

‘I began my career as a single mum’: female QCs changing the face of law

Diane Taylor Fri 19 Jan 2018 The Guardian

A barrister who forged a career in law while raising her son as a single mother has said she hopes her appointment as Queen’s Counsel will be “an encouraging message to non-traditional applicants” to the prestigious title. Amanda Weston is one of just 32 women to be appointed QC this year, out of 119 successful applicants. “I started my route to the bar with a baby and no income. My mother died when I was a child and I had no family support. But I had secure, subsidised housing, benefits, subsidised childcare and the kind of pastoral support that saw me as a student, not a customer. Teaching work and a cleaning job got me through bar school, and an Inner Temple financial award made all the difference. It’s great that someone like me can make an impact at the bar, but it is worrying that just at the point we are celebrating diversity, the practical obstacles to the bar for people from my background are getting worse.”

Women make up just 14.9% of practising QCs. Weston’s colleagues Sonali Naik, Brenda Campbell and Clare Wade, who work at Garden Court chambers in London, will also be formally appointed QCs in February. Together, their stories represent a diversity in life experience that is much needed at the upper tier of the law.

Wade, a criminal law specialist, has expertise in representing people with learning disabilities and conditions such as autism. When she had her two children, she found bringing them up was incompatible with working full-time at the bar in criminal practice. She left the bar for more than seven years, working at the Law Commission, before returning and advancing her career as a barrister.

Naik, who specialises in immigration and asylum law, was born in Birkenhead a few months after her Indian parents arrived in the UK. She recalls being asked if she would be returning to her “own country” when she was becoming a barrister. Naik spent five years working in law centres, where she says she learned the value of “properly representing people who had no one else to serve their interests”. Only 7.1% of currently practising QCs come from black and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds.

Gender and ethnic diversity among QCs is improving, but there is still a long way to go before genuine equality is achieved. Sir Alex Allan, chair of the selection panel, says: “We remain concerned that the number of female applicants remains comparatively low, but I am pleased that of those women who did apply, over 60% were successful. I was also pleased to note that 18 BAME applicants were appointed, a record number.”

Juggling children and family life with a demanding career means there’s little time left for networking, which can help barristers gain referees when applying to become QCs. “One of the things I found particularly tricky was establishing enough of a relationship with people who could be potential referees,” says Weston. “I didn’t have the time that some of my male colleagues had to schmooze.”

Sam Mercer, head of equality and diversity at the Bar Council, acknowledges there are problems with achieving equality and diversity at QC level. “We must find out why it is that ethnic minority barristers are less likely to succeed, and we need to work harder to get more women to apply,” she says. “The very best and the brightest in the profession must be recognised, whatever their background. If we exclude under-represented groups from the top ranks, it means we are failing to benefit from their excellence.”