

# Cheering women on to silk

New Western Circuit Women's Forum mentoring programme aims to help women barristers who are going through difficult life events to aim for silk and judicial appointment, says **Charlotte Davies**



The burdens that female practitioners face have not gone unnoticed by the WCWF. In fact, it is its *raison d'être*.

**'S**how me a successful individual and I'll show you someone who had real positive influences in his or her life. I don't care what you do for a living – if you do it well, I'm sure there was someone cheering you on or showing the way: a mentor.'

At no truer a time should the wise words of actor Denzel Washington resonate, than when we consider those among us who have been confronted with challenges.

Challenges can be those which one has taken on voluntarily, for example applying for silk or for judicial appointment; or those which have been thrown at us unexpectedly, such as divorce, or caring for a child with additional needs. That is when having someone 'cheering you on' really does prove invaluable.

The Western Circuit Women's Forum's (WCWF's) mentoring programme has been a big success over the years, with junior members under 10 years' call being allocated a more senior member to act as a long-term mentor, as soon as they join Circuit. Many lasting and mutually beneficial friendships have been created as a result. Mentoring often works both ways.

However, the WCWF steering committee has long been listening to the particular difficulties women at the Bar face throughout their practices. Our view is that there is something so distinct about a career as a barrister that makes even the

expected harsh realities of life harder to navigate, let alone the unexpected ones. The unpredictability in both hours and income; the expectations from clients, clerks and courts; and the ever-stubborn primary shouldering of the household burdens that female practitioners face has not gone unnoticed by the WCWF. In fact, it is its *raison d'être*.

As a result, the WCWF is about to launch a new type of mentoring programme: a 'needs-based' system whereby members of any seniority can reach out and be allocated a mentor who has experience in dealing with the particular scenario, goal or life-event in question. The mentoring can be in-person, over the telephone, or even by email. It might only last a few weeks, depending on need. A wide and diverse pool of would-be mentors have signed up to help and, by the time this goes to print, we will have opened up applications for mentoring spaces.

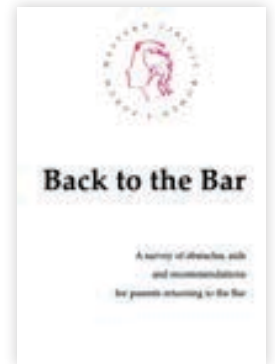
The aim is not only to keep women in the profession, but to guide them all the way through to taking silk, and/or part- or full-time judicial appointment, while simultaneously navigating maternity leave, child-loss, caring responsibilities, family breakdowns, moving chambers, to name but a few examples.

According to the Bar Council, women are still leaving practice prematurely in greater numbers than

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men, with 27% of women who commenced practice between 2002 and 2007 having left the profession (see [bit.ly/49hMoXR](https://bit.ly/49hMoXR)). A 2015 Bar Council report on the experiences of self-employed women at the Bar suggested that many women leave practice after becoming parents, and never return. The WCWF is commissioning new *Back to the Bar* research to try and delve deeper into why this problem appears to be continuing. Watch this space. \*

In the 2023 silk competition 30 of the 95 successful applicants were women. Things are certainly moving in the right direction, and it is interesting that 38% of female applicants were successful as compared to 32% of men. What might this tell us? Perhaps women are more likely to wait until all the above is 'out of the way' (perhaps, for some, it never is) when professionally they are in fact more than ready. And, perhaps, what they needed was someone 'cheering them on'. ●



\* Read the WCWF's *Back to the Bar* research at [westerncircuit.co.uk/womens-forum](https://westerncircuit.co.uk/womens-forum). See also *Snapshot: The experience of self-employed women at the Bar*, Bar Council, 2015: [bit.ly/3UpmCgq](https://bit.ly/3UpmCgq)



**About the author**  
Charlotte Davies is co-leading the WCWF mentoring programme. She is a civil barrister at KBG Chambers in Devon and Cornwall, and sits as a Deputy District Judge and First-Tier Tribunal Judge.

