

I KNOW A WOMAN

by Lerato Mukome, Johannesburg Bar

If it pleases the court, I am Lerato Mukome, an admitted advocate of the Johannesburg Society of Advocates and I represent the General Council of the Bar South Africa.

In the matter of *Incorporated Law Society vs Wookey* the Appellate Division made reference to a quote from *Van Leeuwen's Roman Dutch Law* (1, 6, 1) which stated the following –

“Likewise, owing to the same natural peculiarity, it happens that, inasmuch as nearly the whole of womankind by reason of an inborn weakness is less suited for matters requiring knowledge and judgment than men, women are excluded from holding any office or dignity relating to the government of a people and its affairs.”

What the Appellate Division at the time failed to see, was that by accepting women in the profession, the legal profession would induct trailblazing lawyers who each day demonstrate their legal and professional capabilities. Highlighting that they are as capable as any *person* to occupy any office with the required dignity.

In my short career as an attorney, legal advisor and advocate, I have got to know of and meet these women.

I know of a woman who, as an anti-apartheid activist, opened a law firm with her husband, to help marginalised communities fighting against unjust laws put in place by an apartheid government; who continued to run her practice following her husband's brutal assassination.

I know of a woman who became the first woman to be appointed as president of the Supreme Court of Appeal of South Africa and then deputy chief justice of South Africa.

I know of a woman who wakes up every day to don black robes to fight unconstitutional laws in the highest courts, ensuring that the rights enshrined in our Constitution are protected and respected by all.

I also know of a woman who is following her dream of becoming an advocate, each day sitting in chambers and attending classes, knowing that excellence in her craft is the only way her practice will succeed and break previously held beliefs that women are incapable of being good advocates.

I know a woman who is in her first year of practice. Who, as a result of skewed briefing patterns, does not have work. However, even with such unfairness, she understands that her visibility and consistency will one day result in change and improve the longevity of women at the Bar.

I know of a woman who is following up on her unpaid invoices and understands that while it may be intimidating to ask for payment, it is her hard-earned money and that she should be



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paid equally for the legal services she provides.

I have met a woman who, with a camera and tripod, documents her day in order to bring the legal profession to the world. Ensuring that the profession is in line with the digital age and inspiring those in places where opportunities for women, within the legal profession, are not always visible.

I know of a woman who is buying her first car, house, or booking her first international holiday, and understands the privilege of having such choices; choices our great-grandmothers and grandmothers were unable to have, due to the lack of opportunities for women.

I unfortunately also know of a woman battling mental illness, burnout, and feelings of doubt in her ability to be a legal professional. Facing such challenges, she bravely takes on each day by seeking help and speaking to those who have previously been in her shoes.

And finally, I know of a woman who goes home after a long day to kiss her boy child good night, knowing that not only is she an inspiration to young girls but that in inspiring the boy child, men will grow up knowing that gender is not a barrier to any profession.

Therefore, these 100 years have not only shown that women are capable, but that they are determined, resilient and innovative. That while they may have challenges, they choose to tackle them head on.

My wish is that for the next 100 years the next time someone asks “Do you know of a lawyer who...?” That the answer should be “I KNOW A WOMAN.”

Thank you. **A**