

Q: Why do you think it is important to celebrate International Women's Day/Month?

A: I've been at the Bar for almost 20 years. In that time, society has come a long way; so has my profession. At the same time, there is still so much to do. It is a sad fact that, at least according to the World Economic Forum, my generation will not see economic gender parity in our lifetimes, and nor will many of our children.

That comes as no surprise to me. The unconscious bias in our industry is prevalent, even in 2022. There are countless stories that I can share, my own and others'. There's the solicitor who not so long ago whispered to his male barrister in court that he "despised the type of woman who wears trouser suits". The "type" of woman he was talking about included the female barrister on the other side. Far more recently, another barrister told a male colleague that someone was "a little princess who stamps her feet when she doesn't get her own way, and then plays the misogyny card". These stories are hard to hear but underscore how far away we are from any real gender equality within our industry, or indeed society as a whole. IWD is both an important reminder that we cannot be complacent, and a call to action. It needs to be celebrated loudly so that the call to action goes out to everyone, not just women. As Gloria Steinem once said, "the story of women's struggle for equality belongs to no single feminist, nor to any one organization, but to the collective efforts of all who care about human rights. "

Q: What was your journey to get to where you are now?

A: I was born and brought up in the Republic of Ireland. I came to England to attend university, both because I had a desperate desire to escape (what my teenage-self considered) a very small-town existence, and because there was no obvious way to fund university – at the time Irish universities were fee-paying and English universities were not. I studied Philosophy at York and then decided I'd like to pursue a career in academia. A few months into my Masters, I knew I had made a mistake. I struggled through my course and subsequently found a temporary job at The Spectator Magazine. That turned into a full-time job as the editor's secretary and changed everything.

The then-editor, Frank Johnson, was a very inclusive and kind leader, even going so far as to seek my (rather uninformed) views in editorial meetings. He did not just talk about the huge benefits of collaboration with people who think differently and are different, but actually demonstrated them. In short, he was a model leader.

But the experience at The Spectator was also hugely important in another respect. Although I had thought I might like a career in law, the Bar seemed so inaccessible, and I'm sure still does to many. I had no contacts in the industry, no idea about how I would fund my studies; I didn't even know how to go about getting work experience or choosing the right law course. But colleagues at The Spectator did,

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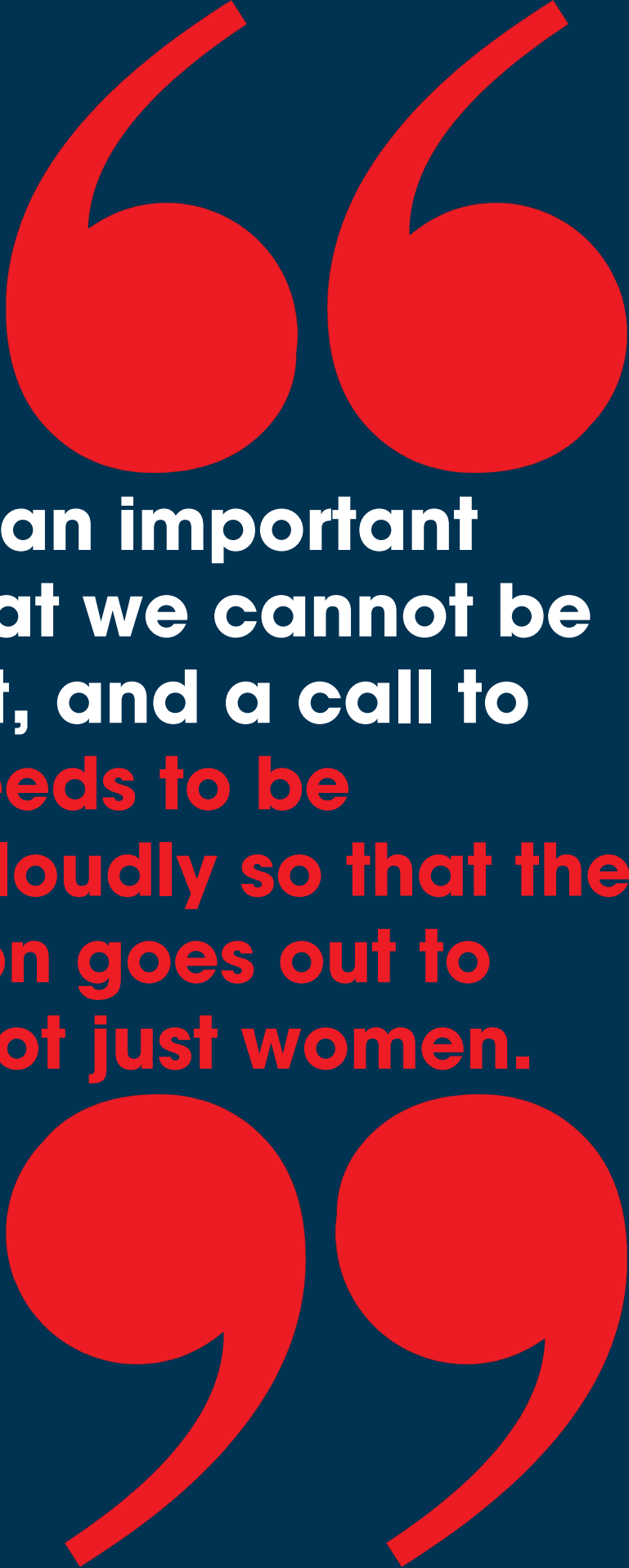


Blair has a broad commercial practice with an emphasis on complex multi-jurisdictional fraud claims and disputes with technical insolvency or company law aspects. She is ranked across all her main practice areas in the latest editions of Chambers UK Bar and The Legal 500, and prior to taking silk, won Insolvency Junior of the Year at The Legal 500 UK Bar Awards 2019. She is described in the directories as "all-round excellent" and receives particular praise for her court room skills ("her advocacy is on another level") and "amazingly good judgment".

INTERNATIONAL
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and encouraged me to believe that I could go to the Bar. One of the journalists even set up a meeting for me with the late Sir Christopher Staughton at Twenty Essex, which co-incidentally became my home 14 years later. Sir Christopher introduced me to Inner Temple and its wonderful scholarship programme, and suddenly a career at the Bar no longer seemed fanciful. I will always remember the day my Inner Temple scholarship letter came through, because it was the same day as Frank was informed that he was being replaced as editor by another Johnson (Boris), and we all sat in the room next to Frank's and cried.

I did the law conversion course at City University, during which time I secured a pupillage at South Square, the well-known insolvency law and restructuring Chambers. I confess that I had no particular interest in insolvency law at the time (I was only a few months into my law studies when I heard about South Square), but they offered very generous funded work-experience (mini-pupil-lages) - £500 for one week. At the time, I was working through my holidays to pay rent and other expenses not covered by my scholarship and so the idea that I could both do some work experience and earn more than I could for weeks of temp work was extremely attractive!

As it happens, I was lucky and really did enjoy insolvency law. I joined South Square in 2002 as a tenant (after first, completing the Bar Vocational Course and second, pupil-lage) and, in the ten years that followed, I was very privileged to work on some of the biggest insolvencies of the 2000s, and with some of the brightest minds of the Insolvency world.

In 2012, I moved to Twenty Essex to broaden my commercial litigation practice. That decision has been the most significant decision in my professional career to date. Not only have I had the opportunity to do more of the type of commercial litigation that I love, and to work closely with one of the Bar's greats before his retirement (Iain Milligan QC), I have been consistently buoyed on by the energy and collaborative nature of Twenty Essex.

I applied for silk during the 2019 competition and was appointed Queen's Counsel on 16 March 2020, just on the eve of the first lock-down. So sadly, I have yet to celebrate properly!

Q: What challenges have you faced as a woman in the industry, and how have you overcome them?

A: Happily, I've only very occasionally encountered explicit bias. Less happily, unconscious bias against women (both by women and by men) was extremely prevalent when I started in practice, and is still one of the biggest challenges faced by women today.

How did I overcome this particular challenge? I think for a long time I internalised the misogyny. Although I have always called myself a feminist, I too readily accepted things as they were. That was partly conditioning and partly a

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result of working in an environment with so few women and even fewer female role models. But, if I am being honest with myself, another important factor was fear; in particular, the fear that I would be accused of playing the “misogyny card”, or would be perceived as simply lacking resilience. Even today I still have to check myself. Indeed, when you asked me to do this profile, my instinctive reaction was to say no, because I did not want to put my head above the parapet on these issues.

So I'm not sure I've overcome the challenge exactly, as much as I've put up with it and survived, and sometimes even thrived. The reason I survived and thrived was because I had a strong support structure, and in particular, tremendous help from both male and female members of our industry. It was this support that made me stay at the Bar, and helped me to take silk in 2020.

Q: What advice would you give to other women in the industry building their careers?

A: Building on the things I definitely got wrong, and the things I might have got right, my “top tips” are:

- Believe in yourself. It's a challenging industry, and unless you know your own self-worth, it will be even more challenging, and frustrating.
- Find your own definition of success. Success should be defined by what makes you feel happy, so you need to define it for yourself, and redefine it along the way.
- Remember you're not alone. When you have a wobble, or a set-back of any kind, it's always best to share. There are so many wonderful people at the senior end of the industry, and they are there to help. You only need to ask.
- Make friends with your peers in all parts of the industry. By making friends with your peers, you not only build a support structure which will be there for your entire career, but all aspects of work will become so much more enjoyable.
- Trust your instincts. Nowadays, inappropriate conduct towards women tends to be more subtle and difficult to address or call out, especially as a junior female in the industry. If something feels wrong or inappropriate, it probably is. Speak to a senior mentor and address the problem sooner rather than later.

Q: What women have supported or inspired you throughout your career and why?

A: When I started, the Commercial Bar had very few women, and even fewer obvious female role models, but it was inspiring to watch from afar the career trajectory of women such as Dame Elizabeth Gloster and Sonia Tolaney QC. In terms of direct support, that inevitably came primarily from men within my Chambers. The three men that I am most grateful to are Martin Pascoe QC, Stephen Atherton QC and Christopher Theobald. They never stopped believing in me, even during those difficult times when I may not have been following my tip to believe in myself. Without that support, I'm doubtful whether I would ever have applied for silk or be as happy as I now am with my career.

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Outside the Bar I have been inspired and supported by huge numbers of women over the past 20 years. It would be impossible to list them all here, but they know who they are. Nevertheless, I must single one person out. To me, Kathryn Garbett at Greenberg Traurig is one of the most inspirational leaders in our industry. She manages to be kind, empathetic and formidable all at once, and works quietly and good-humouredly behind the scenes to support and encourage women in all parts of the industry.

Q: It's 2022, how we can we move forward in the industry to raise awareness against bias and take further action for equality?

It is important to accept that all of us hold unconscious biases. But that doesn't mean that they are permanent or cannot be addressed. Indeed, whilst we may have a long way to go, bias against women is definitely less prevalent in 2022 than it was when I started out.

There is obviously no magic bullet. However, on the positive side, most of us are fair-minded people, who will try to be better if we are shown how to approach things in an inclusive way. By way of example, I think these are a few things that we could do within the industry to move us closer to our goal of gender equality:

- Training that promotes self-awareness and helps us all understand the nature of bias (which is a normal aspect of human cognition) so that we can approach our own biases in a more informed and open way. The EDI training we currently have in most parts of the industry is, at least in my view, too superficial and high-level.
- Training that helps us work out how to call out unconscious bias in a respectful and constructive way. I feel very strongly that more of us, and more senior men in particular, need to start to call out unconscious bias when they see it – if we continue to gloss over or ignore unconscious bias, it will go unchecked and things will not change. However, confronting bias is a very tricky thing for both women and men and that's where training comes in.
- Facilitate “safe-space” cross-industry discussions so that we can share our biases and help others feel more secure about exploring their own.
- Celebrate IWD, loudly (and not just through female only networking events).