

## DAILY ACCOUNT OF THE LAW SOCIETY DELEGATES AT THE 63<sup>RD</sup> UN COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN REPORT

The Law Society is a professional body representing more than 180,000 lawyers in England and Wales. Its aims include upholding the independence of the legal profession, the rule of law and human rights around the world. The Law Society was established by Royal Charter (the "Charter of the Society") in 1845 and has consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations since 2014. Its activities are established by statute: the Solicitors Act 1974, the Courts and Legal Services Act 1990, the Access to Justice Act 1999, and the Legal Services Act 2007.

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## Day One:

In the morning, the delegation attended the “*Women’s economic empowerment in the MENA region*” event organised by SIDA, OECD and UN-Women.

### Key messages

- It takes a long time to change discriminatory social norms, but this should not be an excuse for inaction or for backing away from confronting harmful customs.
- Governments must take leadership and spearhead campaigns, as they have successfully done in other sectors, to effect behavioural changes, e.g. driving safely, quitting smoking among others.
- Changing laws can help to change mindsets but laws are not enough because, in some jurisdictions, there is no legislative enforcement and/or there is lack of funding to make a sustainable change.
- For gender equality to take a step further, it requires a combination of political will, economic incentives, and changing old-fashioned attitudes. It is imperative that we engage men and boys in these discussions to help change mindsets, social norms, stereotypes and the narrative around women.

This event was immediately followed by the “*Opening Session of the CSW*” in the General Assembly room with an inspiring address from the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

At lunchtime we attended the UK Mission reception, kindly hosted by the British Ambassador to the UN, Dame Karen Pierce DCMG, and attended by Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Wessex who gave the welcoming remarks and spoke about her commitment to women’s rights.

In the afternoon, in partnership with the Mayor of New York Office and NAWO, we had our first event on “*Best practice legislation for survivors of domestic violence*” with over 30 people attending.

### Matters arising

- How can we use emerging technology to deal with the problems of domestic violence?
- How can we keep survivors of domestic violence at the centre of the issue?
- Legislation on its own is not enough to tackle domestic violence - domestic violence must be considered a societal failure that must be addressed head-on and mindsets must be transformed.

In the evening, to celebrate International Women’s Day, the Law Society delegates participated at the event organised by the Women’s Bar Association of the State of New York, which took place at Fordham University. They had a very impressive line-up of speakers, who provided a judicial perspective of the situation of gender parity in the US.

## Day Two:

In the morning, we had our second event that focused on *“Robust and Independent Judicial and Legal Institutions as a way of addressing women’s empowerment”*, chaired by Baroness Gale in partnership with NAWO and with the participation of more than 35 people.

### Key messages

- Protection under the law is a right, not a privilege, and such protection must be extended on an equal basis to women.
- In their recent 2019 comparative report, the World Bank found that in practice women have three quarters less rights compared to men.
- Speakers discussed quotas and concurred that, even in the most progressive countries, discrimination based on gender was the norm until only a few decades ago. Women were neither equal to men under the law nor did they have the same access to education, job opportunities or income levels. For that reason, equality is not yet a reality and quotas are an imperative.
- Speakers also presented evidence of the direct correlation between the rule of law and gender inequality – the weaker the gender equality is in any jurisdiction, the weaker the rule of law.

At lunchtime, the Law Society attended the *“CSW63 Townhall meeting of Civil Society”* with UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres and moderated by UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka. There were discussions on the role of female human rights defenders and the need to provide more safeguards for them. The UN Secretary General also highlighted that, since the start of his post, he has made strides to promote more women into leadership positions within the UN. He also emphasised very encouragingly that we must “push-back” against the “push-back” on women’s rights.

In the afternoon, we hosted our third joint event chaired by Zarin Hainsworth OBE on *“Is current governance infrastructure, including the judicial and legal system, delivering for women and girls?”*. There was a consensus among speakers that progress in achieving gender equality has been very slow. Many judiciaries around the world are failing women because there is an ingrained mindset that automatically undermines women.

We also attended workshops at the UN General Assembly building on *“Legislating for women’s economic empowerment in Iberico-America”* and on *“The role of women friendly policies to achieve empowerment of new generations”*. At these sessions, the team met with the Permanent Representative from Costa Rica to the UN, Mr Rodrigo A. Carazo, and with the UN Women Regional Director for the Americas and Caribbean, Luisa Carvalho.

### Key message

- In some Latin American jurisdictions, it appears that women have unconsciously internalised that it is acceptable to be paid less than men, which means that women would accept more readily what an employer is offering them instead of negotiating what they are worth - this needs to be challenged.

In the evening, we had a working dinner with Womankind Worldwide where we discussed opportunities and synergies for collaboration.

## Day Three:

In the morning, President Blacklaws attended the EU breakfast meeting with H.E. Ambassador Mara Marinaki, EEAS Principal Adviser on Gender. Irena Moozova, Director at the EU Commission for Equality, hosted this meeting. It was announced that the “Work-life Balance Legislation” will [hopefully] be voted on by the EU parliament in April. Concerns were raised about the negative transition from ‘gender equality’ to ‘gender equity’ and from ‘women’s rights’ to ‘family rights’.

[Notes: ‘Gender equality’ indicates that people are free to make choices without the limitations set by stereotypes and that their various contributions and needs are valued equally. ‘Gender equality’ is the term used in human rights treaties such as The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). ‘Gender equity’ only refers to the treatment of people according to their respective needs to ensure equal rights, obligations and opportunities.

‘Women’s rights’ are not limited to ‘family rights’ – women’s rights are considered human rights. Attaining ‘equality’ between women and men and eliminating all forms of discrimination against women are fundamental human rights and United Nations values.]

Following this meeting, President Blacklaws also attended a session with the World Bank entitled “Justice for Women”. Panellists discussed the security risk experienced by human rights defenders in the pursuit of justice and peace. The World Bank also announced the launch of a strategy on “Equality in law for women and girls”.

### Key message

- We must challenge recent movements who have been attempting to repeal against the progress made in achieving gender equality following the #Metoo campaign. For example, anecdotal evidence points out to the reduction in the recruitment of young women for fear of ‘being sued’ for sexual harassment or for bringing discrimination claims.

Meanwhile, Lizzette Robleto de Howarth spoke at IANGEL’s event on “How volunteer lawyers can support efforts advocating for social protection”.

### Key messages:

- Given their skillset, lawyers can play a significant role in redressing gender inequality at all levels in society.
- We need to involve men proactively in the discussions concerning gender equality since historically, at all levels of society, they have been the power holders.
- Gender equality is not just purely a women’s issue – ‘gender inequality’ also puts a burden on men.
- Society must push for power with accountability and responsibility.

At the same time, Stephanie Brown was attending the joint UN Women and UN Secretary-General event “Take the hot seat: A high level inter-generational dialogue” – a strong emphasis was made on the importance of young people getting involved in decision-making. UN Women Executive Director, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka told the youth in the room:

“You have homework. You must be organised. You must look at the mistakes we’ve made as well as the positives.”

In the afternoon, President Blacklaws and Stephanie Brown attended the session: “Beyond Consultations”, which launched a toolkit for ‘fostering meaningful engagement with women in fragile and conflict affected states’. Speakers included Lord Ahmed of Wimbledon, FCO Minister of State, and Bandana Rana, the new Vice-chair of the Convention for the Elimination

of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The session focused on the importance of meaningful consultation. Baroness Hodgson delivered the closing remarks, stating that it is essential to engage male champions in the fight for gender-equality.

Lizzette Robleto de Howarth participated at the session on *“Family Care: What are the costs to Women”*.

### **Key messages**

- Current family care arrangements, within many societies, are a burden to women and girls and this responsibility must be shared with men and boys. If the current trend remains the status quo, we will continue to prevent women and girls from achieving their potential.
- The state must also change their attitude towards family care, to prevent women and girls from being overburdened, and create a more equal responsibility in the household – this must be reflected in policy making.

Lizzette Robleto de Howarth followed up this session with a very productive meeting with Charlotte Goemans, Policy Analyst at the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and both agreed to have a follow up in the next few weeks.

In the evening, the Law Society held its first “International Women and the Law” (IWIL) roundtable, organised by IANGEL and kindly hosted by Kelley Drye & Warren LLP. Over 18 female lawyers participated including, private practitioners, in-house counsels and law students. The evening ended with an informal dinner with IANGEL staff.

## Day Four:

In the morning, President Blacklaws and Stephanie Brown attended the session: *“The Role of Parliament as partners in Women, Peace & Security”*.

### Key messages

- Parliaments are essential to achieving gender equality because of their role in legislating, holding the budget, scrutinising the executive, and monitoring policies.
- Parliaments must adopt female quotas for ensuring women’s participation in political life.
- Once women have been elected to office, we need to also ensure that they receive appropriate support so that their participation is effective.
- Men must also take responsibility for advancing women’s rights.

Meanwhile, Lizzette Robleto de Howarth attended the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) session on *“Access by girls to social protection and public services as a means of combating child marriage in West Africa”*. The Honourable Aisha Abubakar, Minister of Women Affairs (Nigeria), and the Honourable Siga Fatima Jagne, Commissioner of Social Affairs and Gender (ECOWAS), spoke at this event. ECOWAS recognised that child marriage is a serious widespread problem in West Africa, which has a significant impact on the welfare and development of children. ECOWAS countries are aiming to pass relevant legislation and change cultural norms to protect children.

In the afternoon, President Blacklaws and Lizzette Robleto de Howarth participated at the event: *“From Tunis to Stockholm: Beijing +25 moving forward”* - the Swedish Ambassador, Ann Berner, Tunis Women’s Minister, The Honourable Naziha Labidi, and UN Women Assistant Secretary General, Asa Regner, spoke at this event.

### Key messages

- It is important to have more women in political office.
- Women with disabilities must not be invisible in discussions relating to gender equality.
- Everyone should be responsible for gender equality.
- Legislative reforms are not enough to achieve gender equality – mindsets and cultural norms all need changing.

At the same time, Stephanie Brown attended the OECD attended a session organised by the OECD & Austria.

### Key points

- Laws can either help or hinder gender equality - it’s not just about passing gender-equality legislation but ensuring these are effective and efficiently enforced.
- Women globally, and at all levels of society, must be made aware of these laws so that they know their rights and can demand their implementation.
- Once laws have been reviewed, we need to look at those customs and social norms that prevent women from achieving their potential to change these as well.

Following these events, the Law Society met with members of the Independent Lawyers and Judges Task Force of the New York City Bar to discuss collaboration on the area of Lawyers at Risk.

In the evening, the Law Society held its second IWIL roundtable, organised by Lexis Nexis and kindly hosted by Debevoise & Plimpton. A group of over 17 in-house counsels participated and Lisa Savitt, former Chair of the American Bar Association (ABA) Section of International Law, gave the welcoming remarks. The evening ended with a networking reception thanks to Debevoise & Plimpton.

## **Day Five:**

Lizzette Robleto de Howarth spoke at the International Bar Association event on “*Gender Parity in Sustainable Development: A global legal appraisal*”.

### **Key messages**

- For society to advance ‘gender equality’, both men and women must work hand in hand. Unfortunately, this is not possible in many countries due to ingrained patriarchy - we must generate transformative processes to redress the ongoing imbalance of power between the sexes.
- Capacity building projects and awareness raising campaigns can contribute to progress gender equality, but we also need strong political will to change the status quo.
- Social transformation can be enabled when there is robust political activism that pushes culture to evolve.

-Ends.-

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