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ON THE RISE: WOMEN LAWYERS IN ZAMBIA

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ABSTRACT

There is a paucity of research on women lawyers in Zambia. This article fills an important knowledge gap by establishing the first baseline of the status of women lawyers. Based on a nationwide survey, interviews, and literature review, this article shows that despite the progress made concerning the status of women lawyers in Zambia, many barriers still exist. These barriers not only hinder the entrance of women lawyers into the profession but also deter their progression within law firms. The article investigates the extent to which the findings in the literature on African women lawyers apply to women lawyers in Zambia. Following these findings, the authors make recommendations that fit the specifics of the Zambia context.

Keywords: woman lawyers, Zambia, gender equity

1. INTRODUCTION

Up until April 1973, when the Law Association of Zambia Act was enacted, the legal profession in Zambia mirrored that in the United Kingdom. There was a split Bar, comprising barristers and solicitors trained in the United Kingdom at various Inns of Court, supported by qualified law clerks.³ The Zambian Bar Association has existed since the 1950s. It was previously named the Law Society of Zambia and, before Zambia's Independence in 1964, it was called the Law Society of Northern Rhodesia.

In the early 1970s, the Attorney-General, Mr. Fitzpatrick Chuula State Counsel (SC), and Mr. Africa Bruce Munyama SC, decided to transform the more colonial Law Society of Zambia into the more indigenous Law Association of Zambia (LAZ).⁴ The creation of LAZ was prompted by the need to create a body that embraced private and public lawyers. It also created a more Zambian identity at a time when lawyers had only just started to be trained locally (Ndulo, 1985). Mr. Munyama became the first President of LAZ in 1973, having been elected by an overwhelming majority⁵. He was the first indigenous Zambian to head the Bar Association.⁶

Against that background, in 1973, Ms. Lombe Phyllis Chibesakunda became the first qualified female legal practitioner,⁷ having trained at Gray's Inn in London. In the same year, she became the first female Solicitor-General of Zambia.⁸ There has been no other female Solicitor-General since then. In 2012, Justice Chibesakunda became the first woman to act as Chief Justice of the Republic of Zambia, a post she occupied until 2015.⁹ Florence Ndepele Mumba became the first woman to be appointed to the position of High Court Judge in October 1980¹⁰. Justice Irene Mambilima was appointed as the first

³ Ndulo, M. (1985). Legal Education in Zambia: Pedagogical Issues. *Journal of Legal Education*, 35(3), 445–454

⁴ This brief history of how the Law Association of Zambia was formed was narrated to Linda Kasonde in a conversation with Dr. Rodger Chongwe SC, a very senior legal practitioner and peer of Mr. Fitzpatrick Chuula and Mr. Africa Bruce Munyama SC in May 2017.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Dickson Jere (2022), 'Book Review: My Trodden Path – An Autobiography by Justice Chibesakunda, Zambia's First Female Lawyer' (*Lusaka Times*) <https://www.lusakatimes.com/2022/11/06/book-review-my-trodden-path-an-autobiography-by-justice-chibesakunda-zambias-first-female-lawyer/> accessed 18 June 2026.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Susana SáCouto (2026), 'An Interview with Florence Ndepele Mwachande Mumba' (*The Ad Hoc Tribunals Oral History Project*, Brandeis University) <<https://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/international-justice/oral-history/interviews/mumba-florence-ndepele-mwachande.html>> accessed 18 June 2026.

substantive female Chief Justice in February 2015¹¹. In the last 10 to 15 years, many Zambian women have risen to prominence in the judiciary following in the footsteps of these pioneers. In 2021, Mrs. Nelly Mutti SC was elected as the first female Speaker of the National Assembly.

The recognition of Zambian women at the Bar has been less notable. The first woman to be accorded the rank and status of State Counsel, the Zambian equivalent of King's Counsel, was the late Josephine Nyirongo SC. There have only been a handful of women who have been given this honour in Zambia, including Justice Prisca Nyambe SC, Justice Abha Patel SC, Mrs. Irene Kunda SC. Zambia, Mrs. Mwangala Zaloumis SC, and Mrs. Kondwa Sakala-Chibiya SC. Zambia had its first female Director of Public Prosecutions, Mrs. Lillian Shawa-Siyuni SC, appointed in October 2016¹².

We wrote this article to inspire other women to take up leadership positions in different sectors of Zambian society by documenting the experiences of women legal practitioners in Zambia in social contexts of deep-seated patriarchy. In Zambia, great strides have been made in terms of advancing women to the highest positions in the judiciary; some work remains to advance the position of women at the Bar. There are increasing numbers of women lawyers in executive positions in private corporations and public institutions. However, women are still grappling with being seen as equals to their male peers. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the lack of recognition of women admitted to the rank and status of State Counsel, the highest accolade for lawyers at the Bar. Currently, only two female State Counsel are practising at the Bar. Additionally, in the entire history of the Bar Association in Zambia, only one woman has been elected to the position of President of the Bar Association. To date, no woman has ever been appointed Attorney-General in Zambia. However, with the number of women entering the legal profession fast outpacing the male entrants, there is a likelihood that we will see a shift in the number of women at the top of all sectors of the profession.

¹¹ Institute for African Women in Law, 'Irene Mambilima: First Woman Chief Justice (Zambia)' <<https://www.africanwomeninlaw.com/african-women-in-law/Irene-Mambilima>> accessed 18 June 2026.

¹² 'Zambia: LAZ Salutes First Female DPP' AllAfrica (26 October 2016) <<https://allafrica.com/stories/201610270023.html>> accessed 18 June 2026.

2. BRIEF HISTORY AND SKETCH OF THE COUNTRY'S LEGAL EDUCATION SYSTEM AND LEGAL PROFESSION

Until after Zambia's independence in 1964, all legal professionals were mostly trained in the United Kingdom as Barristers or Solicitors. Barristers were lawyers trained to represent clients in court, whilst solicitors dealt with non-contentious work and referred cases to Barristers.¹³ All this changed with the enactment of the Law Association of Zambia in March 1973, which introduced a fused Bar, where all qualified legal practitioners had audience before domestic courts, and also introduced an indigenous legal education system under what was then known as the Legal Practice Institute. Up until the late 1990s, the classes at the Legal Practice Institute, which was later renamed the Zambia Institute of Advanced Legal Education (ZIALE) in April 1996, averaged about forty students.¹⁴ This was because previously, the only local university allowed to confer law degrees was the government-run University of Zambia (UNZA). Attaining a law degree was a privilege granted only to students with the highest grades, who were admitted into the UNZA law school, which was the only law school in Zambia until the late 1990s. Since legal education became liberalised in the late 1990s, hundreds of law graduates, from both private and public institutions, have entered ZIALE. Passing ZIALE on the first attempt, however, proved challenging, with between 1-3% of the students in an intake clearing all their exams in all ten subjects over the previous ten years.¹⁵ This led to speculation that there were concerted efforts by the ZIALE Council to restrict the number of new entrants to the profession to manage competition in the legal profession.¹⁶ The cost of obtaining the legal practice qualification is currently around K30,000.00, which many ordinary Zambians struggle to pay.¹⁷ In addition, ZIALE students are required to find a law firm in which to do their practical learning. The number of law students far outstrips the number of available

¹³ Ndulo M (1985), 'Legal Education in Zambia: Pedagogical Issues,' 35(3) *Journal of Legal Education*, 445.

¹⁴ See Nicholas A Kahn-Fogel (2012), 'The Troubling Shortage of African Lawyers: Examination of a Continental Crisis Using Zambia as a Case Study,' *University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Law* 719 <https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2196646> accessed 18 June 2026.

¹⁵ Chief Editor (2019), 'The High Failure Rate at ZIALE is a Source of Worry, and Should be Addressed' *Lusaka Times* (21 October) <<https://www.lusakatimes.com/2019/10/21/the-high-failure-rate-at-ziale-is-a-source-of-worry-and-should-be-addressed/>> accessed 18 June 2026.

¹⁶ National Assembly of Zambia (2013), Report of the Committee on Legal Affairs, Governance, Human Rights, Gender Matters and Child Affairs for the Second Session of the Eleventh National Assembly Appointed on 27th September 2012, <https://www.parliament.gov.zm/sites/default/files/documents/committee_reports/REPORT%20OF%20THE%20COMMITTEE%20ON%20LEGAL%20AFFAIRS%20EDITED%2022.pdf> accessed 18 June 2026.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

placements at law firms because the number of law students has grown exponentially in the recent past.¹⁸ Most ZIALE students only clear the Bar exams on their second or third attempt.

The rank of seniority in the legal profession in Zambia is prescribed under section 20 of the Legal Practitioners Act of March 1973 as follows:

1. The current Attorney-General
2. Previous occupants of the office of the Attorney-General in order of their date of appointment, the oldest being the most senior;
3. The current Solicitor-General;
4. All previous occupants of the office of the Solicitor-General in order of their date of appointment;
5. All State Counsel in order of the date upon which the honour was conferred on them, the oldest being the most senior;
6. All other legal practitioners, according to the order of their entry on the roll of legal practitioners, the oldest being the most senior.

All judges are senior to anyone at the Bar. The qualifications to ascend to the bench are contained in Article 141 of the Constitution as amended by Act No. 2 of 2016. To become a High Court Judge, one needs to have been a legal practitioner in good standing for at least ten years. For a judge of the Court of Appeal, you need to have been a legal practitioner in good standing for at least twelve years. To join the Constitutional Court or Supreme Court as a judge, you need to have practised the law for at least fifteen years and have been in good standing during that period.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several key themes have emerged in a literature review on African women lawyers. The literature describes specific challenges faced by African women lawyers, including gender discrimination, cultural norms, and balancing professional and personal responsibilities.¹⁹ In addition, literature has emerged that proposes certain “pathways”

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Brenner, H. (2014). Expanding the pathways to gender equality in the legal profession. *Legal Ethics*, 17(2), 261–280, 261, International Development Law Organization (IDLO) (2018) Women Delivering Justice: Contributions, Barriers, Pathways, 27

to improve the status quo,²⁰ which includes suggestions regarding the role of the national law associations, providing leadership training, sensitisation of clients and the public, as well as providing maternity-oriented changes in the workplace.²¹ The literature also highlights the significant strides made by African women lawyers in breaking barriers and becoming legal scholars, judges, and influential advocates for various causes. Scholars note that much progress towards advancement of the position of female lawyers was made from the 1970s onwards,²² which reflects the Zambian experience as well.

Advancement of women lawyers was particularly true for the public legal sphere in Zambia, in sharp contrast to the private sector, which was lagging behind. This reflects a wider trend ²³Zambia has had two female Chief Justices (one Acting, the other substantive).²⁴ The current President of the Constitutional Court is female, as well as the Speaker of Parliament. According to a 2019 paper by the Chief Justice of Zambia, in terms of gender parity on the bench, currently out of 76 Judges of the Superior Courts, 40 are female, representing 52 per cent, while 36 are male. Of the seventeen Registrars in the various courts, eight (8) are women, representing 47 per cent.²⁵ Moreover, many government institutions like the Human Rights Commission and Anti-Corruption institutions are often female-headed. As Professor J. Jarpa Dawuni has rightly observed:

Some countries, such as Cape Verde, Zambia, South Africa, Namibia, and Sierra Leone, have had women as presidents of the bar association or law society. In the legal academy, some countries have recorded success with women as deans of law faculties and heads of departments. And across the continent, the number of women called to the bar is increasing each year... Still, challenges remain, narrowing the opportunity structures for women to lead in some countries.²⁶

²⁰ Women Delivering Justice: Contributions, Barriers, Pathways, 27

²¹ Women in Law & Leadership (2023), Kenyan Bar, Patterns, Progress and Prospects, 34-35.

²² Menkel-Meadow, quoted in Women in Law & Leadership (2023), Kenyan Bar, Patterns, Progress and Prospects.

²³ J. Dawuni, quoted in Kenyan Bar, 3.

²⁴ One of them was the acting Chief Justice.

²⁵ Mrs Justice Irene C Mambilima, 'Keynote Address by the Honourable Chief Justice of the Republic of Zambia during the Forum for Zambia Women Accountants (FZWA) 3rd National Symposium' (Taj Pamodzi Lusaka, 11 October 2019) <<https://www.judiciaryzambia.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/See-full-key-note-address-here.pdf>> accessed 18 June 2026.

²⁶ Josephine Jarpa Dawuni (2023) 'African Women Lawyers: Numbers Are up but Report Sheds Light on Obstacles to Leadership in the Profession' The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/african-women-lawyers-numbers-are-up-but-report-sheds-light-on-obstacles-to-leadership-in-the-profession-208131>, accessed 18 June 2026.

All these developments in the law profession are entirely undocumented, as there is no research on women lawyers in Zambia. As such, this article fills an important knowledge gap. By presenting the quantitative and qualitative findings of the research, the article will investigate the extent to which the findings in general and Africa-specific literature apply to female lawyers in Zambia and will make evidence-based recommendations that fit the Zambia context.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Intersectionality, a concept central to black feminist scholarship, was first introduced by Crenshaw in 1989.²⁷ The term creates a crucial framework for understanding the complex dynamics between race, class, and gender, which together form interconnected systems of oppression.²⁸ Intersectionality allows for a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of social and political power and inequality. Therefore, in a discussion of female lawyers in Zambia, it is paramount to include a discussion of intersectionality in order to locate the ways in which social, economic, and geographic factors intersect to inform their experiences of equity.

While Zambia has made notable strides in fostering gender equity through recent initiatives such as the 2016 amendments to the Zambian Constitution, the enactment of the Gender Equity and Equality Act No.22 of 2015 (although the Gender Equity and Equality Commission has yet to be established), and the establishment of fast-track courts for gender-based violence, the country's pluralistic legal system reveals the intersection of gender and culture often place women in marginalised social positions. The coexistence of both formal and customary legal systems in Zambia sometimes leads to discrepancies and disharmony, particularly affecting the lives of women. An illustrative example lies within the institution of marriage. Under the formal law, as governed by the Marriage Act, the minimum age of marriage is set at 21. However, customary law recognises marriages with no minimum age of consent. The implications of this are clear in that 29% of Zambian girls are married before their 18th birthday, 5% are married before the age of 15, and only 3% of boys in Zambia are married before the

²⁷ Crenshaw, K. (1989) "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," University of Chicago Legal Forum, Vol 1989, Issue. 1, Article 8

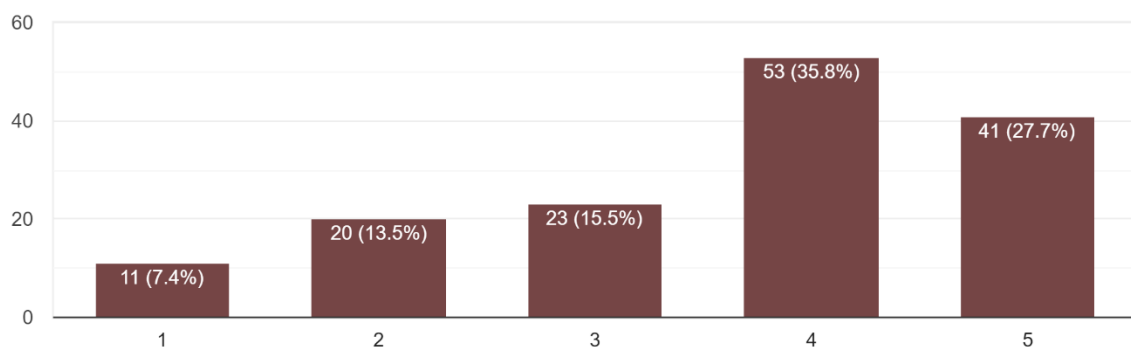
²⁸ Collins, P. H. (1990), *Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination Reconceptualizing Race, Class, and Gender as Interlocking Systems of Oppression* (pp. 221–238).

age of 18.²⁹ While the formal government has been making efforts to reduce child marriage, the strength of customary laws and their ability to perpetuate sexism are clear markers of gender inequity that continue to shape societal expectations of women. This disparity in marriage practices creates a social context that further hampers women's access to education and limits their opportunities to pursue careers in the legal field. These barriers to access are further compounded by intersecting identities of marginalisation, including socioeconomic status and geographic locale.

The persistence of these inequities poses ongoing challenges that women must navigate throughout their legal careers. Our 2023 survey, entitled 'Women and the Legal Profession in Zambia', revealed that 64% of respondents felt that society's perception of women's roles negatively impacted their ambitions in the legal profession.

Figure i: Perception of women's role in the legal profession

Society's perception of women's roles negatively affects women's ambitions in the legal profession.
148 responses



Key: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5= Strongly agree

Source: Author's survey

This response indicates that the intersecting forms of social oppression that hinder women's entry into the legal field continue to manifest even after they have established their careers. It is crucial to consider how the legal profession itself may perpetuate existing forms of oppression within society.

²⁹ Girls Not Brides (2022), Child Marriage Atlas - Zambia Profile, www.girlsnotbrides.org.

In a report on the occupational closure among women attorneys in South Africa by Meyer, it is noted that many women face a "double bind." If they prioritize work, they are labelled as uncommitted mothers, and if they prioritise family or seek flexibility, they are labelled as uncommitted attorneys. While this observation pertains to the South African legal context, it highlights a broader culture within the legal profession characterised by long hours, constant availability, and a focus on satisfying client demands.³⁰ When examining this work culture within the context of Zambian society, where women occupy more marginalised positions that are further exacerbated by intersecting identities, it becomes crucial to explore how Zambian women navigate these experiences and how it impacts their career trajectories. By adopting an intersectional lens to understand the challenges faced by female lawyers in Zambia, we can gain deeper insights into the multifaceted barriers and power dynamics that shape their experiences. This understanding paves the way for the development of more effective strategies and policies aimed at addressing these challenges and fostering a legal profession that is more equitable and inclusive.

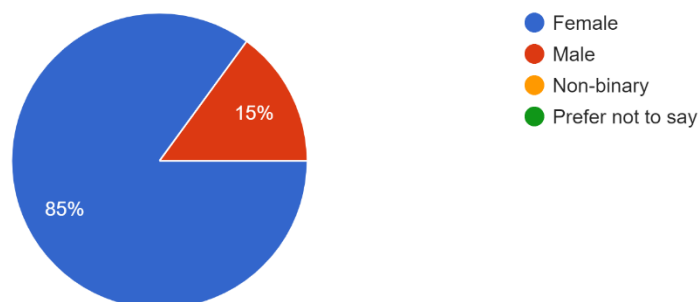
5. METHODOLOGY

In this article, we focus on women lawyers in Zambia. For the purpose of our study, we sent out a survey with the support of the Institute for African Women in Law. In 2023, an email notice was sent out on the mailing list of the Law Association of Zambia, which has around 3,000 members, inviting LAZ members to respond to the survey. In total, we received 148 responses. Given that the sample of the survey was not completely random, in the sense that the respondents are particularly interested in achieving more female representation in the legal profession, it is fair to say that the results are skewed in that direction. The gender demographic of the respondents was overwhelmingly female at a total of 85% as can be seen in figure iv.

³⁰ Meyer, T. (2021). Reaching for Partnership: An Intersectional Study of Occupational Closure Among Women Attorneys in South Africa (unpublished PhD Thesis).

Figure ii: Distribution of gender

Gender
147 responses

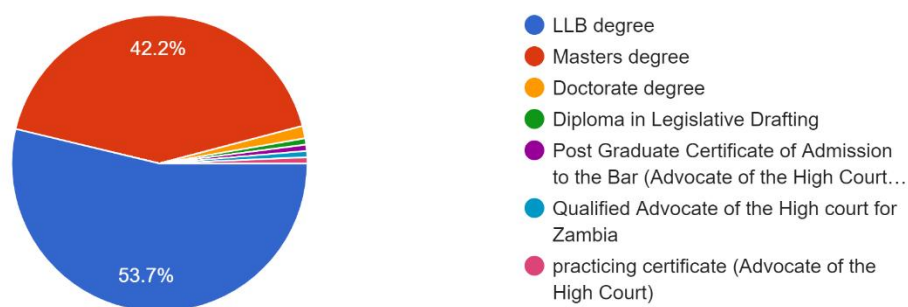


Source: Authors' survey

The levels of education among the respondents were relatively high, as can be seen in figure iv, with 42% of the respondents stating they have a Masters' degree.

Figure iii: Higher educational Level

Highest Educational Level
147 responses

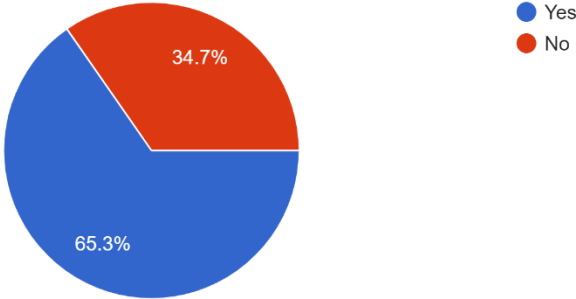


Source: Authors' survey

The survey also shows that the respondents are high levels of leaders in their firms/institutions, with 65.3% affirming their leadership role.

Figure iv: Leadership position

Do you hold/ have you held any leadership position at your institution or law firm?
147 responses

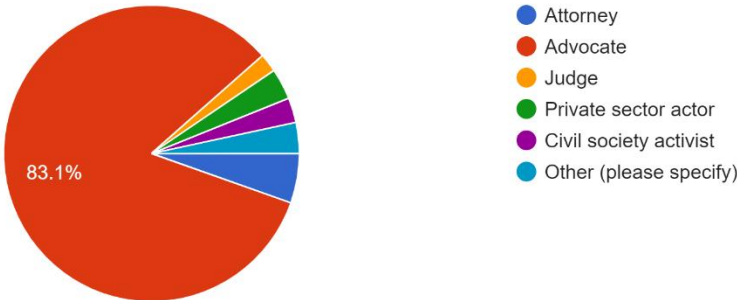


Source: Authors' survey

The respondents classified themselves respectively as Attorney, Advocate, Judge, Private sector actors, as well as a few civil society activists. The majority, however, were advocates (83.7%). Their experience ranged from below 5 years at the bar (51%) to over 20 years (15%), see figure vi.

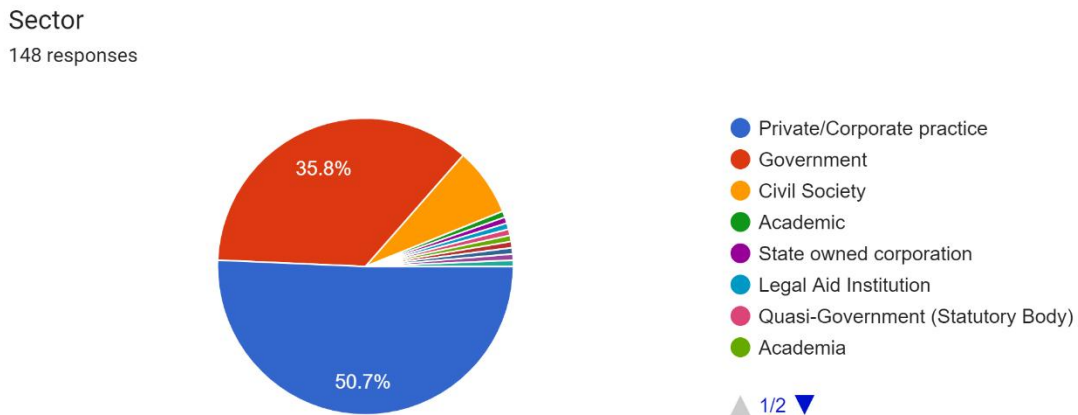
Figure v: Current legal professional status

Current legal profession status
148 responses



Notably, many of the respondents work for government (35.8%), with the majority (50.7%) working for private practice.

Figure vi: Sector of employment



In addition to the survey, we applied a qualitative methodology by undertaking a desk review of literature, legislation and policies. We also carried out individual interviews of top female lawyers in four different sectors: general practitioners in private practice, niche practitioners in private practice, in-house counsel from large corporates, and lawyers from civil society organisations. Two were selected from each sector, eight in total were interviewed. In addition, we draw upon the lived (and documented) experiences of one of the co-authors, namely Linda Kasonde, who was the first female president of the Law Association of Zambia and authored the book *Women, Resilience, and the Will to Lead* (2023), which details some of her experiences as President of LAZ.

6. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND FINDINGS

In this section, the findings of the authors' survey and the interviews are presented. The sections follow the sub-headings of the authors' survey, which looked at the representation and promotion of women legal practitioners, before investigating the challenges and the barriers to advancement in the legal profession. Looking at the way forward, the authors consider the opportunities before making recommendations.

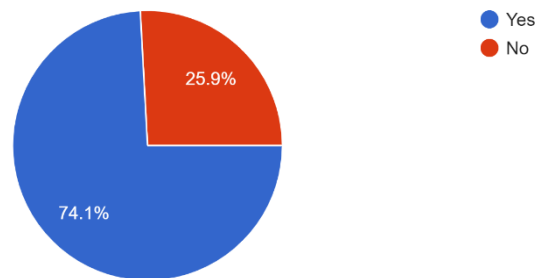
6.1 Representation and promotion of women lawyers in law firms

As alluded to earlier, about a third of the respondents (34.7%) indicated that there is a high female representation in their law firms.³¹

In the author's survey, participants confirmed that over 74% of executives or partners have been female, and that they are increasingly represented.

Figure vii Female Senior Executives

There has been a female Senior executive or partner at my firm or institution.
147 responses



Source: Authors' survey

Of those who have not sought a leadership role, 37.3%, felt that they were not qualified enough to seek a higher position, while 32.7% said they had not familiarised themselves with the requirements of this position. Their responses might point to an underestimation of women's skills or worth, or that there might be another hurdle that women do not consider a leadership role.³²

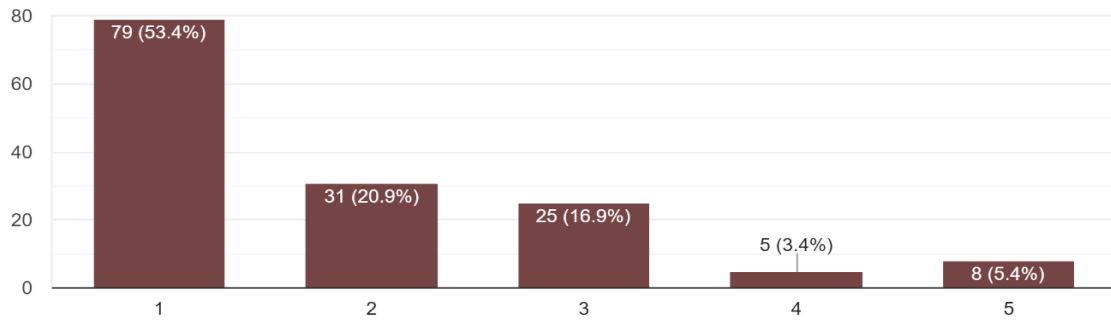
³¹ As explained in the methodological section, the replies might be skewed, as respondents seem to come from a particular segment of the profession. We do not have the number of female-headed law firms in Zambia.

³² Women in Law & Leadership Nigerian bar (2023), 28

Figure: Qualifications for top positions

Few women are in top leadership positions in my firm or institution because they are not qualified enough.

148 responses



Key: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree

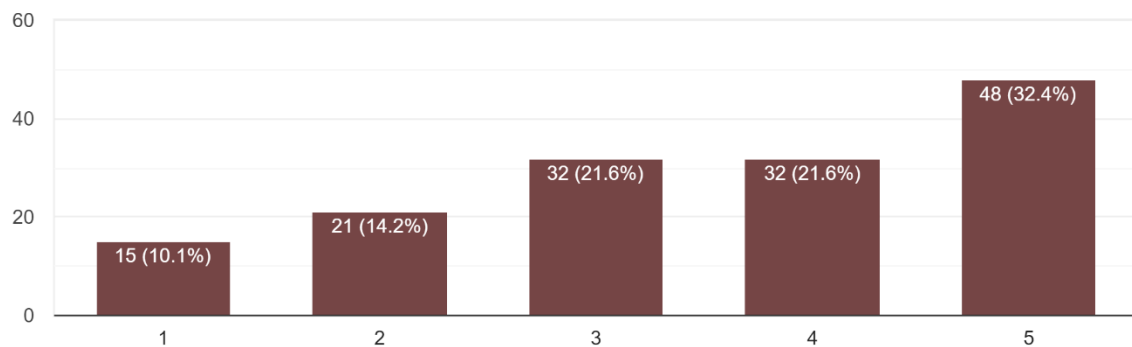
Source: Authors' survey

When asked about the equal opportunities as men to engage in activities that can lead to promotion in their respective firms, a majority indicated there is a possibility of promotion of women there (53.8% said there were these opportunities), but an equally sizeable number can see the hurdles particular to women. These hurdles will be explored next.

Figure ix: Equal opportunities for leadership promotion

At my firm or institution women have equal opportunities as men to engage in activities that can lead to promotion to leadership promotion.

148 responses



Key: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree

Source: Authors' survey

6.2 Challenges and obstacles

In this section, we discussed the challenges and obstacles identified in the survey and interviews.

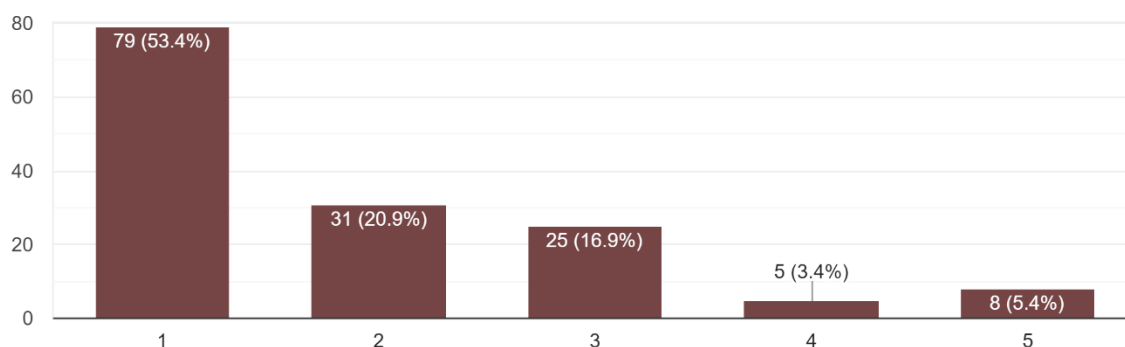
6.2.1 Representation and promotion of women in law firms

As mentioned before, about a third of the respondents (34.7%) indicated that there is a high female representation in their law firms. Of those who have not sought a leadership role (37.3%), they felt they were not qualified enough to seek a higher position, while 32.7% said they had not familiarised themselves with the requirements of this position. Their responses might point to an underestimation of women's skills or self-worth. Self-confidence plays a crucial role in women's ambitions in leadership.³³This can be determined by societal structures, but can also be self-imposed barriers.³⁴

Figure x: Qualifications for top positions

Few women are in top leadership positions in my firm or institution because they are not qualified enough.

148 responses



Key: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree

Source: Authors' survey

When asked about the equal opportunities as men to engage in activities that can lead to promotion in their respective firms, a majority indicated there is a possibility of

³³ Rasivhetshele quoted in Women in Law & Leadership (2023), South African Bar, 35

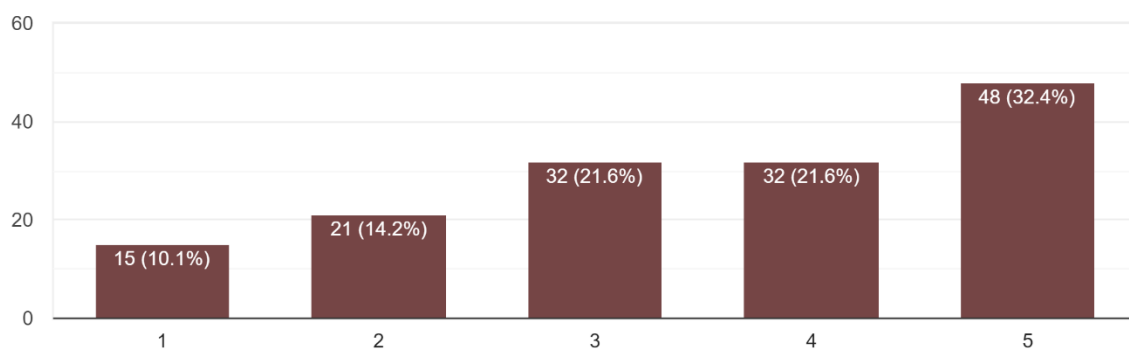
³⁴ Women in Law & Leadership Nigerian bar (2023), 28

promotion of women there (53.8% said there were these opportunities), but an equally sizeable number can see the hurdles that apply particularly to women. One of them is the lack of equal opportunities for leadership promotion. Around 54% mention that this is the most important, or a crucial factor that contributes to their lack of advancement.

Figure xi: Equal opportunities for leadership promotion

At my firm or institution women have equal opportunities as men to engage in activities that can lead to promotion to leadership promotion.

148 responses



Key: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5= Strongly agree

Source: Authors' survey

While data shows that progress has been made by women lawyers in Zambia since the 1970s, it is clear that gender norms and social expectations of women are still having an impact on women lawyers' career trajectories, as elsewhere.³⁵

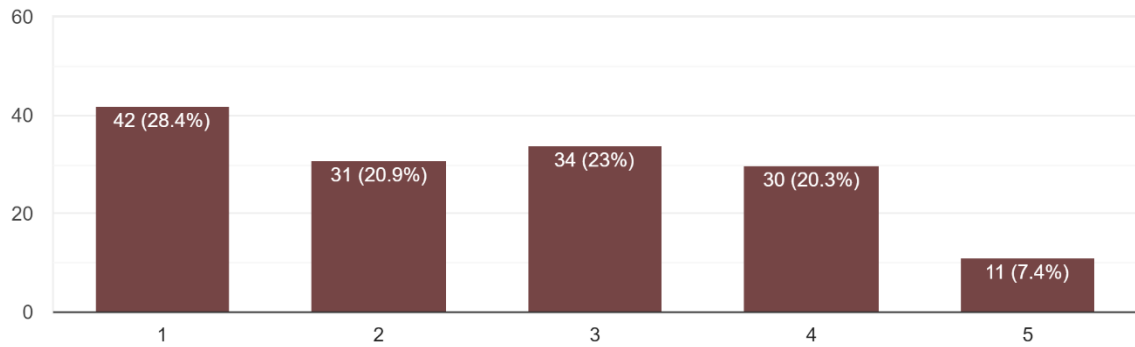
Most participants pointed out that the workload is not the greatest barrier to career progression.

³⁵ Chitapi, R. (2018). Women in law: Navigating the tensions of gender bias and intersectionality at the Cape and Johannesburg Societies of Advocates (the Bar). *Agenda*, 32(2), 43–52.

Figure x: Workload as a barrier

Women find it challenging to remain in the legal profession because of the workload.

148 responses



Key: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5= Strongly agree

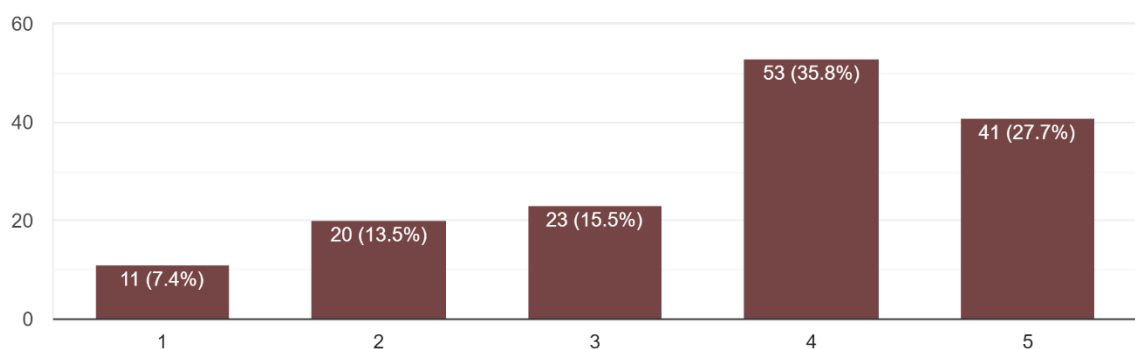
Source: Authors' survey

A shared concern, supported by the majority of respondents (64%), worry about society's perception of women's ambitions in the legal profession.

Figure xi: Society's perception of women's ambitions

Society's perception of women's roles negatively affects women's ambitions in the legal profession.

148 responses



Key: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5= Strongly agree

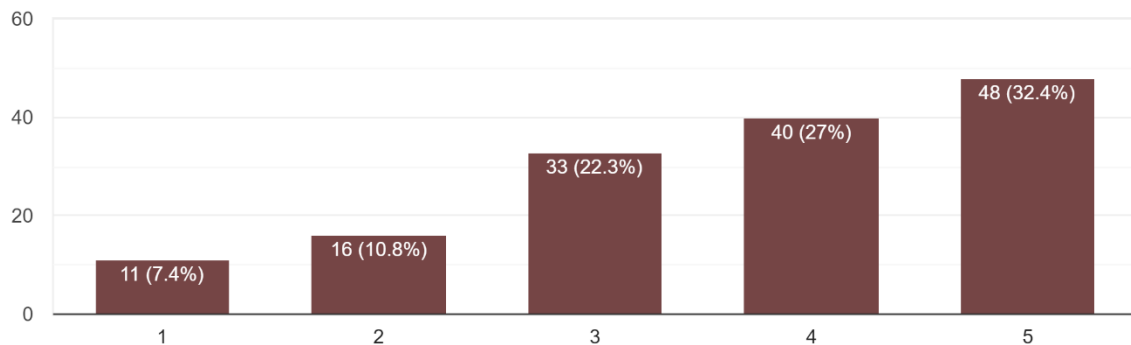
Source: Authors' survey

In addition, many respondents make mention of the lack of group support (i.e., associations and civil society) for women lawyers. It is important to note in this context that Zambia never had a women lawyers' association.

Figure xii: Group support for women lawyers

There is a lack of group support (associations and civil society) for women lawyers.

148 responses



Key: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5= Strongly agree

Source: Authors' survey

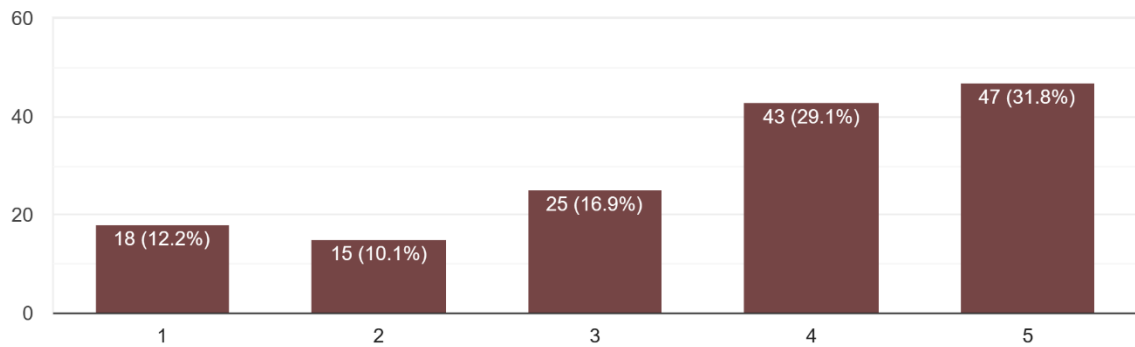
The majority of the respondents (60.9%) also affirmed that women lawyers with children and caregiving roles find it harder to advance in their careers compared to men. Recently, the American Bar Association stated that "There's an 'urgent need' to support female lawyers with children", in a report *Women in the Profession* that assesses how the motherhood penalty and other caregiver bias impact female lawyers.³⁶ This could be related to negative perceptions of women's career ambitions in the legal profession.

³⁶ Robert, A. There's an 'urgent need' to support female lawyers with children, a new ABA report shows (abajournal.com), October 2023, https://www.abajournal.com/web/article/new-aba-report-shows-urgent-need-to-support-female-lawyers-with-children#google_vignette (accessed 18 June 2026).

Figure xiii: Women lawyers with children/caregiving roles

Women lawyers with children and care giving roles find it harder to advance in their career compared to men.

148 responses



Key: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5= Strongly agree

Source: Authors' survey

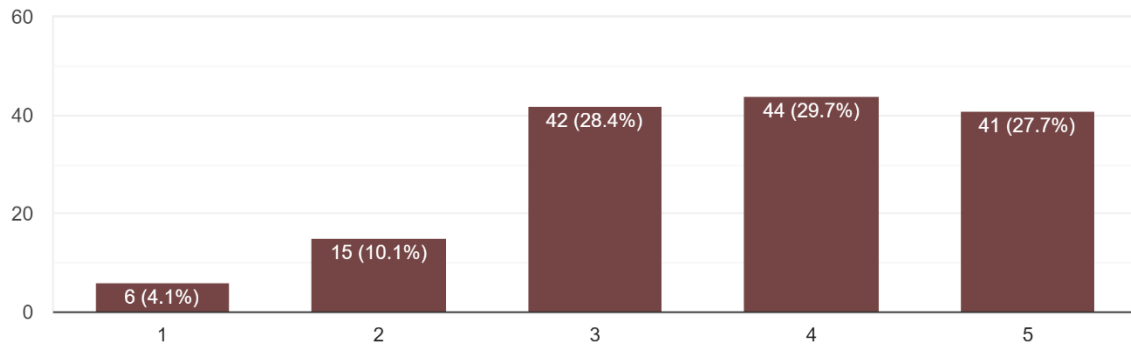
Worryingly, 57.4% of women quote sexual harassment as one of the main reasons that hinders women's career advancement in the profession, with an additional 28.4% considering it as one of the crucial factors. Zambia is no outlier in this regard. In a global survey on Bullying and Sexual Harassment in the Legal Profession, it was found that 1 in 3 female respondents experienced sexual harassment.³⁷

³⁷ Pender, K. (2019) Us Too? Bullying and Sexual Harassment in the Legal Profession, International Bar Association, 8

Figure xiv: Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment hinders women's career advancement in the profession.

148 responses



Key: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5= Strongly agree

Source: Authors' survey

Marriage is quoted by some individuals as an important reason for lack of promotion, especially when positions are found in other towns away from where your spouse lives. The choice then becomes between marriage and career advancement. As most law firms are based in Lusaka and the Copperbelt, this is less of a challenge in the Zambian context. The support of men (fathers, husbands) in their early lives, education, and careers features very positively as a support for women in legal careers in the interviews.

Having the right support systems:

Having a reliable support system, especially for those women with children.

A woman's ambition and her partner's support.

Some barriers were particular to the COVID-19 epidemic era. The predominant answer among respondents concerned the caregiving role that female lawyers were forced to step into amidst the pandemic. Significant absences from the workforce were necessitated by sick family members or children home from school needing caretaking. Many women responded that this female role expectation led to uneven unemployment, whereby women in the workforce faced more extensive layoffs than men.

Working from home had opposite effects:

To some, it had worked well allowing them to work at home and see their children which allays their fears of their children's care when they are not present. For others, working from home as a primary caregiver meant they had interference from their kids and could not concentrate on work.

Another common response was the loss of revenue/business experienced by female lawyers, who witnessed declining service demand.

Within the open comments, a notable number of respondents believed that COVID-19 had no gender-specific impact or no impact on work at all. Some felt it created new opportunities, namely that remote working has also created a very promising environment for women lawyers to step into roles and take up professional responsibilities which may otherwise be difficult if they also manage family needs. For instance, leadership or management positions within organisations no longer require travel or in-person meetings and are excellent opportunities to explore at this time. While organisations are trying to navigate the challenges of COVID-19 successfully, the changing nature of their roles and responsibilities does provide an opportunity to assess and build our skill set. Time could be used to seek out particular assignments that enhance their understanding of a different (and hopefully, in high demand) area of the law and work with specific teams that enhance their skills and network. While the COVID-19 pandemic is over, the responses give food for thought about how women cope with care-taking responsibilities when it comes to other diseases.

6.3 Pathways for women lawyers to rise

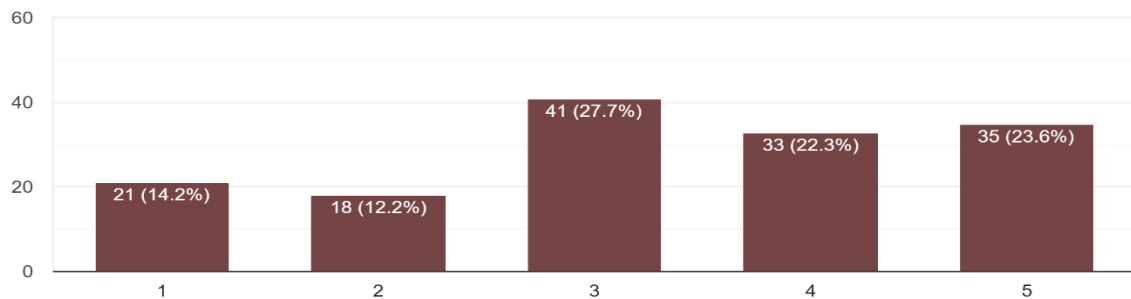
Now that we have established the barriers that hold women back in their respective career paths, we now move on to the pathways that have the potential for women lawyers to rise in law firms.

The survey indicates that female leadership in law firms can play a role in promoting women lawyer, by encouraging women to seek promotion and pursue leadership. However, less than 50% of the respondents see this as the main driver of advancement.

Figure xv: Women in leadership as encouragement

Women in leadership at my firm or institution encourage other women to seek promotion and pursue leadership

148 responses



Key: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5= Strongly agree

Source: Authors' survey

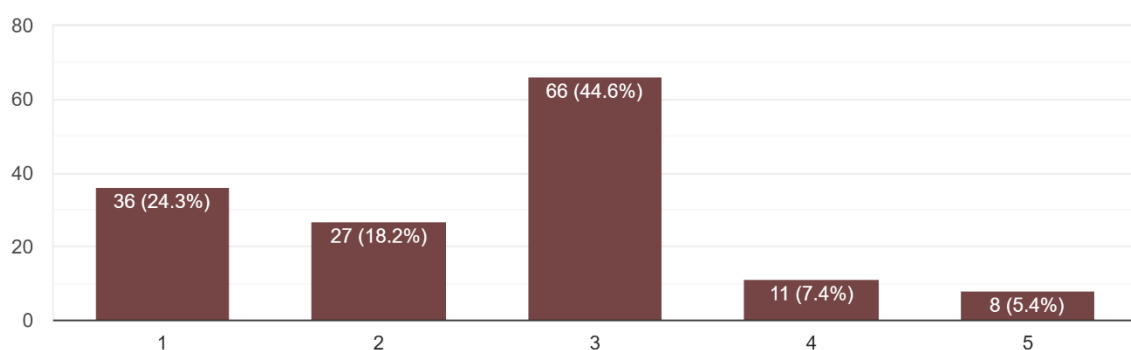
Similarly, women's leadership in a firm is seen as an important factor in the promotion of other women (45.9%).

But women's lawyer associations are not (12.8%). The score is not surprising given the fact that there is no active women's lawyers association in Zambia..

Figure xvi: Role of women lawyers' associations

Women lawyers associations have helped women in the profession to progress in their career

148 responses



Key: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5= Strongly agree

Source: Authors' survey

Respondents overwhelmingly (76%) quoted self-confidence as an extremely important factor to overcome in their opportunities/promotions.

Other obstacles mentioned in the survey were:

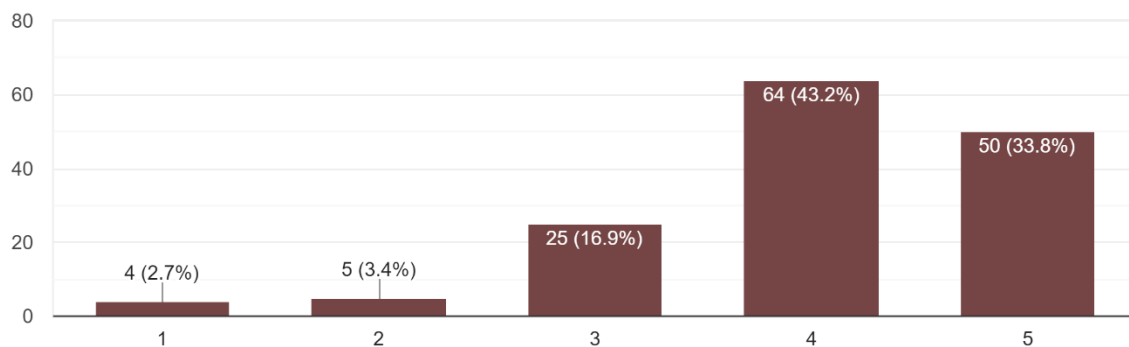
There's so much competition between women ourselves and we strive not to see another woman doing better than us, which hinders the advancement of a lot of women's advancement.

The perception that women aren't as aggressive and therefore can't get the job done effectively.

Figure xvii: role of self-confidence

Women's self-confidence has helped to advance their professional careers.

148 responses



Key: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree

Source: Authors' survey

One way of overcoming these barriers, according to the participants, is mentorship programs/relationships, though many (31.1%) seem to be ambivalent about this, pointing to structural issues undermining their progress, which cannot be solved by mentorship alone. The Nigerian report stated that: 'Often, women's issues are left to women to handle, but that strategy yields few results. Women need men's support. Therefore, expanding male allies is a sure way of speedily advancing women in law and leadership.'³⁸ This strategy was confirmed in the interviews conducted with successful

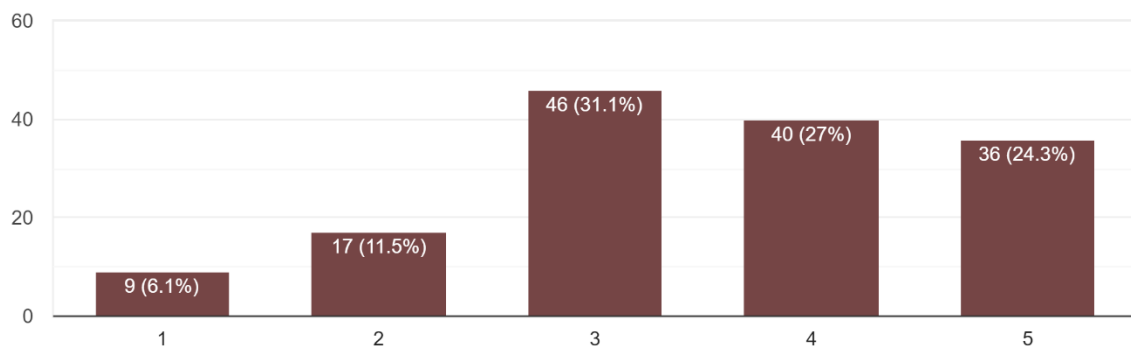
³⁸ Women in Law & Leadership (2023) Nigerian Bar, Patterns, Progress and Prospects
vii

women lawyers in Zambia, in which they explained the importance of strong male support (i.e. fathers, (ex)husbands and male colleagues).

Figure xvi: Role of mentorship

Established mentorship programs/relationships facilitate women's promotion

148 responses



Key: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5= Strongly agree

Source: Authors' survey

Other factors that give women pathways to promotions, which are mentioned in the open questions in the authors' survey, are the following:

Having good networks, which in some ways replicate the 'old boys' network:

Knowing the right people and increasing one's network.

Connections such as nepotism and favouritism.

Others mention the importance of one's reputation and a good track record:

Record of success in exceeding targets, being aggressive, and asserting your position so that you are not bullied by the men in the organisation. Honestly, it usually seems as though women have a lot more to prove. However, maintaining your great personality, and confidence, coupled with skill and hard work helps. I have found that I achieve better results in successfully pitching when I do not allow myself to be emotional about it. It's business.

6.4 Progress of female lawyers in Zambia: trends

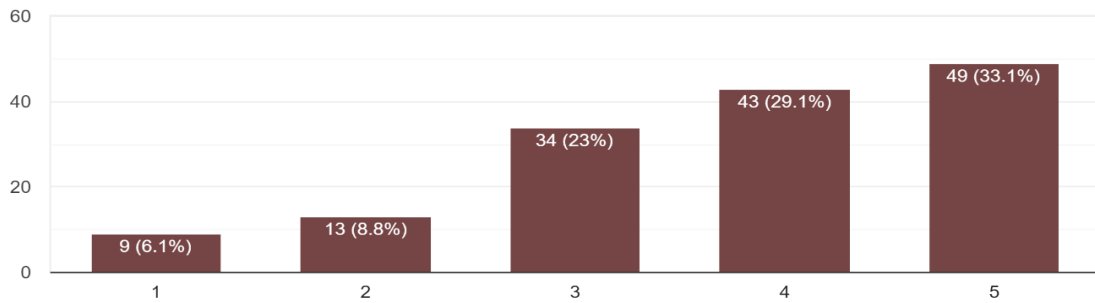
From the outset of this article, it was recognised that there has been an increase in female participation in law firms. The majority of female respondents (53%) are seeing

increasingly more women in higher administrative positions, coupled with an increase in female lawyers' assertiveness and ambition. As we mentioned earlier, this mirrors the experience in other countries in Africa.

Figure xvii: women's representation

More women are being increasingly represented at my firm or institution.

148 responses



Key: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree

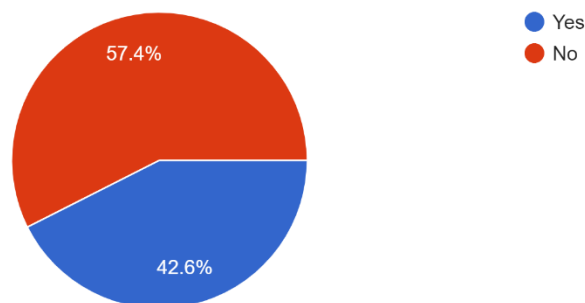
Source: Authors' survey

Their personal experience also indicates high exposure to senior women's leadership (see graph vii, which shows that 74% of the survey participants' executives or partners were female). While no data is available to track the progression over the years, one can speculate that this picture was very different before the 1990s.

Figure xviii: Work experience in a female-owned law firm

I work in or have ever worked in a female-owned law firm.

148 responses



Source: Authors' survey

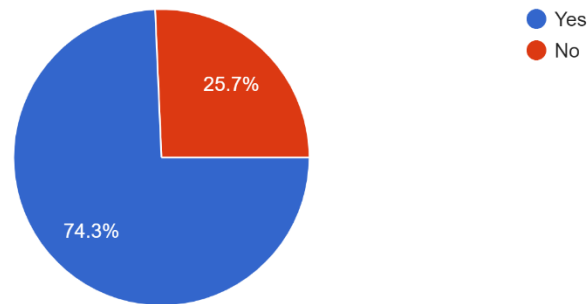
Figure xix: Female senior executives in law firms

Equally, a high number of (74.3%) women lawyers worked in a law firm where there has been a female senior executive or partner.

Figure xix: Female senior executives in workplace

There has been a female Senior executive or partner at my firm or institution.

148 responses



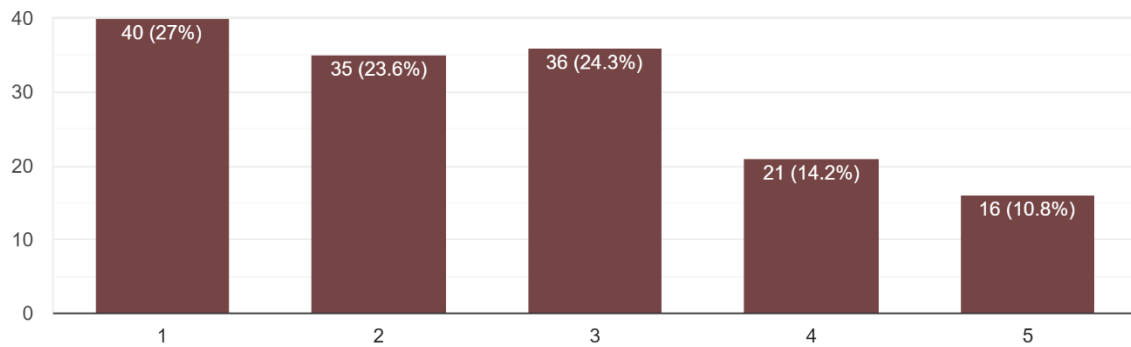
Source: Authors' survey

The other half of respondents noted a negative trend in the female experience, as women continue to experience sexual harassment without channels for protection (as confirmed in figure xiv) Furthermore, many respondents in the open-ended survey questions, state that men still dominate the workforce and disrespect female colleagues. There is also a lack of consideration for promotions or confinement to limited cases (25%).

Figure xx: Assignment of cases

Women are assigned to particular types of cases (e.g. gender and family law cases) but not others like commercial cases.

148 responses



Key: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5= Strongly agree

Source: Author's survey

The fact that a large percentage agrees with this statement shows that allocation undermines women's potential to advance their careers in all directions.

Some additional remarks in the survey point to the possible cause of why women have more success in the public sector, notably from male lecturers during their training:

Another challenge for women is that male bosses or managing partners traditionally see women as a burden. I recall in my 2019 intake at Zambia Institute for Legal Education (ZIALE), one of the lecturers said he thinks women are better suited for working in organisations rather than in private practice because there are a lot of things that make them unable to do the work at the same level as men. He gave examples of maternity leave, family responsibilities like having to leave early to take care of her husband or kids, not being able to stay and work late or attend social events, and so on.

Stereotypes, from as far back as lectures, would tell the female students that they are better off applying for jobs as Research Advocates, as their family life would not allow them to advance in private practice.

In the literature, the debate is sometimes confined to stating the number of female lecturers or the level enrolment of female students in law school.³⁹ However, in a debate

³⁹ Women in Law & Leadership, Nigerian bar (2023), 33, Women in Law & Leadership, South Africa report (2023), 6

organised by African Women in Law, the importance of the content and facilitation of legal education is emphasised, calling upon more gender-sensitive training.⁴⁰

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations are based on the literature review, the authors' surveys, interviews, and observations.

7.1 From the survey and interviews

The open-ended questions in the survey gave some good insights from a personal perspective when it comes to recommendations that do not come out in the other questions. Some respondents recommended robust mentorship and training programs to be implemented to enhance women lawyers' experiences regarding promotion, advocacy, and related legal work. Many survey participants stressed the importance of continuous professional development and the formation of female lawyer groups led by experienced, successful female lawyers. Respondents also noted the importance of deliberate changes in policies, including a lowered Law Association of Zambia subscription fee for female lawyers, a stronger sexual harassment policy, quota system in management composition. Some respondents voiced that a change in public perception (e.g. litigation is suitable for male lawyers) is necessary.

Some survey participants had some well-thought-out plans from a company's perspective for advancing women in the workplace, from which we will highlight a couple of ideas:

7.1.1 Commitment to diversity at the top of the firm

Establish a diversity committee that is made up of partners at both the practice group level and senior management level. Implement diversity key performance indicators (KPIs) for managing partners, practice or unit heads, and other managers. Moreover, consider implementing targets for women in partnership (including equity partnership) and leadership roles, including the Board, Executive team, practice heads, and significant client relationship roles.

⁴⁰ Maame Efua Addadzi-Koom (2022), 'Women Lawyers and the Africa We Want: The Role of Legal Education' *African Women in Law* (11 July), <https://www.africanwil.org/post/women-lawyers-and-the-africa-we-want-the-role-of-legal-education>, accessed 18 June 2026.

7.1.2 Firm culture

Develop cultural leadership by encouraging women in leadership positions to 'bring their whole selves to work.' Again, ensure male partners are a part of actively involved in setting the culture and tone of the firm in terms of gender diversity.

7.1.3 Flexible work, part-time and job-sharing policies

Encourage rethinking working and living within practice groups and provide examples from within the firm or in other firms where practice groups have high proportions of members working flexibly. Allow and encourage flexible and remote work practices across all levels of seniority and all genders. Ensure that lawyers working flexibly continue to receive interesting, challenging, and quality work. Communicate with clients about the style of work and the work environment to manage expectations. Develop strategies that ensure that parents who have taken time out to have children and then return to flexible work are reintegrated in a way that is as supportive and protective as possible to minimise damage to their careers.

7.1.4 Criteria for partnership and partnership track

Make the criteria and process for partnership clear and transparent, and communicate them to lawyers. Value people management, team leadership, and developing and mentoring younger lawyers as an aspect of the criteria for partnership. Ensure that other criteria for partnership, beyond fee-generating activities, are communicated to lawyers and Senior Associates.

7.2 Authors' observations

The authors believe that some of the ideas presented above might be better suited to large law firms that have at least twenty lawyers. Only a handful of such firms exist in Zambia. Anecdotally, most Zambian law firms are either run by sole practitioners or by 2-3 partners with an average of 1-5 Associates. Therefore, we believe that the most practical means of addressing systemic challenges to achieving gender equity at the Bar would be at a policy level through the intervention of the Law Association of Zambia.

Creating an environment where leadership thrives at all levels is the goal of every profession looking at enhancing equity and sustainability. There is a need to encourage multi-generational participation in the affairs of a Bar Association. According to a study

done by Deloitte called 'Leaders at all levels: Closing the gap between hype and readiness'⁴¹, the foundational and new leadership skills that are in high demand are as follows:

- Business acumen: Understanding the core business well
- Collaboration: Having the ability to build cross-functional teams
- Global cultural agility: Managing diversity and inclusion
- Creativity: Driving innovation and entrepreneurship
- Customer-centricity: Enhancing effective customer relationships
- Influence and inspiration: setting direction and driving employees to achieve business goals
- Building teams and talent: developing people and creating effective teams

7.3 So how should the legal profession try to address those leadership challenges?

- a. Representation matters; this was repeated in several respondents' submissions. LAZ should deliberately ensure gender balance on all presentation panels, fellowship opportunities, and nominations that come through LAZ elections for Council positions. The idea is to make seeing women in positions of authority or influence as normal. This can be done by putting in place and implementing a gender diversity policy that institutionalises and prioritises gender equity.
- b. In 2015, LAZ created a Junior Lawyers Committee to represent the interests of lawyers between 1-5 years at the Bar. In 2017, all but one of the four officers on the Committee were women. The Junior Lawyers Committee has allowed young lawyers to be groomed for leadership positions and gives them a voice in the running of the affairs of the association. Ideally, there should be at least two representatives on the LAZ Council, one female and one male.
- c. Increased social interaction between members on multigenerational levels through sports activities, the LAZ social bar, formal Sherry Parties on the occasion of Call Days for newly admitted Advocates, and State Counsel called to the Inner Bar.

⁴¹ Stockton, H. (2014), 'Leaders at All Levels: Close the Gap Between Hype and Readiness' Deloitte Insights (7 March) <https://www2.deloitte.com/ua/en/pages/human-capital/articles/leaders-at-all-levels.html>, accessed 18 June 2026.

- d. Increase knowledge about the business of the law. In one of our interviews, one lawyer commented that:

Another important recommendation is establishing yourself as an integral part of an organisation by understanding the business of the organisation.

Understanding the big picture of what the organisation does and the detail of how it makes its profits will help you understand your role in ensuring the success of the organisation. In that way, you can add value beyond your day-to-day functions.

- e. Encourage law firms to embrace flexible working conditions in recognition of the fact that women play multiple roles in the home and society. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced remote working to many law firms and organisations that previously may have been resistant to such practices. Anecdotally, this flexibility was very beneficial to women whilst still allowing them to be productive.
- f. Having a mentorship programme is important to nurture young talent and to transfer knowledge between senior and junior members of the Bar.
- g. Restructuring the criteria for being conferred with the rank and status of State Counsel to recognize the many ways in which women contribute to the legal profession.

8. CONCLUSION

Nkomo and Ng'ambi argued that:

While the empirical literature on leadership and management in Africa is sparse, the literature on African women in leadership is even sparser.⁴²

While the literature on African women lawyers has grown since the late 2000s, this is not the case in Zambia. Without adequate empirical data on the status of Zambian women lawyers, it becomes difficult to systematically address the challenges that they face. From our statistics, Zambian women appear to be doing fairly well in the legal profession. Despite the feminisation of the legal profession, women's representation in Zambia at the [top] practising and partnership level of the profession remains marginal,

⁴²Nkomo, S. and Hellicy Ngambi (2009), 'African Women in Leadership: Current Knowledge and a Framework for Future Studies' 4(1) *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies – Multi-, Inter- and Transdisciplinarity*, 49
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232983504_African_women_in_leadership_Current_knowledge_and_a_framework_for_future_studies> accessed 18 June 2026.

a pattern common in the region. ⁴³This is changing, but it will take time to dismantle patriarchal systems in place that prevent women from being seen as equal to their male peers. There need to be deliberate policies in place to enhance gender parity and the Bar Association is instrumental in putting such policies in place. Many women we interviewed expressed optimism about the future of women in the legal profession. One of the interview respondents said:

It is promising, and I am encouraged to see more young female lawyers setting up good firms, exciting to see female judicial appointments and also the fact that most Heads of Legal and Company Secretaries in my sector are women is testament of the fact that there is room for growth and progression if one puts in the work.

Another respondent stated:

The future of women in the legal profession is extremely bright. Women are increasingly becoming more visible and influential in the field for instance the legal teams on most of Zambia's big banks are headed by women, and many law firms are actively pursuing efforts to promote diversity, equality, and inclusion. We have seen several law firms which were predominately male appoint women partner. The number of female lawyers is growing, and more women are taking on leadership roles within the legal profession. This is a positive trend that will continue to grow and foster an environment of equal opportunity and respect for all, regardless of gender.

Women lawyers are certainly making their presence felt; however, there appear to be parts of the profession that are perceived to be more suited to men, such as litigation. This may explain why there are so few female State Counsel, an honour reserved for those with superior advocacy at the Bar Association, the Bar. Also, there is a lack of women heading the Law Association of Zambia. Deliberate efforts must be made to dismantle all barriers to gender equity at the Bar for women to truly enjoy all that the legal profession has to offer.

Moreover, more research is needed to fully understand the barriers for girls and women, from childhood to higher education and within their respective careers. This is where intersectionality will emerge and teach us how to advance female participation in society.

Acknowledgements: The authors wish to thank Prof J. Jarpa Dawuni and Dr. Maame Efua Addadzi-Koom of the Institute for African Women in Law for the editorial work.

⁴³ Meyer, T. (2021) Reaching for Partnership: An Intersectional Study of Occupational Closure Among Women Attorneys in South Africa (unpublished PhD Thesis), 18