

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

A: The obvious reason is to celebrate the progress which has been made on behalf of women in what is actually a short space of time, but I think it is better to illustrate it by way of an example in the legal world: two decades ago women were not allowed to wear trouser suits in Court – can you imagine telling a female solicitor and/or advocate now that they could not do this...'

I appreciate that this is a very small example in comparison to many of the amazing achievements over 100 years of women in law, but it is a vivid one.

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

A: I grew up in the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland. At school as I was more familiar with bomb drills rather than fire drills. My school drummed into me that everything is possible although my careers advisor did suggest that a career in law was not for me!

Living in a vicarage meant there was a constant flow of people, their challenges, often their conflict and then finding solutions or being alongside them to support them in their journey. I understood from an early age that confidentiality was key. As a family lawyer I am involved in conflict resolution on a daily basis and with the benefit of hindsight can see how my early years impacted my choice of legal specialism.

I inadvertently spent a year in Italy as part of my degree and was the first Italian speaking trainee recruited by Withers in 1995. I became a family lawyer in 1999 and a partner in the leading family team at Withers in 2007. My interest in people meant that I became the Training Partner responsible for graduate recruitment and trainees as well as Chair of the Women's Networking Group and my interest in Italy continued so I headed up the Italian Special Interest Group.

In 2017 I took over the reins as Regional Divisional Leader for Dispute Resolution (Europe) at Withers and am responsible for the day-to-day management and strategy of the firm's leading Family and Trust, Estate and Inheritance Dispute teams. Alongside this I sit on the board of the International Academy of Family Lawyers and the UK board of the International Women's Forum.

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

A: I have been extremely lucky as a woman in the legal industry. I joined Withers just before Diana Parker became the first female Chair of a City law firm, Margaret Robertson has been our Global CEO for two decades and 45% of our partnership globally is female. Withers has always given me the opportunity to 'reach for the stars'.

However, this has not been the same for many of my peers across the industry. I have experienced the usual struggles and guilt as someone who is pursuing a career alongside parenthood. Sixteen years ago after the birth of my eldest child I returned to work and cautiously asked to 'work from home' on a Wednesday afternoon – in those days I had something called Groupwise which was my inbox and an old fashioned dictaphone, cassettes and documents. There were no work mobile phones, and the Blackberry had just arrived. This was ground-breaking in those days!

It is important for each of us to move the dial just a little and as we find ourselves in the mobile working world today it will make it both easier and harder to manage the boundaries of work and home.



SUZANNE TODD

Partner & Head of the UK Family and Trust, Estate and Inheritance Disputes teams

Withers

Suzanne leads the firm's market leading Family & Trust, Estate and Inheritance Dispute teams in London. She is one of the most highly respected international family lawyers of her generation in London with more than two decades of experience of conflict resolution which is illustrated by the long history of awards and accolades she has achieved.



ThoughtLadies that inspire





**Always, always do something
outside your comfort zone.
This is how we learn, grow and
develop.**



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

A: Be 'very' at something. My 'very' is my interest in all things Italian and I have built my legal practice around that and it now has a strong Italian theme. I never imagined how a telephone call in a red phone box in Nottingham Town Square in 1995 would shape my future career.

Take opportunities as they arise – too often we sit back and wait to see if others will grasp them. Grasp the nettle yourself.

Be present at meetings – how many meetings have you been in where you have been silent and not contributed – try never to walk out of a meeting without having made some contribution.

Always, always do something outside your comfort zone. This is how we learn, grow and develop.

The most important thing to remember is that change can be very good and change is constant....and we need to embrace it. So often when we are in the midst of change it can feel like wading through treacle and it is almost impossible to see the potential benefits when you are in the treacle!

Coming back from two maternity leaves was challenging in different ways. The first time I came back as an associate and was soon up to speed with chargeable work and it was as if I had not been out of the office. The second time was as a junior partner in the middle of the financial crisis in London in 2009. The 'cupboard' was completely bare and I truly believed that no-one would ever instruct me to do anything ever again! It was a scary place to be, however my boss at the time told me to 'keep the faith' which was easier said than done but I did and 13 years later I am ranked in all the leading legal directories for family law and was in the Spear's Wealth Management Awards shortlist for Family Lawyer of the Year in 2021.

Ensure that you have the right support at home and in work – I often refer to the holy triangle of the three 'S's – Stephen, Sarah and Simone – my husband, my secretary and our kids' nanny. It is absolutely vital for anyone building their career that they have their support pillars in place around them along the journey.

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

A: In 2008 I met Madeleine Heggs at an Association of Women Solicitors' event. She set up her own legal practice over 60 years' ago. I was 'buddied up' with her which initially I thought was strange as she had recently retired. Having the opportunity to gain pearls of wisdom from someone who is the last surviving female solicitor of her generation (she is now 92) has been invaluable. She has helped me not only on a client front but also a marketing front. Through her I became a member of the City of London Livery Company and obtained the Freedom of the City of London and we were able together to drive the 'sheep' across London Bridge which was a poignant way of joining the old world with the new world.

Through the Withers' lens, Margaret Robertson, Diana Parker and Gill Doran are all formidable in their field. Each of them pushed the boundaries of female leadership in law firms in their imitable way.



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

A: As we gently emerge from the as yet untold impact on the legal industry of the global pandemic and noting the way in which the situation in Europe is intensifying, we need to move forward in a way that builds on all of the very positive flexibility as a result of the mobile working policies which are in place in many, many legal organisations.

At the same time we must ensure that individuals' mental health and wellbeing is protected and there are still boundaries in place between work and home. Conversations in the industry must involve everyone being at the table - for many years these conversations took place with just women at the table and it is important that everyone, no matter what their background, is present.

