

WOZA LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

CELEBRATING 100 YEARS OF WOMEN IN LAW

**SAWLA WC commends WOZA for driving the commemoration
of 100 years of women lawyers in South Africa.**

**SAWLA WC will continue to celebrate 100 years and bring
activities that will empower and engage our members.**



HONORABLE JUSTICES OF THE WESTERN CAPE HIGH COURT,

Seehaam Samaai
Women's Legal Centre

It is my great honor to stand before you today to speak on behalf of South African Women Lawyers and their mission. Our journey towards gender equality in the legal profession has been a long and challenging one, and it is important to recognize the trailblazing women who have paved the way for us.

It is therefore with great pleasure to commemorate the 100th anniversary of women in law in South Africa. It is indeed a momentous occasion as we celebrate the progress that women have made in the legal profession over the past century. We honor the courageous women who broke barriers, challenged stereotypes, and paved the way for women's participation in the legal profession.

One such woman was Madeline Wookey, a South African who challenged the state between 1909 and 1912 when they refused to admit her to practice law. Her case, along with those of other women who followed in her footsteps, led to the passing of the Women's Legal Practitioners Act 7 of 1923, which allowed women to be admitted to the bar. It was then that Irene Antoinette Geffen became the first female admitted attorney. However, it would be another 44 years before South Africa saw its first black female attorney in Desiree Finca from Umtata in the Transkei.

As black women began to join the legal fraternity, it paved the way for young activists. Cissie Gool was the first colored woman to receive a master's degree from the University of Cape Town and became the first black female advocate in 1962.

On 26 March 1923, South Africa passed the Women Legal Practitioners Act 7 of 1923. In section 1, the statute proclaimed that 'women shall be entitled to be admitted to practice and to be enrolled as advocates, attorneys, notaries, public or conveyancers ... subject to the same terms and conditions as apply to men.'

Today, South African Women Lawyers continue to strive towards gender equality in the legal profession. Our mission is to promote and advance the status of women in the legal profession, to create opportunities for women to succeed, and to advocate for gender equality in all aspects of the legal system.

However, we must acknowledge that women attorneys still face significant challenges in South Africa. Women are still underrepresented in senior positions in law firms and on the bench. Women lawyers continue to experience gender discrimination, unequal pay, and sexual harassment in the workplace. These challenges have a negative impact on women's career progression and limit their opportunities to contribute fully to the legal profession.

Challenges:

- 1. Deep-rooted cultural attitudes:** South Africa's patriarchal culture remains a significant barrier to gender transformation. This culture tends to see women as inferior and often denies them opportunities for advancement in various fields, including the legal profession.
- 2. Institutional biases:** There are institutional biases that still exist in the legal profession. For example, women may find it harder to secure appointments or access funding for their practices.
- 3. Access to education:** Women may also face barriers to education, particularly in rural areas, where access to schools is limited.
- 4. Lack of mentorship and support:** Many women in the legal profession face a lack of mentorship and support, which can make it challenging to break through the glass ceiling.

As we look forward to the next 100 years in law, we must work towards addressing these challenges. It is essential to create an inclusive and supportive environment for women in the legal profession.

Law firms must develop and implement policies that promote diversity, equality, and inclusion in the workplace. They must ensure that women have access to equal opportunities for career advancement, professional development, and leadership positions.

What we want to see in the next hundred years:

1. **Gender parity:** In the next hundred years, we hope to see gender parity in the legal profession, with equal representation of men and women in all areas of practice.
2. **Cultural shift:** We would like to see a cultural shift towards greater acceptance of women in the legal profession, with no barriers to entry or advancement.
3. **Support for women:** We would like to see more support for women lawyers, including mentorship, training, and development opportunities.
4. **Addressing intersectionality:** We hope to see greater attention paid to intersectionality, with efforts made to address the unique challenges faced by women of different races, classes, and sexual orientations.
5. **Women in leadership:** In the next hundred years, we want to see more women in leadership positions in the legal profession, including judges, advocates, and senior partners in law firms.

Solutions:

1. **Cultural change:** Addressing gender inequality requires cultural change. This can be achieved through education and awareness-raising campaigns aimed at changing attitudes towards women.
2. **Institutional reforms:** To address institutional biases, there needs to be systemic reform. This includes reviewing policies, recruitment practices, and funding allocations to ensure that they are gender-sensitive.
3. **Access to education:** Women must have equal access to education. This can be achieved by investing in schools in rural areas, providing scholarships for girls, and encouraging women to pursue careers in traditionally male-dominated fields.
4. **Mentorship and support:** Women in the legal profession need access to mentorship and support. This can be achieved by creating networks for women lawyers, providing training and development opportunities, and ensuring that senior positions are open to women.

In recognition of the important milestone of 100 years of women lawyers in South Africa and to raise awareness of the ongoing challenges faced by women in the legal profession, we would like to propose that Parliament host a joint sitting to recognize the contributions of women lawyers in South Africa. This would be an opportunity for Parliament to acknowledge the role that women have played in shaping our legal system and to demonstrate its commitment to promoting gender equality in all aspects of our society.

Let us work towards creating an inclusive and supportive environment for women attorneys, where they can thrive and contribute fully to the legal profession. Let us continue to push for gender equality and women's rights, and together, we can ensure that the next 100 years in law are truly transformative for women in South Africa.

Thank you