

UNVEILING SUBALTERNITY?

WOMEN AND THE LEGAL PROFESSIONS ACROSS AFRICA



A report from the Institute for African Women In
Law (IAWL)

PREPARED BY MICHELE LYNDAL MUGENYI

Executive Summary



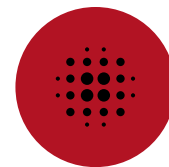
J. Jarpa Dawuni, Ph.D.
Founder and Executive Director

Across the continent of Africa, we have witnessed a steady feminization of the legal professions. Women have not only entered the legal professions, but have ascended to important legal positions within some jurisdictions, at the bar, the bench, academia and public service. The first collection of academic papers to document these changes across the continent are *Gender and the Judiciary in Africa: From Obscurity to Parity?* (Routledge, 2016), co-edited by Dawuni, J. Jarpa and Bauer, Gretchen. The second book on the subject of judiciaries is *International Courts and the African Woman Judge: Unveiled Narratives* (Routledge, 2018), edited by Dawuni, J. Jarpa and Kuenyehia, Akua.

Despite the growing body of knowledge on women judges, more work is needed to understand the positionality of women as lawyers. The findings in this report show that despite the increase in the number of women in law firms, and the legal profession as a whole, women continue to encounter different and intersecting forms of gender-based challenges and discriminatory practices.

The three-day webinar series provided a platform to engage in exploratory discussions which will form the core of future research to be undertaken by the Institute for African Women in Law. We hope you will enjoy these preliminary findings, and we look forward to future engagement with all interested stakeholders.

3-DAY WEBINAR SERIES



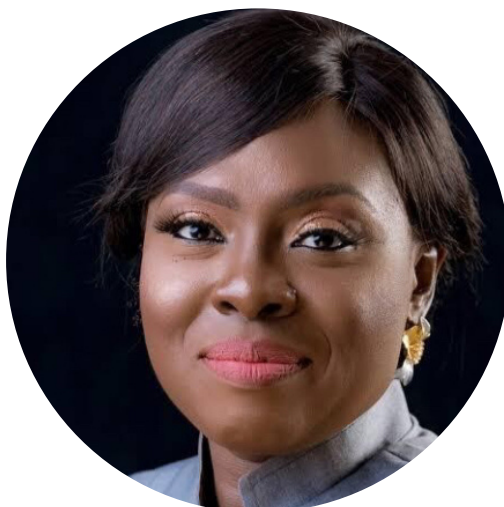
DAY 1

Wednesday July 29th, 2020



BUSISIWE DEYI

Lecturer in the Faculty of Law at the University of Pretoria.



OSAI OJIGHO

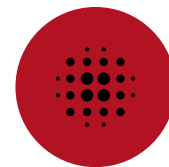
Country Director of Amnesty International, Nigeria and Human Rights Lawyer.



SWITHIN MUNYANTWALI

Vice-Chairman & Co-Founder of the International Law Institute African Center of Excellence.

3-DAY WEBINAR SERIES



DAY 2

Thursday July 30th, 2020



ROSE MBANYA

R.W. Mbanya & Co. Advocates, Kenya.



ACE ANKOMAH

Managing Partner at Bentsi-Enchill, Letsa & Ankomah Advocates, Ghana.



ISABEL BOATEN

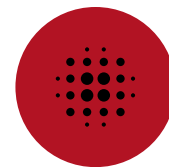
Managing Partner at AB & David Law, Ghana.



DAN AGBOR

Senior Partner of Udo Udoma and Belo-Osagie, Nigeria

3-DAY WEBINAR SERIES



DAY 3

Friday July 31st, 2020



HON. LADY JUSTICE MONICA MUGENYI

Former Principal Judge of the East African Court of Justice (EACJ).



CHRISTIANA TAH

Lawyer, professor of criminal justice in the United States. Bestselling author of the memoir, *Listen to the Songs the Children Sing*. Former Attorney General of Liberia.



DR. MYMA BELO-OSAGIE

Former Senior Partner and current Of Counsel of the law firm Udo Udoma & Belo-Osagie, Nigeria.

Introduction

From July 29th-31st, 2020, the Institute for African Women in Law (IAWL), in partnership with the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, held a 3-day conference under the theme, 'Unveiling Subalternity: Women and the Legal Professions Across Africa'. Discussions at the event were led by twelve legal professionals and the event was attended by over 300 guests.

The idea of subalternity is rooted in [postcolonial studies](#) which seek to understand and critically challenge the existence of covert, and sometimes overt, forms of discriminatory practices and the “othering” of some groups of people. Such discriminatory practices can lead to the subordination of the “other”, where the “other” could be based on intersecting identities such as gender, class, religion and other status. The goal of this conference was to examine and “unveil” the ways in which the practices within the legal professions rendered women visible, as evidenced by the [women in leadership positions](#), while simultaneously rendering them invisible through discriminatory practices endemic in the inherited legal profession.

The purpose of the webinar series was to discuss subalternity in the legal profession, and ways in which change can be made to support female legal professionals. The webinar was created as a forum in which women could hear the experiences of various legal professionals in different leadership positions, and discuss the accomplishments, challenges and strategies needed in order to become a successful woman in the legal occupation. Additionally, the responses from a survey conducted during the webinar helped demonstrate a number of the key issues surrounding women in the legal profession.

Introduction

The series centered on the following three topics:

- Conditioned to Silence? Gender-based Discrimination in the Legal Profession
- Shifting the Burden of Care: The Role of Law Firms
- Women in Law and Leadership

This report provides highlights from the discussions held at the event, as well as empirical data from the survey that allows for a better understanding of the experiences of women legal professionals.



PROMOTION OF THE
RULE OF LAW & JUDICIARY
IN AFRICA presents:

**Unveiling Subalternity:
Women and the Legal
Professions across Africa**

Topic:
Conditioned to Silence? Gender-Based
Discrimination in the Legal Profession

Moderator:
Prof. J. Jarpa Dawuni

Speakers:



Osai Ojigbo Swethin Muryantwalli Busiwe Deyi Sarah Adetola

Wednesday 29th July 2020

9am US
1pm GMT/Gh
3pm GMT+1/Lagos
3pm SAT/Johannesburg
4pm EAT/Nairobi

Microsoft Teams

For registration details, please email: doreen.anyornitise@giz.de or info@africanwomeninlaw.com

Follow Link to join in: https://teams.microsoft.com/join/79%3ameeting_Mjdt4-jkKdGNDASMS000QSLWtOGUlnFZWNBkryYmNh%40thread.v%3D?context=79%3D221d%22%3a%22e698a77-4ee4-4645-9b07-ed3060583c76%22%3F

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PROMOTION OF THE
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Esine Okudzeto Rose Mbanya Isabel Boateng Ace Ankomah Dan Agbor

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Methodology

During the event, we conducted a survey that gathered information about gender-based discrimination in the legal profession. We received 78 responses from men and women from over 15 countries inside and outside of Africa with various jobs within the profession. 67 out of 78 of the respondents were women, which translated to 85.9% of all respondents. The number of years that these individuals spent working at the bar varied from 0-15+ years.

Figure. 1. Percentage of male and female respondents

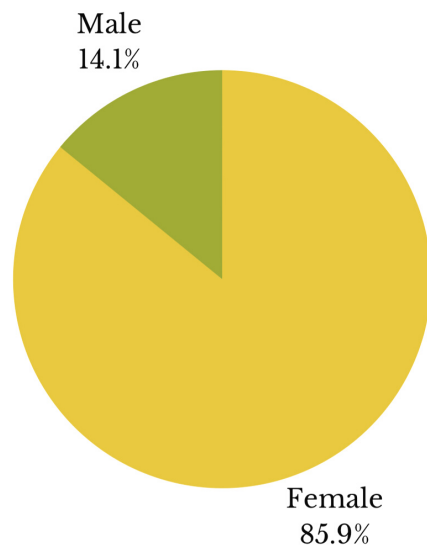
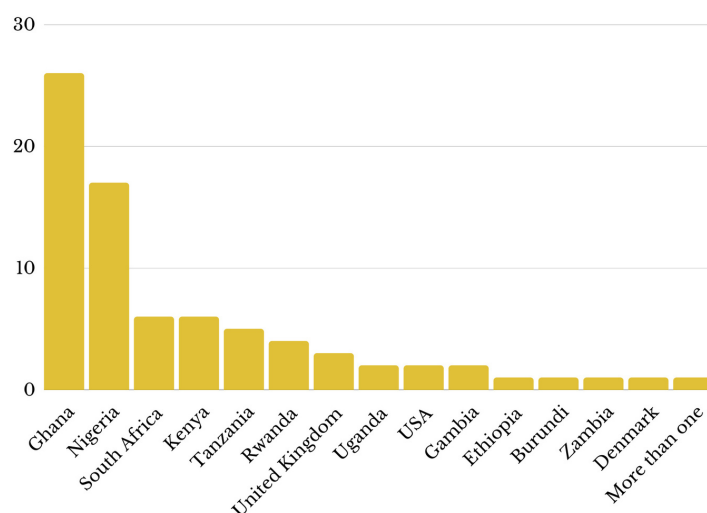


Figure. 2. Respondents' countries of residence



DAY ONE

GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION IN THE LEGAL PROFESSION

Background:

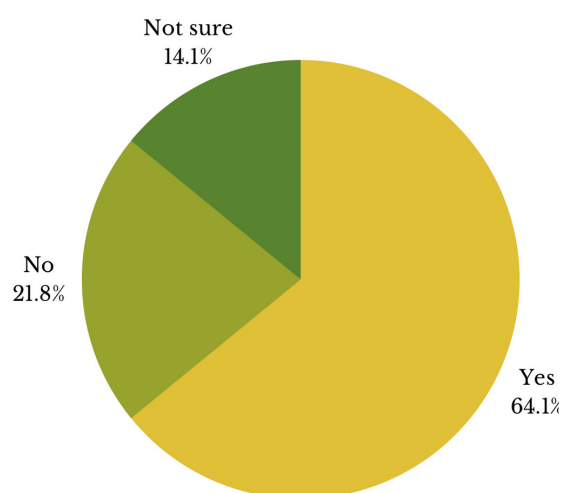
The findings from the International Bar Association (IBA) study [*Us Too? Bullying and Sexual Harassment in the Legal Profession*](#) (May 2019) indicate that many lawyers are victims of bullying and harassment. Other studies conducted by the American Bar Association confirmed high levels of reported cases of discrimination and harassment on the basis of [*gender, race, sexual identity and other factors*](#). In *You Don't Look Like a Lawyer: Black Women and Systemic Gendered Racism*, [*Tsedale Melaku \(2019\)*](#) documents the challenges and discrimination faced by Black women in elite law firms in the United States. Across Africa, despite the dearth of research and systematic study of women in the legal professions, only a few studies have examined the unique gender-related challenges women face as lawyers and judges.

This panel set out to explore questions such as, do women lawyers across Africa face gender-based discrimination? To what extent are these challenges a manifestation of social, professional, historical and contemporary forms of discrimination based on our understanding of gender norms and social conditioning? How do these discriminatory practices manifest? What are some effective strategies to combat these practices?

The Issues

Our survey found that 64.1% of respondents had experienced harassment in the workplace, whilst 21.8% said that they had not, and 14.1% said that they were not sure. Most of the forms of discrimination they had faced included “inappropriate touch”, “sexist language”, “not being recognized to speak”, and being shown “no confidence in their work”. These findings support the plethora of research that states that sexual harassment and discrimination still exist in the workplace.

Figure. 3. Percentage of respondents who experienced workplace harassment



One of our respondents from Copenhagen said that she witnessed “inappropriate comments of sexual connotation [being made] by male lawyers in court”. Another respondent from Nigeria said “not being given equal opportunities” was a form of gender-based discrimination that she had faced, whilst another from Ghana struggled with having her “opinions not taken into account”, despite being a partner at her firm.

Other forms of gender-based discrimination that respondents have faced include “salary disparity”, “excessive workloads”, and working in an environment that has “patriarchal work practices (e.g. late night meetings outside the workplace)”. One respondent was even plainly told “litigation is not for ladies.”

Speaker Observations:

There are a number of reasons why gender-based discrimination still takes place in the workplace. **Busisiwe Deyi**, a lecturer in the Faculty of Law at the University of Pretoria, was one of four speakers who started the webinar series and addressed this issue. Deyi described gender-based discrimination as an institutionalized system. Gender-based discrimination is “not an individualized act or conduct, but rather a structure that re/produces relations of power along lines of gender. And in a way, we see gender roles play out on multiple levels within the legal profession, such as in the university setting. We must be critical of how certain modules are inhabited by black people (e.g. criminal law), and family law and succession are inhabited by women. This translates into the professional space- we find that women are thought to be better suited to certain areas of practice like family law. The pedagogical practice within law school lays the foundations that enable gender discriminatory practices to persist within the profession itself.”

In a way, these practices also persist in the workplace because of perceptions of law as a masculine occupation. **Osai Ojigho**, Country Director of Amnesty International, Nigeria and a human rights attorney, said that in the legal occupation women are commonly referred to as ‘brothers’, ‘gentlemen in skirts’ and other masculine terms that tend to insinuate that law is still a male profession.

“There are cases when women judges themselves resist the option of being addressed as ‘Lady Justice’. The profession needs to embrace the fact that women are also members of the legal profession and should not have to give up their femininity in order to be recognized as law officers. As for sexual harassment in the workplace, it is a moral question. A profession that holds rule of law and accountability as hallmarks for justice should have no place for gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment.”

Swithin Munyantwali, Vice-Chairman & Co-Founder of the International Law Institute African Center of Excellence, was also a speaker at the event, and he highlighted the extent to which present-day discriminatory practices in the legal profession are manifestations of gendered perspectives on the legal occupation, as well as long-standing social, professional, historical and contemporary forms of gender-based discrimination.

“Professionally speaking, legal practice has always been considered masculine and was established to suit a traditionally male approach- that is, an adversarial profession in which the goal is to win over another lawyer or case. For this reason, it is easier for men to be rewarded in the profession because being loud, brash and argumentative to some degree are acceptable traits in men, but are undesirable in women. The legal profession is steeped in a tradition that it has consciously or unconsciously perpetuated- one that was established when there was barely any equal representation of the genders to begin with. This is part of the reason why gender-based discrimination cannot be eradicated, even in the wake of social movements like the #MeToo movement.”

Calls for Action- Recommendations

The conversation around gender inequality in the legal profession is certainly not a new one, but it is a controversial one. As Ms Ojigho said, a profession responsible for upholding the rule of law and justice in our society should not have its own share of unresolved inequality within its system. As the conversation around gender inequality continues, a number of scholars have weighed in on recommendations for the issue.

In her article, *Expanding the Pathways to Gender Equality in the Legal Profession*, [Hannah Brenner's](#) (2014; p274) thoughts on gender-based discrimination mirrored those of Mx Deyi in claiming that “many of the gendered dynamics that plague law firms and corporations are also prevalent in legal education”. For example, Brenner stated that in the United

States women were underrepresented amongst senior educational staff, making up roughly 20 percent of law school deans and only 28 percent of tenured law school professors. This demonstrated how, though more women were entering legal education, individuals taking up the highest positions were predominantly male. Brenner argued that law schools, and the legal profession as a whole, have a responsibility to ensure that the genders are accurately represented amongst their staff. If we want to tackle gender-based discrimination in the legal profession, we need to consider ways in which it manifests as early as in the legal education system.

She argued that law schools need to create modules that educate students on the inequality within the profession and equip them with the skills needed to succeed. A number of institutions have created programmes such as ‘Women and the Law’ or ‘Women, Law and Equality’, but more needs to be done. Aspiring legal professionals should also be shown examples of female pioneers who have succeeded at leading fulfilling personal lives whilst making significant accomplishments in their professional lives. Showing young women these positive role models encourages them by reminding them that there are women who have accomplished a lot in their personal and professional lives. Overall, the more women we have in positions of authority within the profession, the better our chances are of eradicating the pervasive gender inequality that exists within it.

According to Harvard Law School’s [*The Practice*](#), opinions are split between using quotas to increase female representation within the profession and using voluntary efforts like Helena Morrissey’s 30 Percent Club. Though some consider quotas “[patronizing and anti-meritocratic](#)”, others consider them an efficient way of making rapid change to women’s representation, a process that some believe is a lot slower when left to voluntary efforts.

In her 1992 paper on the same topic, [Susannah Bex Wilson](#) noted that change within the legal profession also starts within the mind. Institutions should consider ways in which gendered stereotypes and biases affect work

environments and the ability of employees to advance in the workplace. An article from the [Harvard Law Review](#) pointed out that people can be implicitly biased against certain groups of people without knowing it, all while arguing that they do not have any prejudiced beliefs. This paves the way for structural discrimination to exist in the workplace because evaluations may be made by seniors who hold implicit biases against female and minority workers. It is important that workplaces consider the effects of implicit bias in decision-making processes as these biases may act as obstacles for women seeking promotions.

Wilson also suggested that workplaces consider the responsibilities that employees have outside of the workplace, in order to create a work environment that is conscious of the dual burden of duty that a number of women and men have. This ties into the next topic on the burden of care.



DAY TWO

SHIFTING THE BURDEN OF CARE: THE ROLE OF LAW FIRMS

Background:

Available data from law societies and bar associations across Africa show a steady growth in the number of women joining the bar. Further data indicates that, among some of the top law firms across Africa, women lawyers are advancing as partners, and working in higher numbers in other corporate legal positions and government agencies. However, while women are making valuable contributions to law firms, the existing professional and societal expectations and gender norms have varying impacts on women lawyers—reproducing intersectional challenges for women. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is [documented evidence](#) of an increase in family obligations and the burden of care for women, and women lawyers are no exception to these obligations. In this panel, we examined the structures of law firms across Africa and what these structures mean for women lawyers. Panelists explored the challenges women face as working caregivers and the role of law firms in addressing the burden of care for women lawyers. Speakers explored the traditional notions of client networking, handling briefs and legal practices, and how these traditional practices remain gender-blind, despite the increasing numbers of women lawyers.

The Issues

One of the survey respondents stated that the burden on women had increased in the midst of this pandemic because of the increased need to take care of the family, especially children. According to a [policy brief](#) released in April of this year, 1.52 billion students and over 60 million teachers were sent home in the midst of school closures. The sudden decline in formal and informal childcare services available has meant that working mothers have had to increase the amount of childcare that they do, whilst

balancing it with their work. The Next 100 Years project conducted [two surveys](#) on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the lives of women in the legal profession. Out of the 350 women that responded to the May 2020 survey, 91% reported taking on extra childcare responsibilities since the start of the pandemic, and 49% said that they were taking on more of these responsibilities than their partner. The increased amount of childcare responsibility has had adverse effects on women's work-life balances. 73% of the May 2020 survey respondents said that they were finding the situation difficult to juggle. In addition, out of the 400+ women that responded to the October 2020 survey, 63% stated that the pandemic has had damaging effects on their mental health.



Said the pandemic has had damaging
effects on their mental health

However, few respondents work in workplaces that have recognized these increased familial obligations, or taken them into account when giving employees work. Only 6% of employers reduced the formal work hours of the May 2020 respondents, and 45% of October 2020 respondents worried that employers would become less understanding about childcare responsibilities as the pandemic went on.

Speaker observations:

Rose Mbanya of R.W. Mbanya & Co. Advocates spoke to guests of the webinar series about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on legal practice, and lessons law firms could learn in making new working arrangements that are inclusive and supportive to women. “COVID-19 will go down in the history of our generation as being one of the greatest disruptors of all time. It is clear, at least in the African context, that the effects of the pandemic are

not gender neutral. With that being the case, law firms should at least be aware of this reality for women, and should take it into account when trying to operate normally”.

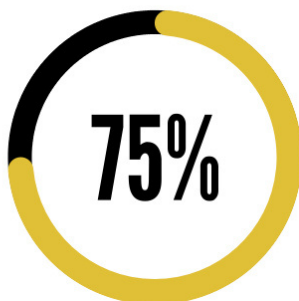
Responses:



Started taking on more childcare responsibility when the pandemic started



Said they were taking on more of these responsibilities than their partner



Said they were finding the situation difficult to deal with

Ms. Mbanya stated that juggling work with care in the midst of this pandemic requires great time management, and this is something that firms should consider. Respect for working hours and personal time should be maintained, as should the option of flexible work hours. The increased necessity of technology means that firm technologies should be upscaled and staff up-skilled. Lastly, female employees must recognize the opportunities this ‘new normal’ brings to legal practice, such as fewer travel expenses for conferences, the ability to work from home and keep an eye on domestic life. Given that we are all experiencing this pandemic together, one can hope that the requirement of female-associated accommodations (e.g. flexible work arrangements and remote working) will no longer be considered gendered or a nuisance. One can also hope that these accommodations will no longer impede the advancement of women’s careers, as it did in the past.

Ace Anan Ankomah, Managing Partner at Bentsi-Enchill, Letsa & Ankomah Advocates, noted “based on my own experience working with women lawyers, I can say that generally, women lawyers remain largely loyal—they stay with the law firm, and work their way up in the firm, while male associates tend to be footloose. In my firm now, 70% of the partnership is female and each of them joined the firm straight from school and worked her way up to partnership. Women lawyers learn quickly how to treat the boss/partner as a client and make their lives easier. They do not lose focus on the law, and often there are little to no questions on their integrity and work ethics. Women lawyers produce high quality work because they pay attention to detail, they deliver relevant, user-friendly and timely work and drive assignments forward.”

He further noted that “personally, the women in my Disputes Department do a lot of the heavy lifting that makes my work super easy. My high school anthem has a line, “we feebly struggle, they in glory shine.” I think all my ‘shine’ is based on the hard work (not feeble work) of my associates, especially the female associates”.

In making recommendations on what law firms can do to shift the burden of care, he argued that “law firms are traditionally structured to be biased in favour of men, and firms have to make an extra effort to accommodate and promote women. Law firms must consider deliberate steps to address issues women face, such as remote working and flexitime. They must create opportunities for a balance between firm life, social life and family life so that no one suffers.”

Isabel Boaten, Managing Partner at AB & David Law in Ghana, argued that one of the benefits of gender inclusivity is that the retention and advancement of women leadership is a sound business strategy. Creating a gender-inclusive environment for female workers can benefit the business as well as the employees.

“Clients pursuing gender inclusivity want to work with lawyers that mirror their aspirations. In addition, women are more emotionally intelligent and, therefore, better able to build consensus in decision making. They know how to interact with others and can be trusted to lead teams successfully.”

Furthermore, men and women are competing neck to neck in terms of representation in law schools. Increasing gender inclusivity would mean welcoming more talent from the large pool of talented students available, rather than favoring one gender exclusively. Finally, increased gender diversity means increased innovation and growth from a fresh influx of ideas. All in all, law firms greatly benefit from being gender-inclusive.

Dan Agbor, Senior Partner of Udo Udoma and Belo-Osagie law, supported Ms Boaten’s argument by stating the benefits of having an equal representation of women in a law firm.

“At UUBO our experience over time has confirmed that talent, at least in the area of commercial law where we practice, is not allocated by gender. Consequently we have an uncompromising and unequivocal focus on merit

and talent, regardless of gender or any other metric. Having good female role models is important for women in the workplace and UUBO had a head start here because, very early on, the firm became a partnership comprising initially of one male and one female partner. The female partner had to deal with the myriad of life-related issues that working wives and mothers are confronted with - and, by her example, showed other women that it could be done.”

Calls for Action-Recommendations

Some of the speakers already mentioned a number of recommendations for the issue. However, a few scholars had a few more points that could be added. In her 1992 paper, Wilson argued that workplaces should offer paid parental leave to all employees, not just women. By offering the leave to just women, it makes it look like a feminine issue and adds to the assumption that all women either have to choose between work and family, when in reality, more men are choosing to be more involved in their family life as well. Women are not the only employees with multiple responsibilities, and employers should normalize employees having responsibilities outside the workplace.

For this reason, Wilson also argued that workplaces should incorporate flexible work schedules for all employees, not just for parents, and that flexible work arrangements should also be considered. Just as businesses have gone out of their way to accommodate their employees in the midst of the current pandemic, workplaces should regularly take into account the needs of employees who may need to or prefer to work from home. The necessary materials, such as modems or fax machines, should be provided.

Wilson argued that parental leave should not be used to “track” employees and reduce the likelihood of them advancing as partners, as has been done in the past. Finally, workplaces should offer different childcare options for employees, including emergency childcare. Wilson argued that offering or

subsidizing childcare at the workplace is worth the benefits of reducing unexpected absences in the event of an emergency or the last minute loss of a babysitter. Since a lack of adequate childcare makes it difficult for employees to be fully immersed in their work, providing childcare would increase employee productivity.



DAY THREE

WOMEN IN LAW AND LEADERSHIP

Background:

Across Africa, women have made remarkable gains as founding partners of law firms, chief justices, presidents of courts, deans of law schools, general counsel and government ministerial appointees. In this series, some of the questions explored included: what does it take to be a woman in a leadership position in law? What are the qualities of a successful woman in legal leadership? What are some of the strategies for achieving success? What does it take to be successful in law, whilst staying true to one's self, community and humanity? In this series, three women lawyers who have occupied important leadership positions shared their professional trajectory, experience, and strategies for success.

The Issues

Women have been steadily flowing into the legal profession since the 2000s. A [2013 study](#) found that women made up more than 30 percent of employed lawyers in 52 countries—a threshold that is thought to indicate “significant societal change.” However, figures indicating the number of these women who have reached positions of authority are far less encouraging.



According to *The Practice*, women made up 61% of graduating law classes in the United Kingdom in 2015, but only 17% of British law firm partners. Despite leading “the world in social policies that promote gender equity”, Norway’s law firms struggle to represent “women at the highest levels.” And “according to the 2013 South African Legal Fellows Network survey”, 80% of chief executives at the 12 firms “canvassed in the survey” were white men. Similarly, there were only two women in the South African Constitutional Court in 2014 and, according to [Tabeth Masengu](#) (2016), only 86 out of 243 judges of the South African Superior Courts were women.



In her 2016 paper, *It's a man's world: barriers to gender transformation in the South African Judiciary*, Masengu identified five obstacles that prevented women from becoming leaders in the legal profession. These included lack of mentoring opportunities, lack of support, and “lack of clarity regarding judicial acting appointments”. However, Masengu argued that “unequal distribution of work and discriminatory perceptions of women’s abilities” are the most prominent barriers that prevent women from taking up higher positions in their workplaces.

Discriminatory perceptions of women’s abilities often lead to women receiving assignments that lack in quality and/or quantity, making female employees feel as though they are undervalued. Because they do not feel valued at their workplaces, these women are more likely to leave in great volumes, leading to another reason why there are fewer female legal leaders:

high rates of attrition. As [Fiona Rice](#), former banking partner at Linklaters UK, said, the first issue is getting women to stay at companies and firms long enough to become partners, and the second is offering the support they need as leaders when they do become partners.

No matter how much of a meritocracy judicial practice may be considered, [feminist critics](#) also argue that there may be biases in how gatekeepers and other members of the legal profession consider an individual qualified for a position. If female candidates are scrutinized for “the type of legal practice they engaged in” or “whether they worked as clerks for senior judges”, they will not be able to get the same positions as men because of “bottlenecks” in their careers that prevented them from getting the necessary qualifications. Masengu pointed out that part of the discriminatory assumptions gatekeepers make about female lawyers is that they are not qualified for higher positions or positions outside certain types of law (e.g. family). These women are, therefore, denied opportunities in the higher positions or different areas of law that would have made them the more qualified and experienced lawyers the gatekeepers would like to hire.

Speaker Observations:

Yet in spite of all these barriers, there are a number of women that have managed to break the glass ceiling and ascend to positions of seniority at their workplaces. This series highlighted a few.

Hon. Lady Justice Monica Mugenyi, Former Principal Judge of the East African Court of Justice (EACJ), was one of three speakers who closed the series by speaking to guests about what to expect when it comes to being a female leader in the legal profession.

“The appointment of a woman to high office tends to stir up a plethora of mixed emotions; there is often celebration and salutation, accompanied by cynicism and/or opposition. However, in such contexts, personal and

professional integrity, leadership and communication skills, and the pursuit of excellence are skills and competencies needed in order to not only succeed but to excel in the workplace. Emphasis must be placed on emotional intelligence, and you must consider the goals of your workplace when making any decision. Women leaders must show up, be present and be visible.”

Christiana Tah, lawyer, professor of criminal justice in the United States, and bestselling author of the memoir, [*Listen to the Songs the Children Sing*](#), also spoke to guests about being a female legal leader. Ms. Tah served as Attorney General of a post-conflict Liberia in 2009. When asked to describe her charge, she outlined how, in the wake of the 2003 Liberian civil war, it was clear that a number of women and children were the victims of the violence and had to deal with deteriorated mental, physical and emotional health as a result.

“The challenge that the government faced was figuring out how to help support this population. Liberia historically has always had a dichotomized justice system; its legal system is more western/formal, whilst its judicial practice is more traditional and African/informal. Majority of the population, including women, agree with the practice of the informal justice system, even though it does not have the same constitutional safeguards that protect individual rights, such as the right to appeal. Therefore, the government felt it necessary to consider the harmonization of both the formal/western legal system and informal/traditional African justice system in order to ensure equal protection under the law for all.”

The government created a National Action Plan on Access to Justice that would enable them to do so. In addition, the government created a special unit under the Ministry of Justice to investigate and prosecute acts of gender based violence. What’s more, they created a special court under the judiciary to try these cases. The National Action Plan is not yet complete in its implementation, but has progressed well. When writing for our [*Amandla! Series*](#), Ms. Tah urged women to work together in order to increase our

numbers in key sectors of the government, because groups of people that are underrepresented will be underserved. She especially emphasized women increasing our numbers in the legislature in order to contribute to creating more laws that benefit women.

Dr. Myma Belo-Osagie, former Senior Partner and current Of Counsel of the law firm Udo Udoma & Belo-Osagie, shared with participants how she and her founding partner were able to build the firm.

”My vision for the law firm was to build a brand for the future. I wanted a law firm that would provide excellence in the legal market locally and internationally— a world class law firm. I was also interested in building a diverse law firm, one that reflected the multiple ways in which Nigeria was diverse—in other words, one that was diverse in terms of gender, ethnicity, religion, ability and socio-economic standing. I was blessed to have a partner with a shared vision, which is essential for building a strong brand.”

In sharing her strategies and advice for others who aspire to achieve a successful career and leadership roles, she noted, “to be successful, you must have a clear vision of what you want to achieve, while being flexible enough to pivot when the circumstances change. One must constantly work hard, build strong and dependable networks and develop strategies outside your comfort zone. Being clear about what your final vision is, and backing that with quality work, dedication and excellence, are crucial to achieving one's professional goals. There are many challenges and hurdles along the way, but with determination, focus and a dependable network, the challenges can be less daunting.”

Calls for Action- Recommendations

Ashley J. Hielprin wrote an [article](#) for the American Bar Association in which she invited two trailblazing African-American women with outstanding legal careers. Jade Brown Russell, founder of JD Russell Consulting, LLC, spoke of

the challenges women face in seeking promotions in the legal profession. She acknowledged that the issues women face in seeking promotions in the legal profession are systematic and institutional, and would need a thorough and multifaceted solution. Ms Russell stated that companies must be committed to creating partnership opportunities for women, and that they must be intentional about creating the policies, programs and practices that allow these opportunities to arise. Change within organizations must come from those at the top with all the leadership and authority and must trickle down. A good place to start would be making sure there are women on the executive team or committee.

Eboni K. Williams, a professional broadcaster with a history as a public defender, was Hielprin's second guest. Ms Williams, like Ms Russell, stated that obstacles facing female legal professionals are ingrained into the legal profession and require a well thought out and holistic approach to eliminating them. She pointed out that successful corporations are aware of individuals having different priorities and pursuits of personal happiness. She stated that, given the choice between themselves and their family and the Corporation, women will choose the former and successful corporations are aware of that. Corporations that value having female employees will recognize the other commitments their female employees have and do what they can to ensure that women are able to strike a balance between their work and their personal lives. Corporations that fail to do so will not be able to compete with corporations that do.

Williams also emphasized the importance of flexitime in increasing female employee retention. Both women stressed the importance of having 'safe spaces' in which women lawyers could talk to each other about challenges, opportunities and strategies for success in their workplaces.

In addition to the advice the ladies gave to corporations regarding female leadership, they also had some words of wisdom for women pursuing partnerships and other examples of legal leadership. Ms Williams said that

she received a 'seat at the table' by relying on preparation and fearlessness. By being prepared, you ensure that you bring something valuable to the table and that serves as your purpose and a source of confidence. She also urged women to trust themselves and that preparation. Ms Russell encouraged young women lawyers to keep pushing through the successes, failures, opportunities, struggles and sacrifices, arguing that they will be able to look back and see how they all counted for something.

In [her article](#) for the IAWL's Pioneering African Women in Law initiative, Eusebia Munuo, a Tanzanian lawyer and the first woman to ever be appointed as a resident magistrate in her country, stated that sky's the limit for young women in law. These aspiring legal officers must be willing to approach their legal studies with a strong sense of dedication and determination, because doing so will open a number of doors.

Patricia Kameri-Mbote, the [first female professor of law in Kenya](#) and the first female dean of the University of Nairobi, lives by Woodrow Wilson's famous quote: "You are not here merely to make a living. You are here to enrich the world."



Conclusion

The last few decades have seen significant growth in the number of female legal professionals around the world. And while this increased feminization of the legal profession may seem like a good sign for female legal professionals, existing research suggests that most women often experience forms of gender-based discrimination in the workplace. This shows that the legal profession still has a long way to go before it can consider itself a gender neutral environment. When combating gender-based discrimination within the occupation, firm leaders and other individuals in positions of authority are encouraged to see the profession for what it is, and to recognize ways in which it has progressed and ways in which it could do better.

They are encouraged to look deeper into all of the implicit and structural biases that exist within their organizations, and must be willing to consider ways in which the history of the profession, stereotypes, and professional norms and practices perpetuate a non-inclusive environment that makes it difficult for women to climb the professional ladder. The fact that a number of themes and recommendations were repeated throughout this report shows how intertwined all issues regarding gender-based discrimination are, and how they all fall under the overarching umbrella of subalternity. Eradicating gender-based discrimination from the profession as a whole is an act that will require a lot of reflection and effort from all members of the profession, from schools to courthouses. However, if practitioners commit to the change, it can be done.

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