

Women Lawyers: Time to Stride through the Door



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Only recently I was reading the in-house magazine of the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators UK called The Resolver and a particular title of an article caught my attention "why are women the first among equals in ADR?" In the said article according to the Law Society of England and Wales the number of women entering the legal profession has been steadily increasing. The same can also be said about the Nigerian Law School where a steady and significant increase in female students has been recorded to such an extent that they now outnumber the male students. It also went on to say however, that the Association of Women Solicitors in the UK has observed the dropout rate for women is twice that of men while the Bar Council says the dropout rate for women barristers after 10 to 12 years is "high". This is also an obvious phenomenon in Nigeria as the number of female private legal practitioners has been steadily declining over the years and continues to do so. The article further asks if we need more women in dispute resolution. The answer of course, was yes! Mainly because the author recognised that the lack of women was potentially damaging the future of the dispute resolution talent pipeline as a tremendous resource was clearly not being fully or properly tapped. Indeed research carried out by the Hansard Society found that women can and do bring issues to the table that may not otherwise be considered or which might wrongly be thought of as less significant. This statement is so true in many ways as cannot be imagined. This in turn led me to re-read Mrs Hainat Adeninsola Balogun's book "Women in the Law" published in 2009 and the first historical and statistical study of the lives of women lawyers in Nigeria. Mrs. Balogun investigated the role of gender differences in the legal profession at various colloquia in Abuja, Asaba, Benin, Calabar, Enugu, Ibadan, Katsina, Lagos, Sokoto, Zamfara and Zaria. I participated in the Lagos colloquium which had in attendance the most senior of lawyers such as Ambassador Aduke Akkija (1968), Mrs. Grace Ogburn (1968), Chief (Mrs) Leila Fowler (1962) Mrs. Layo Akintele (1960),

Mrs. Gloria Jackman, Mrs. Kafayat Bakare and a host of other female lawyers of repute and distinction.

The project "Women in the Law" was to examine the lives of female lawyers in Nigeria and its conclusion was that there are still barriers to career progression of women in law in the form of exclusionary practices and structures that impede work/life balance. There were indeed gender disparities among lawyers and the dual burden of work/life (i.e. professional demands and family life demands) is a significant factor that casts a shadow on the achievements of female lawyers. And of course the "old boys club" still exists within the profession and that made women feel excluded from the social networks that are highly influential in furthering a legal career.

The recommendations made in 2009 remain ever more so significant today in 2014. Professional bodies should take preventive action to remedy the culture of discrimination experienced by women lawyers. They should adopt policies on work/life balance and encourage employers to be more flexible in accommodating and facilitating home working, reduced hours and other flexible working arrangements. Networking should also be developed between generations of women lawyers to provide role models, mentoring and support to younger members of the profession and students embarking upon a legal career.

The legal community should ensure that maternity leave is paid for by firms and that employees do not suffer disadvantage to their careers in taking statutory maternity leave, other forms of leave or reduced hour arrangements. Spouses should be supportive to their professional wives in all aspects, so that they can remain focused.

The media and other watchdog agencies should give more room for publicity and proper documentation of profiles of pioneers who have made landmarks in the legal career for easy referencing and monitoring gender policies in the public and private sectors.

In the book "Women in Law" Honourable Justice Aloma Mariam Mukhtar was congratulated as the first female Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Nigeria as at 2009 for keeping the faith, staying the course and making judicial history. Today in 2014 she is the Chief Justice of Nigeria. A real first among equals. She has truly broken

down all barriers, shattered the glass ceiling and swept opened the door for other females to stride right through. Today we also have more female Justices of the Supreme Court.

This year also marked the appointment of the first female Appeal Court President Hon. Zainab Bulkachuwa. The Court of Appeal it must be said has a good number of female Justices including Hon Justice Annina Augie who is the presiding Justice, Lagos Division, of the Court of Appeal. There are furthermore now 6 female Chief Judges in the country namely; Lagos State, Justice Ayotunde Phillips, Osun Justice Oyebola Adepele Ojo, Niger has Justice Rati Abubakar, Akwa Ibom Justice Idongesit Isua, Oyo Justice Bolajoko Olateju Aderiji and Abia Justice Nnenna Chionna Otti.

In the Lagos State judiciary the female judges now actually outnumber their male counterparts. Without any doubt the judiciary ranks very high where the issue of gender diversity is concerned and this is indeed commendable. However, that success is not reflected in private legal practice. Although, our law school is graduating a good number of women, something unusual happens to them after they begin practice of law; they suddenly disappear! No doubt some women leave firms to become involved with child rearing whilst others feel pressurised into making that choice whilst they would prefer to maintain both their careers and a family; if a structure existed that allowed them to do so. I know a corporate law firm here in Lagos that has provided a crèche for its lawyers as it employs a good number of young hard working mothers and it makes very good business sense to keep them. Other women have moved into other careers, corporate institutions or otherwise followed their true dreams and passion. That notwithstanding it cannot be gainsayed that there is a significant decline in women in practice. There are certain legal bodies who have championed the cause of women lawyers in Nigeria such as the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) which has made great strides in highlighting the causes of women and children in society by providing legal aid as well as legal literacy and education programmes. The time has indeed come for the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) to rise to the challenge regarding women in the law as it prepares for its next general elections.

The top echelons of the private practice bar are still male dominated and is about time we stemmed the decline in female private legal practitioners practicing in the courts. In 2006 the Nigerian Bar Association inaugurated the Women's Forum to provide equal opportunity for the advancement of women in the legal field with particular focus on the advancement of women in their respective practices. Gender diversity is an area of great interest and must be highlighted by creating ways for women to remain in practice and advance through the ranks. Mentoring programmes should be the norm for female lawyers. The Women's Forum should be made to play a major role in the Association going forward and their impact should be felt right across the board, addressing issues of work/life balance by organising career planning programmes and dedicated mentoring.

There can also be outreach programmes organised for law school female students including occasional but regular lectures by female Judges / senior lawyers in active legal service, all in aid of inspiring the next generation of female lawyers who themselves must be up and ready for the challenge. As the American author Edith Wharton reminds us, there are two ways of spreading the light: either be the candle, or be the mirror that reflects it.

