



Western Circuit Women's Forum's Conference 'Women in Law: Support, Retention, Progression' 8th March 2019

In celebration of International Women's Day 2019, 8th March 2019 saw over 200 delegates come together for Western Circuit Women's Forum's first conference: 'Women in Law: Support, Retention, Progression.'

Barristers, solicitors, judges and students from across the South-West and beyond gathered at Armada House in Bristol, and listened to a range of inspirational speakers sharing their experiences and insights on how women in law can be supported in their careers.



Kate Brunner QC opening the conference

Kate Brunner QC introduced the speakers and spoke of the need for both men and women to fight together for equality and diversity at the Bar. She recognised the contribution many men make to promote women in law. She addressed the conference about the importance of women encouraging each other to progress in their careers.

Thangam Debbonaire, Labour MP for Bristol West shared her experience in politics over the years, and spoke of how there is still a long way to go: women are still hugely under-represented in Parliament. She spoke of how diversity is not a box-ticking exercise, but is key to bringing in talent. She told us that true progression comes from listening to those you might not agree with.

The Hon. Mrs Justice May DBE

inspired delegates with the story of her journey through a remarkable career. She spoke of the project firsthundredyears.org.uk which charts the journey of women in law since the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919. Urging mutual support between women, she spoke of the value of sharing encouragement and praise. She urged women not to be hesitant in promoting themselves: 'people will take you at your own estimation of yourself'. To counteract the common reluctance of women to promote their talents, the key message was 'help women big themselves up'. She spoke of the importance of women returning from parental leave being offered serious and interesting work. Mrs Justice May ended on a note of optimism, sharing a photograph of Charley Pattison, a barrister at Queen Square Chambers in Bristol who took breaks during a trial to breastfeed her 11 week old daughter.



The Hon. Mrs Justice May OBE

Alison Hawes, Burges Salmon spoke with humour and humility about the unconventional path she took towards a career as a successful family law solicitor. She shared experiences of when, like many women, she had been reticent to put herself forward and take due credit, sharing her own ideas with men who took the praise for themselves. She spoke of the need for those who succeed to then pull others up: 'when you've climbed the ladder, send it back down.'



Charley Pattison from Queen Square Chambers

Maggie Semple OBE FCGI spoke of her fascinating and varied career. She encouraged delegates through practical advice: buy your own domain name; do not undersell yourself - use 'I' rather than 'we' when talking about achievements in job applications; and think about how the language often used to describe women's skills - 'soft-skills' – needs to change. She shared valuable lessons on how to navigate a professional world which is often geared towards the selection of men, especially in socially-gendered roles.



Kate Brunner QC with the winners of the essay competition

WCWF Steering Group Members Carol Mashembo and Emma Cross presented prizes to our essay competition winners. Nicole Hilton, a Law student at the University of Bristol, won first prize for her fantastic essay on '100 years on from the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919: What is the point of diversity within the legal profession?'

Sarah Langford, criminal and family law barrister turned best-selling author, spoke about how

inflexible practices and a lack of funding in the system hinder those with caring responsibilities in continuing a career at the Bar. Addressing these systemic issues, and promoting a change in attitudes are essential to ensure the attraction and retention of talented women in law. She endorsed mentoring schemes, support structures and sharing experiences, and spoke of how the accounts she read in WCWF's survey, *Back to the Bar* struck a chord with her own experience. Sarah read a moving extract from her best-selling book *'In Your Defence: Stories of Life and Law'*, about her experience of making the difficult decision to pause her career as a barrister in order to care for her children. *WCWF's survey Back to the Bar: a survey of obstacles, aids and recommendations for parents returning to the Bar, is published here: <https://westerncircuit.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/WCWF-Back-to-the-Bar-Final-version.pdf>*

Mary Jackson, LawCare spoke of the vital service LawCare provides to the legal community through its helpline. She spoke of the importance of prioritising wellbeing and the value of talking to someone when feeling under pressure. She described how she kept a photo of her 3 year old self on her desk, to remind her to engage with a more compassionate inner voice when being self-critical. She emphasised the importance of reaching out for help in an environment where so many are prone to professional burnout. For more information visit www.lawcare.org.uk

HHJ Wildblood QC ended the conference with a simple but strong message: happiness and perseverance are key.



Delegates and speakers from the South West and beyond together after the conference

Reflections on Women in Law: Support, Retention, Progression' 2019, from Caighli Taylor, barrister specialising in crime at Guildhall Chambers, Bristol, and member of WCWF steering committee:

'It is inspiring to be able to listen to so many talented and ambitious women share their personal and professional experiences – but today's conference went beyond that. I came away feeling more than ever that so many women who have succeeded in law are also passionate about, and committed

to, helping other women succeed. It was heartening to see men join us too, and today was a reminder of how unified we can really be. Today's message for me was: aspire, celebrate your hard work, and support one another – but above all, of optimism: that as I progress my career, many are cheering me on.'

WCWF would like to thank the speakers, everyone who attended, and our sponsors who helped make this event possible:



Written by Caighli Taylor

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