



Race

One of the few black female QCs in England and Wales calls for action on inequality

Barbara Mills says next 12 months 'critical' in tackling systemic obstacles in legal profession

Haroon Siddique *Legal affairs correspondent*

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One of the few black female QCs in [England](#) and Wales has said the time has come for action and “no more talk” when it comes to tackling race inequality in the legal profession.

Barbara Mills, who is co-chair of the Bar Council’s race working group, said the next 12 months would be “critical” to tackling systemic obstacles at the bar.

These were identified in [the group’s landmark Race at the Bar report](#), which found that there were just five black female QCs (senior barristers, also known as silks) in England and Wales (another two were announced in the latest appointments, published on 22 December). Another stark statistic was that a black female junior barrister with the

same level of experience as a white male junior billed £18,700 a year less on average, and an Asian woman £16,400 less.

Elsewhere, the judiciary said [only 1% of judges in courts and tribunals were black](#), a figure that is unchanged since 2014

Mills says there had been “well-meaning people” in the profession but a more strategic approach was required to boost diversity.

“If, in a year’s time - I shouldn’t say if - when, in a year’s time, we have ... all sorts of stakeholders with clearly defined targets, which we can then work to and then hold them to account, that would be real progress,” said Mills. “The system didn’t get like this overnight and none of us can hope that the change will be overnight but what the race working group members and our brown and black colleagues are expecting is a sense, a feeling of visibility, that it’s changing - no more talk, just change it and let me see that it’s changing. So, I think the next 12 months are critical.”

Mills said the fact that the race working group even existed, and racial inequality was being talked about openly within the profession, showed progress since she was first called to the bar in 1990. But the next step required targets - not to be confused with quotas - to pave the way for tangible action, she said.

She shied away from discussing her own experience, instead focusing on “holding my hand out as I climb up”. But Mills is under no illusions about her own visibility as a black female QC, given that by comparison there are 1,303 white men and 286 white women who are silks, according to the report, which used figures calculated before the latest round of appointments.

“I was really struck when I took silk,” she said. “My inbox was flooded with messages from black women who I didn’t know who were either students or young barristers, who said: ‘Oh, my God, it’s possible. Thank you, thank you for making it look and be possible.’”

Targets for QCs from minority-ethnic backgrounds, as well as for appointments to the judiciary and panels, are one of a raft of recommendations in [the Race at the Bar report](#), which focuses on access to the profession, retention, progress and culture.

Mills said those asking if there was really a problem were in the minority and she “can’t understand or believe that anybody doubts the value of diversity any more”.

She said: “You can’t have a system whereby in something as fundamental and as important to people as the legal system, there are those in society who think there’s an

‘us and them’ going on. It can’t be. You can’t have a system where people think: well, the person who will represent me, has no idea of my life, my culture, my heritage, what makes me me, the person who’s going to make a life-altering decision, has no idea of my culture, of who I am. That just doesn’t instil the sort of confidence in the decision-making that we require.”

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