

Lessons learnt: You cannot aspire to be what you simply cannot see

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It is very important to me to share my story and speak to seeking a truly diverse profession and judiciary. I have written on this topic for many years and am grateful for the opportunity to go out to schools and universities to meet all those with aspirations of making a difference in the legal profession.

From the age of eight, I knew I would grow up to be a barrister – it is recorded on my school report. I went to a state school, got a bursary to study the Bar course and worked two jobs until my third year in practice as my pupillage was unfunded and the work given to me paid relatively nothing. However, I carried on.

Frequently the only Muslim woman in the room, I have always made a point of aiming to practise in areas where someone like me has never been seen. But I am just one small example, and it is of great importance that we encourage and include voices from all backgrounds to dispel the still held belief that joining the legal profession is the domain of the privileged and consists of predominantly White men.

We need to provide cases and opportunities for all to advance to silk and sit on the bench. The authorities are acutely aware of this and are working hard, though there is still a lot to do. We are making real strides in diversity at the Bar, seeing different classes, cultures and more women, but equal allocation of work still needs to be checked and the judiciary is a long way behind. The reality is that Black and Asian defendants in particular will not readily see anybody who looks like them in the judge's chair. When I joined the judiciary in 2012, I was among the very first Muslim women Crown Court judges to be appointed. My mantra that I repeat is that you cannot aspire to be what you simply cannot see.

To those who feel excluded, I understand it can be soul destroying. Hold your head high and persevere. My own journey has shaped me as a barrister and I have had to be resilient, knowing that I would face opposition in the areas of work I wish to do – homicide, terrorism, sexual offences and serious complex criminal and family work. I have heard it all. To a White male colleague who told me that I would become a judge because I 'ticked all the right boxes' I responded: 'I will become one because I possess the skill to be one.' Some years ago, when it was pointed out that I was the first ever Muslim woman to lead a murder prosecution at the Old Bailey and not a KC, my comment was: 'It's about time, then.' When I was very junior, I was told that I could not represent defendants at Snaresbrook Crown Court because they would not accept a Brown Muslim girl as their barrister. Sixteen years later I walked into that court as one of its judges, authorised to hear serious sexual offences and rape cases.

The qualities necessary to succeed as a barrister are determination, tenacity, authenticity and hard work. These are the building blocks to achieving your goal. It has not been easy for me, or many like me, but it is getting much better and there are a growing number of mentor networks and organisations to support and include. Having said that, there is still a very long way to go. [...]

I have always said that those who work within the criminal justice system do so as a vocation. Being a publicly funded criminal barrister, as we all know, is not well-paid and there are many who are not prepared to do this work. There is real concern about the backlog of trials and lack of advocates willing to undertake them [...]

Balancing the long hours and travel to cases away is never easy and requires personal sacrifices. I am a mother of two and worked until I was overdue (and almost due) – something I would not recommend. I am now a KC and I am very thankful for all those who have loved and supported me along the way. For me, it is now even more important that I never stop standing up, for my work, for my clients and my colleagues.

What is my ultimate lesson learnt? Aspire to be nothing but your best and then you will be seen.