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When I was asked to write about my career for Women in FIRE I was delighted to say yes especially as it coincides with International Women's Day.

Perhaps I should share a little about my background.

I was the first person in my family to go to University. Both of my parents left school without qualifications. They studied later in life. Mine was a single parent family and I was the eldest of four children. My mum was and remains an inspiration. She made us believe that we could be anything we wanted. She worked hard and instilled in us an excellent work ethic and reminded us that courage, determination and a true sense of self were as important as academic grades.



I researched a career in law at the age of 17 but was overwhelmed by how much money was required to pursue the vocational course. At the time I did not have the financial resources. Years later as a member of the Bar remuneration committee, I found myself explaining to the meeting that money meant and represented different things to different people. A debt of £10000 to undertake the Bar course could not be countenanced, when a total household income was £9400. I recognised that this inequity had to change and during my tenure and as Chair of the Young Barristers' Committee, we introduced paid pupillages which sought to make a difference to levelling the playing field.

I did A levels in Maths, Physics and Chemistry, this was followed by a degree in business. I scoured the Trusts and Charities Directories to obtain funding so I could undertake the conversion course and bar school. I secured pupillage at what is now 25 Bedford Row. It was full of hardworking, tenacious advocates who truly cared about what they were doing.

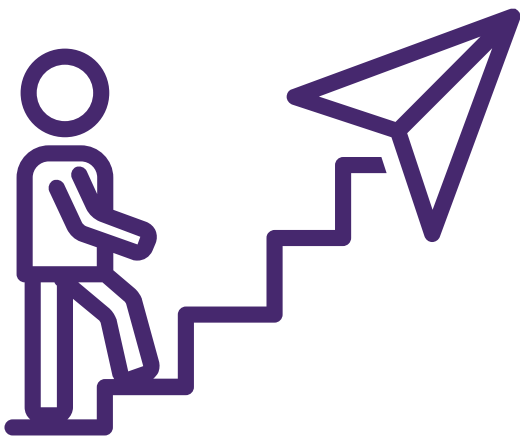
At the time of training it was a prerequisite to dine at the Inns of Court but I didn't enjoy my experience. Firstly a male silk told me that the Bar was not a place for women, and secondly that I should get elocution lessons: I didn't. On another occasion I was ignored because I hadn't studied at Oxbridge. This sort of behaviour has largely diminished and the Inns are now committed to ensuring that opportunities are available for all. Two women in Chambers are in fact Benchers and I know play their own part in ensuring that inclusion is a top priority.

I did not get taken on after pupillage at 25 Bedford Row. I was devastated. It took time, courage, and determination to persevere, to believe that there was still a place for someone like me at the Bar. I continued to strive and a few years later I was invited back to join 25 Bedford Row. Ironically, I am now joint Head of Chambers and the first female Head.



Supported in chambers by an excellent clerking team I began to grow my practice. Having a background in science A levels coupled with a business degree, the World of Financial Crime seemed an obvious fit. This area is challenging, beset by complex problems, voluminous materials but simplifying a multiplicity of intricate concepts into an understandable theory was something I enjoyed and excelled at. Throughout my career I have often been the only woman in these types of cases. This has improved but the gender disparity remains a feature.

Having been in practice for 12 years, I had two small children within 17 months. I took 12 months off. The reality of returning to work with small children was daunting. It required a clear sense of what I could manage and an honest conversation with my professional and personal network. I recognise that the workplace must be more flexible and accommodating. Our inflexible working hours particular if Court based can seem unmanageable to a parent returning to work and we need to recognise this. Retention of women in the profession is essential. Women bring a different and unique dynamic to the workplace and the Courts are no exception.



The next step in my career was to apply to sit as a Recorder, whilst it took me a couple of attempts, I became a Recorder in 2017 with Southwark as my appointed court. Initially the late HHJ McCreath KC was my mentor and then HHJ Taylor. They both imparted lots of sound wisdom and practical advice.

The support from women across the Bar has been important to me throughout my career. I was approached by a female silk from another Chambers, she told me to apply for Silk. She went to great lengths to encourage me (I should add my husband had already done the same). The Female Bar relies on women supporting other women. It builds confidence, reduces insecurity and can be that "little push" that is often needed. Women are notoriously bad at promoting themselves. I applied for Silk that year and got it. Once the imposter syndrome dissipated, my practice thrived, I was nominated for Legal 500 Financial Crime Silk of the Year and won the award.

On taking silk I received a list : a list of every woman that has taken silk. It is compiled by a senior female silk who adds to it each year. I was number 440. Our latest female silk in Chambers to be appointed on the 18th March 2024 will be number 623. Whilst this is progress, I remain hopeful that this figure / list of women will hit the 1000 mark whilst I'm still in practice.

Relatively recently organisations have developed so that there are places for women to network and meet likeminded people. The Female Fraud Forum and Women in Criminal Law are examples of these. I have acted as a Mentor and given talks for both organisations. The fundamental principle, a principle I endorse, is to provide a support network for women to progress but also a place where they feel encouraged.



By way of example, I received a message from a junior colleague at Women in Criminal Law - the message simply said - I just wanted you to know that I'm at a drinks party and a group of men are stood around discussing how superb your speech was today. It was such a kind and supportive gesture and it made a huge difference. We must all do more to be supportive and encourage others and also to commend when someone has done a good job.



Last year I had the great honour of taking over as Joint Head of Chambers at 25 Bedford Row. In our new role as Heads we are able to do even more to support our female members. We are committed to the retention of our members, we recognise the challenges and together with our Clerks room help we achieve a balance and a practice that is compatible for them.

As Master Shifu in Kung Fu Panda wisely says;

'if you only do what you can do , you will never be more than you are'.



It seems to me that with more role models ahead of us, more support around us, we can all become more than we are. Happy International Women's Day.



#IWD2024

#InspireInclusion

