

IFLR Women in Business Law Group

Life at the Bar



Thirty-two years after being called to the Bar, Melanie Hall QC is still known as an enthusiastic and sprightly litigator. The London-based VAT and EU law specialist regularly represents household names and the UK government in Europe's highest courts.

Since taking silk in 2002, the Monckton Chambers barrister took on even more high-profile cases, becoming one of the most recognisable and respected members of London's community of female barristers. A recent highlight saw her successfully defend HMRC against Subway's challenge of its VAT policy.

In a frank interview with IFLR Women in Business Law Group, Hall discusses the highs and lows of life at the Bar, the value of informal mentoring, and how the profession's attitude towards women has changed over the last three decades.

What advice would you give female private practitioners or law students who want to become a barrister?

Don't specialise too early. Keep your mind open as to what sort of practise you would like to have. At university I wanted to be a criminal defence barrister. That didn't last long, because I was not cut out for it. If someone had said to my 20-year-old self that one day I would be a tax silk, I would have laughed out loud. My mind was more closed then to the broad range of possibilities the Bar has to offer.

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I would also say, work harder than everyone else around you for the first few years. Making your mark early on will single you out from the crowd, which will help you to build a practice. For those women thinking about having children, a huge investment of your time in those early years will reap valuable dividends later when you take maternity leave.

One of the many joys about being a barrister is that, once you have secured a tenancy, it is an open market place. Only the best thrive. So if you enjoy a challenge, the world is your oyster. For women who don't have physical and mental stamina (I am often at my desk until the early hours of the morning), or who don't enjoy flying by the seat of their pants (litigation is often full of surprises), the Bar is not the profession for you.

In your thirty years at the Bar, how has the work environment changed for female barristers?

When I started out at the Bar, colleagues and friends talked openly about "women's work", which was largely family law. I was turned down for a tenancy because they "had enough women doing the women's work". Such attitudes would be met with incredulity by all members of the modern Bar. The profession has made a genuine effort to rid itself of its old ways. In general, I would say the Bar is a very hospitable profession for women. The flexibility of being self-employed can be a huge benefit for those with children.

Reflecting on your career, what are the critical decisions you made that helped you achieve what you have today?

One of the most critical decisions I made was to join what was then the Attorney General's panel of barristers instructed to advise the government on civil matters. It was through that route that I stumbled across my first VAT case. I've never looked back. I find it very rewarding

to specialise in a relatively niche area and I've done it for so long now that I have become a specialist.

A growing number of law firms have mentoring schemes to help foster female talent in the profession. Do chambers' have any similar arrangements?

Monckton Chambers does not have a formal mentoring scheme, though some chambers do. We do however mentor each other informally, which I believe can be equally effective. Just late last year, all the female members of chambers met at my house for dinner. We all found it to be a very valuable experience. It was also great fun. The fact that there were gasps of amazement from the younger members when I told a few anecdotes about how the Bar used to be spoke volumes about the journey the Bar has taken to become a hospitable profession in which women can thrive.

You helped establish the Lawyers' Circle, which supports the African Women's Rights Protocol and Oxfam's efforts to empower poor women in developing countries. How important is it for women in prominent positions to help those that are less privileged?

I believe very strongly that it is a matter of personal choice. Being prescriptive about philanthropy never works, at least not for very long. It is a tremendous privilege to work with so many inspirational women in collaboration with Oxfam on its Raising Her Voice global programme. There are 100 or so women in The Lawyers' Circle, ranging from QCs and partners of the big city law firms, to very junior barristers and solicitors. All of us were ultimately inspired by Annie Lennox who founded The Circle, of which The Lawyers' Circle is a part. But we are all there because we have chosen to be, not out of any sense of obligation. What we have learned over the years is that women in prominent positions can make a real difference to the lives of those who are less privileged.



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