

The First 100 Years - celebrating women in law

06 NOVEMBER 2015

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CATEGORY:

ARTICLE

A day at a conference of lawyers is rarely worth writing home about. Not so **Spark 21**, where alongside a number of Withers colleagues I spent Monday of this week at an event forming part of the First 100 Years, a five year project that will run until the 100th anniversary of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act in 2019. The project's main aim is to raise money to build a digital museum dedicated to women in the law, including an online library of 100 stories about women who have helped shape the profession since the 1919 Act enabled us to practise law for the first time. Coverage of the event since Monday has focused unsurprisingly on the question of female quotas as a means of addressing the persistent mismatch between the numbers of women entering the profession and those reaching its highest echelons. Lord Sumption's controversial view that the gender gap in the Supreme Court will narrow itself if we give let events take their course for another 50 years was addressed during a panel discussion entitled 'What role for men in helping women progress?' by Supreme Court judge, Lord Hodge. His view is that significant change can be expected within the next 10 years without the help of quotas, which he labelled 'corrosive'. What however struck me more forcibly than the unsurprising fact that Supreme Court judges don't always agree with each other, is that there was a male Supreme Court judge at the event at all. For the women in the audience who, like me, qualified as lawyers during the 1970s and 1980s (some of whom had been denied jobs in law firms in the early years on the express grounds that they were women), the mere fact that one of our most senior judges gives up a working day to debate the advancement of women in the profession is a testament to how far we have come. Two themes emerged from the day which seem to me to be of equal importance in maintaining and improving upon the gains that women lawyers have made. The first is the presence of men in the debate. Why is this critical? Because, as the conference participants generally agreed, equality for women at work is predicated upon equality for men at home, with all that that entails. The discussions focused on childcare and men's role in that, but the issue is far wider. Until both men and women recognise that all work that is necessary for human survival and well-being is the responsibility of adults of both genders – that childcare, elder care and housework are not just 'women's work', women will continue to lag behind and remain under-represented at the top of any profession you care to name. The second theme, which lies at the heart of the project, is the importance of storytelling. Women's stories have not been told often enough or loudly enough. This is far from peculiar to lawyers – a panel of women representing or researching in other areas of human activity in which women have struggled to fulfil their potential – including medicine, orchestral conducting and diplomacy, testified to the generally low visibility of women's historic contributions to all these areas of human endeavour. The stories of the struggles of individual women are vital in reminding us where we began, first and foremost to inspire us and the women who succeed us not to go back there. I had a first-hand experience of the effectiveness of storytelling this week when I took my 14 year old daughter to see 'Suffragette' and saw the power of an individual narrative to awaken the events of the past in the mind of a young woman. So I wholeheartedly applaud the First 100 Years, for collating the stories of women in the law, and for helping to ensure that we neither forget nor repeat the struggles and setbacks that have brought us to where we are now. **How can you help?**

- ***Donate*** via www.indiegogo.com/projects/first-100-years#/
- **Share** the project on your Linked In, Twitter and Facebook accounts. **
- **Submit** a story: do you, or someone in your career who inspired you have a story that should be told? Use the 'Contact Us' page here to suggest a woman who has helped shape the profession.
- **Watch** this film and send it on to someone you think would be interested.

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