

African female lawyers share their experiences

Practising as a female lawyer in Africa is all about relationships. Cold bidding does not usually work and, because of this, the most successful lawyers are always prepared to be away from home for long periods of time to forge these relationships.



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This is according to Claire Barclay, a director in the Projects and Infrastructure Practice at Cliffe Dekker Hofmeyr in South Africa. Barclay says that the extensive travel required when working in a thriving African legal practice, across numerous jurisdictions, can prove more challenging for women with families, and especially young families.

"Despite Africa's diversity of cultures and religion, however, I have not experienced any particular bias toward me from African clients because I am a woman. Gender bias in a professional context does not seem to resonate culturally."

Flexible hours

Priscilla Pattoo, a partner at Juristconsult Chambers in Mauritius, agrees that being a woman with a family in the legal profession can prove difficult.

"Being a woman at the beginning of my career was not so hard, but then, I became a wife and a mother, and the story changed. I had to strive hard to find an equilibrium between being a mother present for her children and being present at work. Flexible hours was not a concept wholly accepted by my peers. As time passed, I proved that such a balance was possible - I am now a partner in my firm and a proud, fulfilled mother of two children!" says Pattoo.

Anne Shilengudwa, a director at ESI Namibia, notes that there are issues to overcome for women in the legal profession.

"Being the only black female director among four white males in one of the top commercial law firms in Namibia is not always easy, but as I have matured, I have learnt to combine my emotional and intellectual intelligence to observe a situation, and to instinctively know when to move forward, take a step back, or change it."

Few challenges

Ekua Hayfron-Benjamin, Partner at Reindorf Chambers in Ghana, says that being a woman in private legal practice in Ghana poses few or little challenges for women in the profession. "The country has had a woman attorney-general, a woman speaker of the house and currently the chief justice is a woman. Women are taken very seriously in the legal system by both the judges and other lawyers, as well as by clients."

Jay Govender, a director in the Projects and Infrastructure Practice at Cliffe Dekker Hofmeyr, notes that by virtue of practising in the Projects and Infrastructure space, she has been fortunate enough to undertake a fair amount of project, regulatory and energy work in Africa. Infrastructure expansion is a key driver for economic growth on the continent, making Africa an exciting and stimulating working environment for any legal professional.

"Over the years I have seen an increase in the number of strong and highly competent women who hold high profile positions in the private sector and within government institutions. A career as an African lawyer is no more or less challenging to a woman than it is to a man. Expertise and competence will always remain the recipe for long standing success in the legal profession. These attributes are not gender specific," she adds.

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