

## Jacqueline Renton interviews Alison Grief KC and Indu Kumar for International Women's Day

### [Jacqueline] Why did you chose to become a barrister?



**[Indu]** – I was interested in exploring a career in law from a young age, having been completely inspired by Atticus Finch when I first read “To Kill a Mockingbird” at the age of 11! However I wasn’t aware of what the role of a barrister entailed until I turned 16. I first came across a Barrister whilst doing work experience at a local solicitors firm organised by my school. I attended court to see a final hearing in an adoption case, and emotions were running very high at court. I found it fascinating to watch the interaction between the barrister and the judge and their lay client. I instantly loved the human element of the role particularly as you help people to navigate an often extremely difficult time of their lives, the advocacy and also the independence of the job. I was the first generation in my family to go to university, and there were no lawyers in my family, but I knew that this was the career for me from that moment onwards and was determined to learn more.



**[Alison]** – I was 10 years old when I first decided I wanted to be a Barrister. As a child, I suffered from very bad asthma, and so I was off school a lot, in and out of hospital. In those days, there were only 2 television channels, and when I was off school I came across a programme called ‘Crown court’. It ran on sequential days at lunch times and was a full criminal trial spread over each day, with real members of the public as the jury, and actors as Barristers, judges and witnesses. On the last day, the jury delivered the verdict. I remember sometimes trying to bunk off school for the last day, even if my asthma was better by then, as I had to find out the verdict! I was hugely inspired by the Barristers who I saw getting witnesses to say things they didn’t want to and advocate their client’s position with such skill. Ending up at a local Secondary Modern school, one of the worst in the area, I became even more determined to pursue my dream and prove my worth and had one, wonderful teacher, who did everything he could to help me. His name was Robert Currie. He was a wonderful man and it is thanks to him I am doing what I do today really.

I ended up going to a ‘technological college’ to do my A-levels and started to get involved in politics. As part of that process I was helping those whose homes were in disrepair, writing letters on their behalf and assisting those that were homeless.. I realised that the law could be used for social justice and change, and this then galvanised the dream I already had of becoming

a barrister, into a mission!. I was fortunate to have a really inspiring A level law teacher and I therefore began to understand a little more about the profession and role, from him.

**[Jacqueline] Do you feel that there have been any obstacles in your way as a result of being a woman at the Bar?**

**[Indu]** – When I was applying for pupillage, I couldn’t see many people who looked like me which I found really daunting. There is a notion of the bar being for the privileged where the ‘norm’ seemed to be white, middle class men. When I looked into the profession more I saw that there was more diversity, and particularly so at the family bar which was the area I was always most interested in, but nonetheless I remained conscious of the fact that I did not fit the norm. I was also disappointed to see fewer women at the senior end of the Bar. This is something that has improved over the years (especially so at 4PB where we currently have 9 female silks), but I think there is still a long way to go.

Since being in practice, I have experienced the ‘juggle’ of managing my busy practice with raising my children. At times, I have found it hard to get the ‘juggle’ right and I am sure many working mothers can relate to this. Having said this, I have been exceptionally fortunate to be at 4PB. I took off 10 months with my son (now aged 4) and 11 months with my daughter (almost 2). On each occasion of maternity leave, I was always somewhat nervous about what would happen to my practice and my income when I returned, but I need not have been worried. My clerks are amazing, supportive and accommodating of my changing needs as a working mother. I have found that as long as I am open and clear with them as to what I need to make the ‘juggle’ work, they will bend over backwards to help me and ensure my practice flourishes. 4PB has recently put in place a new parental leave policy that I benefited from when I came back to work after taking time off with my daughter, and I can safely say this it is the best, most progressive policy I have come across at the Bar.

**[Alison]** – I was called to the Bar in 1990. In those days, unless you had been to the right sort of school or had good contacts at the Bar, and I didn’t have either of these things, it was very difficult to access the profession. I was lucky enough to be introduced to a barrister by a work colleague in the first job I had after my degree when trying to gather some money – negotiating leases for satellites dishes to be put on roofs for Ladbroke’s – oh the glamour...! He kindly let me do a mini pupillage with him. Crucially, he also told me about the Inner temple sponsorship scheme, and after I found out about that I managed to get a wonderful male sponsor through the Inn, and ultimately obtained tenancy at a mixed Common Law set. I initially wanted to do crime, but sadly it did not work out as a result of being a woman. I went to a chambers party one year, and two senior partners from two different firms approached me and commented that they thought I had left chambers as I “never did any of the Crown Court trials they sent down

in my name”.. Surprised to hear this I approached my then senior clerk the next day. Much to my surprise he did not try to doge the issue, and instead openly explained to me that “girls” were better at family law, so it was easier to offer me for family and therefore the Crown Court work was then given to the “men” (he might have said “boys”, I can’t say for sure now).. After that open acknowledgment of gender discrimination, I swiftly decided to leave the chambers and after a short while, I joined the Housing Team at Garden Court Chambers.. Family law, however, grabbed me again, but this time for all the right reasons as the last few cases I took with me to Garden Court led to more and more new instructions with solicitors I met in each case until I was eventually doing nothing but family law and I loved it!

Later on in my career, when it came to applying for Silk, I delayed my application after convincing myself it was too big a risk for financial reasons given my mixed public and private law practice. I am the breadwinner in my family and I was concerned that taking Silk would be a financial risk with legal aid funding that I couldn’t afford to take. I applied the subsequent year when a good male friend of mine told me he was also applying, and that spurred me on.. Fortunately, I was successful, and with hindsight I wish I had not lacked the confidence to apply the previous year. Sadly, I think a lack of confidence when applying for Silk or even other appointments i.e. Tribunal or the Bench, is something that is more common amongst female Barristers, and I hope this will change in years to come.

### **[Jacqueline] Who is your biggest inspiration?**

**[Indu]** – My grand-mother. She was raised in India by her elder brother after her parents passed away in an earthquake when she was just 3 years old. She came over to England in the 1960s with my grand-father in search of a better future. They came with very little and had to work extremely hard and faced a lot of challenges, including racism at the time. She worked long hours in factories along with my grandfather and raised four sons, one of which was my Dad. Despite all the difficulties she had in her life, she was the most positive and grateful person I have ever met. I was fortunate enough to live with my grandparents when I was little. She passed away unexpectedly when I was a teenager. Her resilience, loving nature and ability to smile each day through anything life may throw at you continue to be an inspiration to me, even now.

**[Alison]** – Maya Angelou– she was such an amazing writer, poet and civil rights campaigner. Although she went through huge trauma in her childhood, she still radiated positivity and hope through her writing. Her writing inspires me and give me strength. I will never tire of hearing her recite ‘Still I Rise’ , which makes me feel that anything is possible.

**[Jacqueline] What three tips would you give to any women out there who are aspiring to be a Barrister?**

**[Alison]** – Firstly, trust your gut, if you think you are being treated differently because you are a woman then you probably are being, and you should seek out help from others.. There are lots of supportive women out there and organisations that you can turn to. You are not alone!

Secondly, and this is always easier said than done in this profession, set firm boundaries with your time. It is especially common for women at the Bar to measure their worth by how hard they work and feel that they must work so much harder to prove themselves– you don’t and it’s a destructive spiral once you start that. Prioritise your well-being.. The Bar has started to pay head to these issues and the conversation has at least started although there is still much to be done, especially at the publicly funded Bar.

Thirdly, remember that there are lots of amazing women at the Bar who are more than happy to offer you support. Search out those who offer you a hand. When you become more senior, leave out your hand for someone else to take. I really think times are changing, and women are showing their strength as a collective group. I am very proud of 4PB – we have recently set up a women’s mentoring scheme and ran a very successful women’s forum which was a chance for the women in chambers to discuss all kinds of issues that crop up in day to day life at the Bar. Our parental leave policy is ground breaking. There are also other, outside schemes that are hugely valuable, such as the work being done by Women in Family Law. Don’t be afraid to reach out– we are stronger together!

**[Indu]** Firstly, believe in yourself and in your abilities. Don’t lose that confidence, however bad a day you have in court. Secondly, take advantage of mentoring schemes that are out there. I used the Inner temple mentoring scheme when I was applying for pupillage and found it invaluable. So many people in this profession want to offer advice and guidance to those looking to join, please do utilise these opportunities! Thirdly, do your research thoroughly before applying to chambers – be aware of their approach to women’s rights, such as their parental leave policy.



Interviewed by **Jacqueline Renton** on  
**International Women’s Day**  
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