

The next 100 years for women in law

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The Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act came into force in 1919, opening the gates for women to become lawyers. Three years later and the first set of women were admitted as solicitors: Carrie Morrison, Maud Crofts, Mary Pickup and Mary Sykes, with Ivy Williams and Helena Normanton called to the Bar in the same year. Things have since progressed both in the profession and society generally, but there is still a lot of work to be done; so let's take a look at the next 100 years.

To understand what the future looks like for women in the legal profession we need to understand and celebrate how far we have come and consider the changes still to be made. The Law Society's most recent statistics from 2017 report that, for the first time, female practicing certificate holders outnumbered their male colleagues at 50.1%. The first female CEO of a leading law firm was announced in 2013 and 2019 will see Browne Jacobson appoint its first female senior partner. Without paying tribute to achievements towards equality such as these it is difficult to appreciate what the future holds. A brilliant example of this is The First 100 Years project which looks to do just that by collating and recording women's progress over the last 100 years in an accessible format that tells a story.

There are however still a number of hurdles to be overcome as highlighted by the Law Society's 'Women in Leadership in Law Report' published on the 8 March 2019 ([full report available here](#)). Whilst it is widely accepted that for at least the last 12 years women have been entering the profession almost equal numbers to their male counterparts, there undoubtedly remains a problem with the progression of female lawyers; cohort after cohort, the number of females decreases significantly the higher up the ranks you look. The report is based on research involving approximately 12,000 legal professionals globally, including approximately 40 roundtable discussions involving men and women from across the profession. It revealed that some of the key factors halting this type of progression include the notion of an unconscious bias (that is, attitudes or stereotypes that affect our decisions in an unconscious manner). This was in fact the most commonly cited reason why so few women reach senior positions, as reported by 52% of respondents. The gender pay gap and infrastructure within firms are also considered to be key factors.

Studies such as these are paramount in identifying the barriers and overcoming them in future years. A perfect example of this is Browne Jacobson's mobility initiative which implemented flexible and agile working policies, enabling professionals at all levels to be able to carry out their work from any number of settings (GDPR permitting), helping to tackle the infrastructure issues alluded to in the report.

It is clear from the research that the drive to achieve gender balance in the profession is supported by men, women and regulators within the industry. The Law Society for example are launching a set of toolkits in the form of 'how to' guides to enable firms to embed best practices with regards to gender balance. Innovative steps such as these lead me to believe that the future for women in the profession will bring greater understanding, recognition and opportunities.

It looks like the next 100 years will be just as progressive as the last, if not more.

Here are some views from women at Browne Jacobson on their future hopes for women and the profession:

"Of 30,000 partners in private practice only 28% are women (and this is despite the fact that when I left university almost 30 years ago men and women graduated in equal numbers). I therefore endorse the views of Christina Blacklaws (the 174th President of the Law Society but only the fourth woman) when she says "The solution to overcoming these barriers is not to change the women to fit the system, a system which was not created with them in mind, but to reconsider and adapt the processes which are in place at every level of the profession to help level the playing-field." Going forward I hope that the profession as a whole finds a way to be fully inclusive and for the profession's female talent to achieve its full potential."

Nichola Evans, Partner

"Personally, I've (perhaps fortunately!) not experienced gender bias or prejudice in my legal career so far. I recognise that statistically, the glass ceiling still exists particularly in the senior levels of the legal profession. However, I genuinely believe that times are changing – e.g. with more men being the primary care-giver and the advancement in technology (which allows flexible/home working); mums who would historically have to sacrifice their legal careers are now able to continue pursuing them. Positive measures such as these should continue to be encouraged but I would stop short at implementing quotas or similar 'forced' measures to break the glass ceiling, as we would then run the risk of undermining the concept meritocracy which must still remain the correct measure for progression."

Sandra Wong, Solicitor

"In the future I hope for the legal sector to celebrate women of all backgrounds in the workplace, adapt and recognise the alternative career paths people have taken and move away from rewards based on the number of hours you are at your desk in the office. I hope that law firms continue to be flexible, supportive and encouraging by understanding the need for women to balance several professional and personal roles over their careers".

Hina Ali, Trainee Solicitor

"I think one of the most important things about being a woman in the legal profession in my experience is to be yourself and be proud of your achievements - rather than trying to fit into this or that box, behave in this way or that, or setting higher standards for yourself than you would for anyone else and then berating yourself for not achieving them. It's also really important to support more junior women you work with."

"Maya Angelou puts it much better than me - "How important it is for us to recognize and celebrate our heroes and she-ros!"

Rebecca Fitzpatrick, Partner

"My fundamental hope is that, in the future, the legal profession is so inclusive, balanced and flexible that no-one thinks about 'women in law' as a distinct category, and instead simply thinks of a modern profession where everyone is judged solely on their merits and contributions and is equally valued, supported and accommodated to enable them to thrive."

Beth Dowson, Legal Director

"We are happily living at a time when there is less of an issue with equality of opportunity to step onto the ladder or with progression up to a point. My hope for the future is that the current scepticism about the professions' commitment to gender diversity in the more senior levels of business and the judiciary are proven wrong. I want to see the legal profession reaping the well-researched and described rewards of equality and kicking itself for not moving faster to achieve it."

Amanda Callaghan, Partner

"I hope young professionals develop the confidence to stop comparing themselves to others and take their own path. Achieve what they want to achieve and to walk away from situations where they are not valued or supported without feeling like they've failed. In turn, I hope this will breed a new generation of lawyers who are inclusive, open minded and able to support the next generation to overcome whatever obstacles might be put in their way."

Jennifer Grigg, Solicitor

"Undoubtedly women in the legal profession have come a long way over the last 100 years. However, there is still much to be done and my hope for the future of women in the profession is for women to truly feel equal and be equal to their male counterparts"

Marlene Henderson, Partner

"I hope that we don't have to run initiatives like this in the future by virtue of equality in the legal world (and beyond) being a day-to-day given. Wishful thinking... but if we want to move forwards we need to respect and celebrate each other's differences, and that doesn't stop at gender!"

Ayesha Khalique, Solicitor

Contact



Mark Hickson
Head of Business Development

onlineteaminbox@brownejacobson.com

+44 (0)370 270 6000

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