



KARIN GRAF, SANDRINE GIROUD

Two women at the helm of Swiss law

How Karin Graf and Sandrine Giroud, presidents of the Zurich and Geneva Bar Associations, are modernising the legal ecosystem by pushing for inclusion, defending core values and preparing the profession for the future

by claudia la via

For the first time in history, the two largest bar associations in Switzerland—Zurich and Geneva—are both led by women. But neither **Karin Graf**, president of the Zurich Bar Association (ZAV), nor **Sandrine Giroud**, president of the Geneva Bar Association (ODA), came into the role focused on making headlines for their gender.

Karin Graf is a litigation and arbitration partner at Vischer in Zurich, with broad experience in complex commercial disputes, including shareholder disputes and enforcement matters and a long-standing commitment to professional ethics and continuing legal education. Sandrine Giroud is a partner at Lalive in Geneva, where she specializes in international dispute resolution, art law and business and human rights, and frequently represents clients before international bodies. “Real progress comes when gender in leadership is no longer newsworthy”, says Graf. “The fact that I hold this position today shows that competence and commitment can open doors, regardless of background”.

Giroud echoes that sentiment: “While I haven’t focused my presidency on being a woman, the position naturally opens conversations. A man would never be asked, ‘Should we call you *bâtonnière* or *bâtonnier*?’ That kind of question shows we’re still adjusting as a profession”. Together, these leaders are not just symbols of change—they’re actively reshaping what legal leadership looks like in Switzerland.

«Lawyers face rapid technological change, increasing complexity and economic pressure. These require adaptability, specialization and innovation»

Karin Graf



KARIN GRAF



SANDRINE GIROUD

«Lawyers are being targeted around the world—whether under sanctions executive orders or political retaliation. We need to respond with a strong, united voice»

Sandrine Giroud

EVOLVING ROLES, NEW PRESSURES

Both Graf and Giroud are navigating the shifting ground beneath the legal profession. The challenges are mounting: technological disruption, complex regulation, geopolitical instability and attacks on the rule of law. “Lawyers face rapid technological change, increasing complexity, and economic pressure”, says Graf. “These require adaptability, specialization and innovation. Bar associations must help members navigate these shifts—offering continuing education, digital tools, and peer exchange”. She points to ZAV’s 23 professional groups as one example, providing tailored training and networking across practice areas. “Equally important”, she adds, “is defending our core values—independence, integrity, confidentiality—through legal advocacy and dialogue with institutions”. Giroud, whose international practice has given her a broad perspective, sees the risks as both technical and political. “Lawyers are being targeted around the world—whether under sanctions, executive orders, or political retaliation. These aren’t isolated. We need to respond with a strong, united voice”. She believes bar associations must speak out and act—not only to support their members, but to protect the rule of law itself.

EQUALITY: FROM AWARENESS TO ACTION

Despite the rising number of female graduates in law, leadership remains male-dominated. Both presidents are pushing for structural reform—not just symbolic representation. “In Geneva, 65% of trainees and 61% of associates are women”, Giroud points out. “But only 30% of partners are. That tells you the problem isn’t ambition—it’s structural barriers”. Graf sees similar dynamics in Zurich: “The issue today is not access, but long-term retention and advancement. We need sustainable reforms, including flexible work models that support both men and women”. Mentorship, she says, is critical: “Networks must be open to all talents. I’ve benefited from mentors who helped me grow—and we need to make that standard, not luck”. Giroud agrees: “We’re past the stage of overt discrimination. Now the barriers are more subtle—bias, uneven distribution of responsibilities, lack of flexibility. If we want a profession that reflects society, we need to rework our structures to support that—practically, not just symbolically”.

LEADERSHIP BEYOND THE TRADITIONAL MOULD

Despite managing demanding practices, both leaders say their professional roles enrich their presidencies. “My practice in dispute resolution has given me the tools I rely on every day as president—identifying problems early, focusing on practical outcomes and communicating clearly, even in high-pressure situations”, says Giroud. “Our firm’s diversity is also a huge strength: we bring together more than 15 nationalities. That environment has taught me to lead across cultures, to value listening as much as speaking, and to build consensus in complex

settings”. Graf also draws on her private practice experience: “You learn quickly that leading an association is about persuasion, not hierarchy. That mindset actually strengthens my legal work”. For both, leadership is about presence and consistency. “To me, leadership isn’t about authority—it’s about example”, says Giroud. “It means showing up, staying consistent, and creating the conditions for others to contribute”.

LOOKING AHEAD: PRIORITIES FOR THE PROFESSION

Both bar associations are marking major anniversaries this year—Zurich’s 150th and Geneva’s 130th—but their focus is forward-looking.

For Graf, it’s about driving digital transformation, strengthening education, and building deeper dialogue—across generations, between institutions, and within the profession itself.

“We want to be a dynamic organization, ready to evolve without losing the core values that define us”.

Giroud’s priorities include defending the rule of law, improving cooperation with the judiciary, and modernizing the internal governance of the Geneva Bar to meet rising demands.

“One of my goals is to ensure the presidency becomes accessible to anyone, regardless of their background or practice structure. That means rethinking how we work—and sharing responsibility more broadly”. Their presidencies represent more than a gender milestone. They signal a broader shift toward leadership rooted in action, inclusion, and adaptability.

As Giroud puts it: “Leadership doesn’t have to follow one path. I want younger lawyers—especially women—to feel empowered to lead, even if they don’t fit the traditional mould”.



GIRAUD AND GRAF TOGETHER AT THE 3RD WOMEN'S LAWYERS DAY, WHICH TOOK PLACE ON JANUARY 28 IN BERN