

ME. URMILA BOOLELL SC

A Conversation with Me. Urmila Boolell

In this exclusive interview, Me. Urmilla Boolell, Senior Counsel, shares her journey in the legal profession, the challenges she has overcome, and her thoughts on the evolving role of women in law. With nearly 40 years of experience, she reflects on the realities of the profession, the importance of resilience, and offers valuable advice to aspiring legal professionals. Her story is one of perseverance, dedication, and a commitment to excellence in the pursuit of justice.

Taking silk in 2016, she holds the distinction of being the most senior woman at the Mauritian bar and was the first of the two women in Mauritius appointed Senior Counsel to date.



Can you share a bit about your journey into the legal profession and what inspired you to pursue law?

I just knew from the time I was in primary school that one day I would do law and that I would become a lawyer. In fact, at the time, I didn't even know what it entailed to be a lawyer. Hence we often look up to the glamorous appearance of lawyers wearing the gown, going to court, but in reality, I discovered that it was nothing like that. I was just thrown into the world of law. I was told since young, “you are going to be a lawyer.” So I became a lawyer. That's the only thing I know how to do now. I have never done anything else in my life which made me enjoy the pleasure of being a lawyer which of course, I'm happy with the way my life turned out. Because, you know, if it is the only thing you do on a daily basis, with time you can become better and better at it. And if you are good at something, you end up enjoying it. So, yes, I managed to find the joy the longer I practised as a lawyer.

What advice would you give to women aspiring to hold leadership positions in the legal field?

Well, you know, there are a lot of role models already in the Bar, right?

Do not forget, judges are also barristers. And in fact, we have more female magistrates now, which denotes highly how the number of female role models in the legal field is soaring.

The problem is, if you want to join the private sector as a female legal practitioner, where you are left to your own devices, that could epitomise a source of difficulty. And in the private sector, in the legal field, you have to pave , by yourself, your way in. You cannot expect anyone to try to help you. Subsequently, it is not a question of getting any help from anyone or any encouragement. You will not even be encouraged a lot of the time.

You will be thrown in the den by yourself. Thus, my advice to young female aspiring barristers, notaries, all of those, is think well. Think well. Don't join that profession with blindfold or with visions of wearing the gown going to court. This is perhaps a very small fraction of the work of a barrister. The rest of the work is overwhelming. It encapsulates a lot of hard work, a lot of humiliation. You must eat your humble pie. As a woman, you have to be three times better than men. But my advice would be to think hard before you step in the world of a legal practionner.. And if you decide that this is the career path for you, make sure you do it for the right reasons. And the right reasons would be that you think this legal career is for you. When you know exactly what being a lawyer includes, when you know exactly what will happen to you once you join the profession, then think and decide on that. Do not go in the law arena on the basis of ignorance.

The legal profession has traditionally been male-dominated. What were some of the biggest challenges you faced as a woman? And how did you overcome them?

So I will not put that in the past tense to start with. I think the challenge is still there for female legal practitioners

It has always been male dominated in my opinion. You see, there's this thing with the perception that if you have more women, things will change. But we already have more women. Nothing's changed. And nothing will change. Because it's a profession that is a mirror of our society. The reality is that, women are not taken seriously. And until people in our society adjust to the fact. I mean, it starts from school, from parents and people in authority.

How many women in authority are you exposed to in your childhood? That determines the adult you become.

And if those women in authority inspire you, because they are able, then you want to become like them.

But I do not think there has been many female role models from my perspective, in my life. And as you grow, as you join the world of adulthood, as you move on, it's the same thing. So society has to change in terms of its value and its encouragement. You have a female speaker, you have two female ministers, you have female junior ministers. All this is very good. But it does not change the society we live in. But even then, as I'm saying, having more would not mean that the problems would be solved.

Because sometimes you can be there as a woman, just to fill up the quota which is even worse, because it would be not be respectful to women..

Women in Law

I think the first thing is to accept the reality. This is the pond you have to swim as a female legal practitioner..

It's full of piranhas. You have to accept it.

And you will be humiliated. You will be put down. You will be made to feel inadequate. I use the term made to because it's done consciously. Do not forget that when your opponent is a man, he has a moral advantage over you. Already, just by being a man. That is the sad reality of working as a female lawyer.

Besides, it doesn't mean that if you appear before a woman magistrate, a judge, that you will be getting a better treatment than a man. It doesn't mean that at all.

So if you know that this is how it is, and you don't have the power to change it, the best you can do is accept it and live with it. Or quit if you cannot cope with it. Of course.

If being a female lawyer in a male dominated society is something you cannot do, you are going to damage your physical and mental health. So you might as well quit.

Law can be a very demanding career. In your past interviews, you have also mentioned that you started writing your book, 'The Case Law of Mauritius', when you were pregnant. How did you just manage to keep your legal career and your professional and personal life still in a very balanced way?

I could not manage both very well.

Because as a woman, it is even more difficult to maintain your personal life and your legal career in a stable way. If I had to start over again, and knowing what I do now, I think I'd really be proud. Because in my time, I'm talking about 40 years ago now, we were the first generation of women who actually came out as professionals, as a whole generation.

There were women professionals before that, but it was not systemic. In our generation, I think I was part of that first generation where women didn't just stop at the HSC, they all went to university. And they all did further studies, and they all came back with degrees, with professions. So, what we didn't know was that we were signing up for double responsibilities. We were actually signing up for two jobs, as lawyer and the caregiver of the family.

Because while being a woman on your own, and you have to look after yourself, it's fine, but when you have a family, this is a full-time job. Even if you're not sitting in the house, organizing a family, organizing children, organizing meals, tuition, school, problems, this is a full-time job. On top of that, you have another full-time job, which is being a barrister, going to court, making your name, having a career.

And on top of it, in my case, my frustration was that my husband qualified at the bar at the same time as me. We became barristers at the same time. He joined the public service, I didn't. And he, after a while, he had a flourishing career in the public service, while I was still struggling. And you can imagine the frustrations. I felt the feeling of inadequacy sometimes. I felt like that I could not do it that I am not good enough.

Women in Law

According to the World Economic Forum, the true gender parity won't be achieved for well over a century. As women are facing several issues, such as domestic violence, gender gap, the glass ceiling, how can we deal with these issues as future legal practitioners? What would be your advice for us as the younger generation?

I have lived my life not trying to change the world, because I cannot do from a realistic standpoint. So I have lived my life being very aware of what my limitations are.

But I have also tried to change my immediate world, those people I come in contact with, those people I interact with, people like you, if you can leave here feeling inspired, I would feel that I have touched your life in one way, that is my way, of changing the world. Because if in 10 years' time you can remember what I said to you and my message, then, I have e actually helped to shape your future as future female legal practitioners. So going back to international, world, world, and towards world issues, yes, they still exist and unfortunately, they will always be there. But I do not believe that we should try to find solutions outside of ourselves. At least I do not hold that conviction.

I try to find solutions within myself. So if a woman comes to me and she has issues which are a woman's issue, I try to help them the best I can.

I do come in contact with a lot of women with issues that really are women's issues. And if you're able to deal with those with empathy, understanding where this woman comes, from a place where you could be yourself, and you try to give the support, the love and the assistance that that person needs, I think you have done enough to save the world.

I think at the educational level, not educational, at the academic level, women are very smart. I'm very proud of people like you, young professionals. So I think they're very capable, they are very good, they are very bright, and they are full of promise. But, do we have an environment that promotes that?

At the time when I was chair of the bar, the figures are more or less the same I think, but at the time I was chair of the bar, there was more women barristers. I think there were two-thirds, women barristers.

I think women are not respected for who they are. There is still this discrimination in society, in the way we are looked at.

The way things work is still very skewed in favour of men.

Women in Law

When you were struggling, when you were starting your career, what helped you overcome these issues? How did you manage to find confidence in yourself as a woman?

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I think it is when I saw people around me and what they did. Some of the time, how poor they were. So it was basically, my confidence came from what I knew I could do. This is not arrogance, that belief in myself came from what I saw around me. Admittedly, this is where I noted the difference in treatment. Someone who was much poorer and doing far less work than I was doing would get a lot of accolades and a lot of credit. I would do twice as well, three times as well and I would not even be acknowledged.

And then that made me realise, but no, I have to be real here. What that person is doing is not the best, I can do better. And I want to show I can do better.

So that was what sparked a realisation in me at the time. With age, I think it's just knowing, being knowledgeable, having a good handle over how the court functions and how the justice system functions.

Did your family support you as a female legal practitioner? How did this shape your mindset towards being empowered yourself as a woman?

So family, you have the family and the in-laws. So my family, yes, they sent me out to become a lawyer, but I do not think they ever respected me for the work I did. Because it was just a qualification I achieved.

And even when I started doing really well, I do not think I got the extent of encouragement that I would expect from my in-law family. My in-laws, I got married into a family where there were a lot of lawyers.

Consequently, in my in-laws' family, perhaps I felt better understood there.

I don't think I got equality of treatment for a long time. I think with time it's probably changed a bit now.

What advice would you have for law students?

In terms of subjects, I think you have to nurture a good literary background. If you are doing sciences, I believe it would be useful to also develop a good mathematical background because law includes also thinking in a very logical way.

Concerning my advice to law students. I would lay emphasis on how you have to accept that a hierarchy in the legal profession prevails.

Besides, concerning one's journey as a law student, an exam is a very arbitrary way of deciding whether someone is good or not. It's not the exam that decides this, but you need a benchmark, so it is an exam which provides so.

But in real life, it's not an exam which determines your worth as a barrister. In real life, what I always tell barristers who start, is forget everything, all the qualifications you've ever had in your life. Your exam starts today.

And every day of your life is an exam. So my advice is, you know, it's not a short run. It's not a sprint.

A legal career is like a marathon. As long as we have the passion and the determination, even if you did not have the perfect background from secondary school, you still can become a very powerful and successful barrister. I think it's not the school you go that makes you.

I think it's the values you have. You must have the right values. You must believe in integrity. You must be honest. You must believe in fairness and in impartiality.

You must not encourage discrimination. You must try to aspire to elevate yourself as a person first. It does not matter what your qualifications are, because you know what's worse? It's someone with all the qualifications who does not have those values.

And you have to be able, since you are the voice of your client, to express yourself properly and clearly. Indeed, why does a client get a barrister? Because he wants that barrister, he or she wants that barrister to speak on his or her behalf.

If you cannot express yourself, you cannot be a barrister. You have to convey what you feel and intend in clear terms.

