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## How SoCal Women In CRE Made The Climb To The Top — And What They'd Change

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*Bisnow/Camille Toomey*

Allen Matkins' Elizabeth Wilgenburg, CDC Small Business Finance's LaKisha Gant, Gensler's Denise Zacky-Popoch, Innovative Housing Opportunities' Rochelle Mills, Green EconoME's Marika Erdely and Jamboree Housing's Laura Archuleta.

For women at the highest echelons of Los Angeles commercial real estate, there's clear proof that the male-dominated industry has made great strides in terms of gender parity, but further changes, including increased flexibility, support and even men taking time off, are needed to advance the field further.

Speaking in front of a packed house at *Bisnow's* annual Southern California Women Leading Real Estate event at the DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Los Angeles Downtown, a panel of commercial real estate CEOs, founders,

partners and other top-level women professionals discussed their career progressions and what can be done to help those who come next.

A 2022 CREW report [found](#) that the leading motivation for women leaving commercial real estate was a lack of opportunities for advancement. Women make up [just about a quarter](#) of the highest-level executives at CRE's top companies, according to an analysis by *Bisnow*.

A few panelists shared stories about finding the critical flexibility they needed to balance a family and a career, usually by negotiating for what they needed or moving to another workplace that would be more accommodating.

[Gensler](#) Principal [Denise Zacky-Popoch](#) said earlier in her career, she watched as many talented women left to have kids. While that may have been what they wanted, it was not for her.

"There was part of me that said, I don't want to have to choose [between family and career]," Zacky-Popoch said. "How can I find my path? How can I figure this out?" For her, it meant going down to part-time hours and even taking a year off.

[Allen Matkins](#) partner Elizabeth Wilgenburg, who moderated the discussion, said that didn't feel like an option in her industry, law.

"I think particularly in the law field, you will be penalized in your career [for stepping aside]," Wilgenburg said. "And once you're off the partnership track, you're off the partnership track and it's kind of hard to get back on."

Wilgenburg, who interviewed for partner at her firm while she was on maternity leave, said that while Allen Matkins has been very supportive of her, in industries like hers where there is less flexibility, it would go a long way if men took their parental leave so it becomes less gendered.

The way it stands now, with mostly women taking that leave, "is not going to change the perception of who's responsible for the kids," Wilgenburg said.

Many women who cannot find flexibility they need to grow and care for their families and succeed professionally sometimes end up leaving the workforce for a time.

[Innovative Housing Opportunities](#) CEO [Rochelle Mills](#) said that stepping away from the workforce can be an opportunity that can give some women much-needed time to make sure they're on the right track, in the right career. Mills said she is seeing the return of some of those women and is seeing resumes for women in their 40s and 50s cross her desk.

"I'm not lamenting the loss, I'm celebrating what we gain when they come back," said Mills, who leads an affordable housing development business.

Retaining women often means promoting them.

When asked what can be done to get more women into the top levels of CRE, panelists touched first on elements women can control, encouraging them to ask for the positions and promotions they want and to ask often.

"Just do it and see what happens," Green EconoME CEO Marika Erdely said. "If you don't ask, you're not going to get anything."

There is evidence indicating that asking for what you want in the workplace [doesn't always work out](#) for women the same way [it does for men](#), but almost every panelist had an example of an opportunity that would have passed them by had they not asked for what they wanted.

That philosophy helped [Jamboree Housing](#) CEO [Laura Archuleta](#) land a development with [the Irvine Co.](#) The affordable housing developer recalls that one of her colleagues couldn't believe it. "He tells people, 'She just asked for it and she got that deal!'" Archuleta said.

CDC Small Finance Senior Vice President LaKisha Gant shared a story about being up for a promotion and not knowing how much to ask for. She consulted a male colleague, who told her to ask for a 20% raise. Gant hesitated ("We're a nonprofit. Twenty percent is a lot!") and asked for 15%.

"You know what I got? Fifteen percent," Gant said as the audience erupted into laughter. She said no one should be so afraid of the word no that they don't ask for things.

"No' is not the end of the world," Gant said.