

Celebrating the past and changing the future



Following recent media reports – and social media commentary – on the subject of women in the law, we thought we would use our inaugural column in *Modern Law* to take a constructive look at this topic by show-casing an enterprise which highlights the pioneering work of women within the legal sector.

The First 100 Years is a ground-breaking history project, supported by the Law Society and the Bar Council, charting the journey of women in law since 1919. In 2019, the campaign, founded by Dana Denis-Smith, will mark the centenary of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919, which paved the way for women to enter the profession.

The project will produce 100 short films for the British Library, celebrating powerful female role models, providing a platform for debate and establishing a valuable archive for the future.

The aim is to promote a strong and equal future for all women in the legal profession. Great progress has been made but there is still so much more to achieve, as was illustrated by the study published in July 2015, which revealed a 42% pay gap between male and female solicitors in Scotland.

The First 100 Years project challenges the attitudes underlying such statistics with stories of women lawyers such as Rose Heilbron. Born before women had the vote, she was a working mother who (with Helena Normanton) became the first female barrister to take silk, the first to lead in a murder case, the first woman recorder and the first woman to sit at the Old Bailey. As chair of the Heilbron Committee, she made the recommendations that rape victims should remain anonymous and be protected from unnecessary cross-examination about their sexual history, which we now take for granted as law.

We are delighted that, in Bridget Dolan and Katie Gollop, we have two female barristers taking silk this year at Serjeants' Inn Chambers (together with Mike Horne). However, it remains the case that women represent just 13%¹ of today's QCs. In this context we would urge you to visit first100years.org.uk for fascinating stories of inspiring women, ranging from Eliza Orme (the very first woman to receive a law degree in England in 1888) through to Sonya Leydecker (who in 2014 became the first female CEO of a leading law firm).

The Law Society's recent report, *The Future of Legal Services*, predicts that by 2020 (101 years after the introduction of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act) women will account for over half of all solicitors. We are delighted to support a project which highlights so many inspiring individual women lawyers. As Dana notes: "by celebrating the past we will be changing the future".

Catherine Calder, Solicitor and Director of Client Care, Serjeants' Inn Chambers.

1. Correct at time of writing