning, and connection in this moment. After our conversation, she wrote to me:

“As a Black woman, reading Deborah Rhode’s articles made me feel seen and more included in the fight for vitiating gender sidelining and discrimination for all women in the workplace. Deborah Rhodes not only made it apparent to discuss the obstacles women of color face, but also highlighted people of color who were courageous and impactful leaders, committed to making a change. This empowered me to continue the fight in honor of their legacy. Thank you, Deborah Rhode.”

What Dana is saying is that Deborah’s voice shines as the voice of moral authority in the midst of a nation embroiled in grief and crisis. “She speaks directly to women like me,” Dana told me, “we need someone to fight for women in the margins.” Deborah does that when she writes the history of Ida B. Wells, in her book on “**Character.**” “She is speaking with us on what Black women experience in being left out and often labeled as a ‘difficult woman,’” Dana explained to me, “even when we are struggling for the greater good.”

Dana and other young women students of color tell me that they often feel disfranchised both by the women’s movement and the BLM movement. In their quest for an inclusive new women’s movement, they see Deborah as their fierce ally, the fountainhead, and the standard bearer of the theory and the practice for their struggle. In this moment of disenfranchisement, Deborah builds allyship and “*paves the way*” for a new generation of women lawyers of color in a way that no other Margaret Brent awardee has or ever will, save Justice Ginsburg herself. In this post-Ginsburg moment, Deborah Rhode attempts to close the inequities in gender equality theory, practice, and movement building.

**Best Regards,**

**Rangita de Silva de Alwis**

Senior Adjunct Professor Law and Global Leadership, University of Pennsylvania Law School  
Nonresident Leader in Practice, HKS Women and Public Policy Program (2019-2021)  
Distinguished Adviser, UN Under Secretary General Phumzile Mlambo Ngcuka  
Hillary Rodham Clinton Fellow on Gender Equity, Georgetown University