

Meet the women fighting gender bias in law

Emma Sheppard January 2018 The Guardian

When Funke Abimbola graduated 20 years ago, it took 150 phone calls to secure her first job in law. “I thought that once I was in, it would be fine,” she says. Her career progressed well to begin with, until, aged 28, she had her first child. The response when she returned from maternity leave nearly made her abandon the profession. “It was one of the lowest periods of my life,” she says. “I was the first person in the firm’s history to ask to work flexibly and they weren’t set up for it. I felt helpless. .”

It’s a struggle many women in law face, which is reflected in the low number of female lawyers in leadership positions. Despite the fact that women account for 61% of law graduates, only 28% of private practice partners are female. The numbers are similarly troubling at judicial level. England and Wales have among the lowest proportion of female judges in Europe, and a Law Society review found that the lack of flexible work opportunities was a significant obstacle to women progressing up the career ladder. The gender pay gap in law is 30%, compared with a UK-wide average of 19%.

But there are signs of change. Magic Circle firm Linklaters recently launched a flexible working pilot scheme in Germany, and more than a third of UK legal firms and practices have signed up to the Law Society’s diversity and inclusion charter, which includes a commitment to flexible working. To improve diversity more broadly, a new Lawyer Portal aims to help students aged 14 and over find opportunities, regardless of their background.

Lady Justice Heather Hallett, the first female vice-president of the Queen’s Bench division and chair of the Judges’ Council diversity committee, says the law sector has “changed considerably for the better” for women. “I hope there is no glass ceiling,” she adds, “but I am not sure that all those involved in selection processes appreciate the difficulties that a woman may face.” She says greater recognition that sexism and discriminatory practices are unacceptable is needed across all organisations, as well as the “genuine commitment of those in senior positions to improve diversity and social inclusion. There are some men who, having seen dramatic changes since the 1970s, question whether there are still any problems today,” she says. “I can assure them there are.”

Some women are setting up their own law firms to drive a new way of working. Sarah Goulbourne co-founded [Gunnercooke](#) in 2010 and was inundated with applications from senior female lawyers, many of whom were considering a career change. The firm now has 200 lawyers across the country, 60% of whom are female. All are self-employed and work flexibly from home. “One of the things we’ve been told by our clients is how much happier our lawyers are,” Goulbourne says. “Those working in traditional models are under so much pressure and strain.”

Abimbola didn’t quit law when the going got tough and was awarded an MBE this year for her services to diversity in the legal profession. Her advice to female graduates entering law now is simple: “It’s about being brave enough to ask for what you need. But the legal profession also needs to evolve to appeal more to young people. The men coming through now are no longer prepared to do the long hours either.”