

Christina Blacklaws's Story

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In 2018, I became the 174th President of the Law Society of England and Wales; I was only the fifth woman to hold this office. It was a real privilege for me to be named to this role at a crucial time for the global legal community. Political change, regulatory reform, and security threats had brought significant challenges to the profession and the justice system, but there were also opportunities in equal measure.

My time in office was to be short, only a year, and I was determined to do all I could to make lives better and our profession stronger. I chose three international themes for my presidential year through which I felt I could make a difference: women in leadership, access to justice and innovation, and the future practice of law.

Campaigner, Lawyer, and Internationalist

I am an international lawyer by birth, background, and training. I am not English; I was born and spent my formative years in New Zealand until my family moved to England. Deep down I am an expat!

Fascinated by the English legal profession, I studied jurisprudence at the University of Oxford. As an Oxford graduate, I have been privileged to have opportunities and experiences that are not open to most. I was called to the bar and could have qualified as a barrister. However, I had had enough of ivory towers and decided to become a solicitor instead, dealing with real people and helping them with their everyday problems—being with them every step of the way.

After sitting my law exams, I qualified as a solicitor in 1991 and moved to an all-woman firm in Brixton (south London) working on social justice, mental health, and public law children's cases. In this role, I became a campaigner—a passionate advocate for children's rights, fair family law, and access to justice. This role taught me that helping people at crisis points was often too late. To make a real impact on people's lives, changes in policy and legislation are needed. A lot of work has to be done, often behind the scenes, working with decision makers and influencing to change the law for good.

As a result, campaigning became a central part of my career. As a children's lawyer, I campaigned for twenty years against cuts to legal aid and for proper reforms to family law. I took every opportunity that I had to speak in conferences and make representations. This included speaking at the international events at conferences on children's welfare and rights, some of which significantly strengthened safeguards on child protection across borders, and giving evidence to the European Parliament in its inquiries.

This work is invaluable and has continued up to this day. I sit on the Family Justice Council advising the UK government on law reform, and I lead a campaign at the Law Society to reinstate legal aid for early legal advice on housing and family law cases.

Business Management and Innovation

Business management, development of strategy, and innovation have also been some of my key areas of interest. I spearheaded the development of the Co-operative Legal Services, one of the first businesses

set up in England as an alternative business structure (ABS)—a model that allows nonlawyers to own and run law firms.

Once my work there had been done, I set up my own consultancy to support other businesses, charities, and not-for-profits to improve their strategic approach, better understand their position in the market, and assist their consumer offerings. I very much enjoyed this work, and it culminated with my most recent role at a top 100 law firm where I was chief operating officer and director of innovation.

These roles taught me three valuable lessons: the ability of women to exert influence in the workplace by being in positions of leadership; the need to scan the horizon to prepare for the future in order to stay ahead of the game; and the importance of challenging ourselves to do things differently in delivering modern legal services.

As lawyers, we must ensure that we can maintain our relevancy to our clients in a world where disruptive technology is taking hold. Therefore, I am leading a number of initiatives in this area. Notably, the Law Society has set up a public policy commission to investigate the use of algorithms in the justice system; the UK government has asked me to chair a LawTech Delivery Panel to establish the UK as a preeminent jurisdiction for technology; and we plan to launch a program of activities to empower all our lawyers, wherever they practice, to embrace and own the new technological solutions and provide helpful, relevant advice to their clients.

Program on Women in Leadership in Law

Diversity, gender equality, and inclusion have been central to my career as a campaigner and a business manager. Like the vast majority of women, I have been at the receiving end of unconscious and, at times very conscious, bias, and yet I have not experienced the double or even triple bind that women with protected characteristics face. Therefore, I decided to do something about it, and as president of the Law Society, I led a program of work on women in leadership in law.

It has been almost a century since the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act was passed in the United Kingdom, which allowed women to qualify as solicitors; in that time, women have taken the profession by storm. Since 1990, women have represented more than 60 percent of new entrants into the profession, and our Annual Statistics Report for 2017 revealed that more women than men now practice as solicitors.

Although these statistics and role models are encouraging, if we dig deeper we find that the numbers are less positive. Women are still not making it to partner status in equal numbers to men: our statistics show that of the approximately thirty thousand partners in private practice in England and Wales, 72 percent are men and only 28 percent are women. I believe that the time is ripe to make and embrace step changes in our profession at a global level. This isn't just in the interest of female lawyers: it's an issue for 100 percent of us, not just 50 percent.

This program of work aims to promote and support gender equality in the legal sector and to level the playing field for all women working in law irrespective of role, including business service professionals and the judiciary. To date, the project has produced the largest global survey ever undertaken on gender in the law—it had more than eight thousand respondents. The survey showed that unconscious bias is the largest barrier to gender equality.

The main objective of the program is to provide the research base and to empower women to be activists. Thus, in addition to the survey research, we are undertaking the following:

- A **global academic literature** analysis of the evidence available on gender inequality in the legal profession at an international level.
- A series of more than **one hundred focused roundtable discussions** to gather qualitative information on the key issues that will emerge from the survey. These events are being held nationally and internationally. The roundtables are underpinned by a **toolkit** covering unconscious bias, gender pay gap, male champions for change, and international sisterhood.

- A comprehensive **report**, which will be launched at an international symposium I will host in June 2019. We hope to pass the baton on to the international community and see the methodology adopted in other jurisdictions

I invite you to get involved in this important work.

Conclusion

My career has been varied and dynamic. It has taken me all over the world, from civil law to common law jurisdictions and often to places where lawyers are at serious risk just for doing their jobs. I have tried to play my part by trying to give those lawyers visibility by making representations to governments and parliamentarians and by building capacity with local law societies in these countries. This was also a key area of my work as president.

I believe all international lawyers, regardless of their pathway to the law or country of qualification, have a part to play in achieving equality of opportunity and reward for all and in improving the justice landscape for the most vulnerable.

This is the time to achieve real transformation, to make the global legal profession more inclusive, diverse, and truly representative. Certainly, we have some way to go before we reach a satisfactory level of impact, but my ultimate goal and dear wish is that the transformative impact and outcomes will be felt by the legal community, our clients, and other professions and that the next generation will continue and build on the progress we make in the immediate future.

I see no limit to the positive impact of this work, and I believe international lawyers are a central part of it.