

GENDER DISCRIMINATION LAWSUIT AGAINST COUNTRY CLUB SETTLED

In September, 1999, the Women's Law Project announced the settlement of the first lawsuit challenging gender discrimination in a golf club under the Pennsylvania Human Relations Act. Filed two years earlier in Montgomery County Court of Common Pleas, the case alleged that the club's membership policies and rules limiting women's access to the tees violated the provision of the Pennsylvania Human Relations Act prohibiting gender discrimination in public accommodations. The Women's Law Project brought the case on behalf of plaintiffs Wynn and Robert Harris with co-counsel Abbe Fletman, of Wolf, Block, Schorr and Solis-Cohen LLP.

When the Harrises joined the club, they thought they would both be full members. They later learned that Meadowlands considered only Bob Harris to be the member and only he was given the right to vote, run for office and play golf on Saturday and Sunday mornings. Meadowlands also had a Men's Grille which women were prohibited from entering. After trying to end these practices for over two years, the Harrises sought the assistance of the Law Project. As required by law and with representation by the Law Project, the Harrises first filed a complaint with the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission. After a year passed, the Harrises were permitted to file the case in court.

The main features of the settlement agreed to by Meadowlands include:

- The creation of a spousal membership category which gives the spouse full access to the tees at all times for a reasonable additional fee.
- Full membership rights for all adults, including voting rights.
- The addition of two reserved seats for women on the Board of Governors for each of the next three years.
- The creation of a Blue-Ribbon Committee, comprised of an equal number of men and women, to study and make recommendations to the Club membership concerning the facilities provided to men and women.
- An apology to the Harrises.

The men's-only grille was eliminated by Meadowlands prior to the settlement. In addition, the Club has agreed to a monetary payment in an undisclosed amount.

The settlement was reached after Meadowlands agreed that it was a public accommodation and subject to the Pennsylvania Human Relations Act. The significance of this case lies not only in the specific remedies provided by the settlement, but also in the club's recognition that it must comply with state law prohibiting gender discrimination in public accommodations. Clubs like Meadowlands, which open themselves to non-member events such as weddings, corporate affairs, and golf lessons, should understand from this settlement that they may not discriminate against women.

The Harrises are very pleased with the outcome of the case and hope that the effects of the settlement will go beyond the changes at Meadowland and reach other

clubs. For the Law Project, the conditions that gave rise to this case represent the deep-seated attitudes that prevent women from gaining full equality in society. The gender-based discrimination openly practiced by Meadowlands and many other clubs is carried out by many of the same men who are leaders in the corporate and political world. They perpetuate discrimination through the attitudes that allow them to discriminate at the club and by the example they set at the club. To eradicate discrimination completely, it is essential to change attitudes and set the right example.