

'What a Barrister Looks Like': A Young Black Woman Paves the Way

By *Megan Specia* Oct. 31, 2020 *The New York Times*

It was looking like a typical day at the office for Alexandra Wilson as she arrived at a London courthouse ready to defend someone accused of theft. She tied her hair into a neat knot, shrugged on her black robe and pulled on a white horsehair wig — the official garb of Britain's barristers, the lawyers who argue most cases in court.

But once she was in the courtroom, things went off script. In a patronizing exchange that was rude at best and hostile at worst, the prosecutor, an older white man, scoffed at Ms. Wilson, chided her for speaking with her client and tutted at her requests for details on court documents.

Unfortunately, it was an all too typical day for Ms. Wilson in a profession where, as a young Black woman, she often finds herself fighting for recognition and respect. "It certainly does happen to a lot of Black barristers," she said after the encounter. "My ability is underestimated, quite a lot." Last month, in an incident that made headlines in Britain — and spurred a public apology from the acting head of the country's court system — Ms. Wilson was shouted at for entering the court to defend her client, one of three times that day she was assumed to be a defendant

"For me, it was a real insight that Black people are being criminalized from when they are first laid eyes on," she said. "How can I reassure my clients that it's a fair system if people are already making their mind up from seeing a Black person that you are likely to be a criminal?" That is part of her drive to be here. "I thought the best way to make a difference was to be a part of the system that is so problematic and to make change from the inside," she said. "It's one thing calling out all of the problems, but we need to actually think, 'How are we going to solve this?'"

As the 25-year-old daughter of a Black Caribbean father and white British mother from working-class roots, she is still a rarity in the cavernous halls of England's courts.

The most recent statistics on diversity among Britain's barristers are grim. Nearly 100 years after the first women became barristers in 1922, women account for just 38 percent of the profession and 16 percent of the most senior barristers, known as Queen's Counsel. And Black barristers account for just 3.2 percent of all barristers and 1.1 percent of the most senior ones. A 2018 report from the Bar Standards Board noted that Black prospective barristers encounter significantly higher barriers to entering the profession than their white peers and are less likely to be taken on as trainees. Yet Black people are overrepresented in the prison population, data from the Justice Ministry shows, with Black people making up about 12 percent of the prison population but just 3 percent of the total population in England and Wales. The result, Ms. Wilson noted, is criminal courtrooms where those in positions of authority are overwhelmingly white and defendants are disproportionately Black. "If you've got an overrepresentation of Black people on the wrong side of the law, being pushed through the system," she said, "and they don't see any Black people representing them, how can they trust us?"

She thinks the time is right for Britain to address racial inequality after the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis set off protests and a global conversation about race, including in Britain. "I think we like to think of ourselves as this post-racial society where race doesn't exist and we all live in racial harmony, and frankly, it's not true," she said. "We can't just fool ourselves into thinking that everyone has the exact same life chances and everyone is on a level playing field, because they are not," she said.

Now, she wants to lift up other women of color who are making their way into the profession. This year, she founded Black Women in Law, a community for aspiring lawyers and women already in the field. The group has close to 600 members who connect for conversations, advice and mentoring and organizes online events for schools. "It's so important that kids see Black female lawyers," Ms. Wilson said. "I didn't, and I wanted to."