

WHAT SAY BARRISTERS ABOUT BLACK LIVES MATTER?

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THE WEBINAR HOSTED BY THE INN ON 30 JULY

No one will have failed to notice the belated but seismic shift in the wake of the death of George Floyd in the US. While we have all been confined to our homes, it is almost as though there was nowhere for us to go and instead we were left to stare, embarrassed(?), at the issues of privilege, prejudice and racism. And the question I hear constantly is: what can be done?

It is a conversation that needs to be had and one that needs to be had in a way which is mindful of all participants. We need to be aware of where we are placing the burden to find a way through, particularly if our way of doing so means we require people to relive difficult experiences. That is where the webinar comes in. The panel was made up of BAME lawyers at various stages of their careers (who discussed the use of the word BAME).

THE PANEL



Master Anesta Weekes QC



Master Gelaga King



Master Kim Hollis QC



Master Sa'ad Hossain QC



Master Ijeoma Omambala QC



Kwame Boateng Sekyere



Fitzrene Headley

The views are, perhaps unexpectedly, diverse. Should there be fewer 'black only' or 'BAME only' organisations? Is there room for change there and, if so, what change? Is it time for more groups of all races and colour to join in the debate for change? What are the roles of allies? And importantly for those reading this, what role can Gray's play?

The conversation requires an understanding of the makeup of the Bar. The Bar is not the most diverse of professions, and, as a career at the Bar progresses, diversity both in terms of race and gender decreases. Gray's can play a role at many levels – from grassroots through to pupillage, tenancy and silk applications.

When does a budding barrister decide that they want to go to the Bar? If it is during or post university, they may well by then be on the back foot depending on the opportunities they have already had or been provided with. We may want people to consider the Bar as early as possible, so that by the time they come to apply for university, they are on course for achieving the academic qualifications and honing the interpersonal skills required for a career at the Bar. But, if you are from a disadvantaged background, are you starting at the same point as your more privileged peers?

Gray's, with the help of its members, can start to even the playing field by investing in the talent which might not otherwise emerge due to a lack of access to contacts, opportunities and inspiration. Inspiration was touched upon by members of the panel. When we walk into Hall who do we see, both physically in the Hall and in the portraits around us? Mainly white men. What are we telling our entire pool of talent about who is successful here, and, importantly, who is *welcome* here? That is important, not just for prospective members, but for members currently in practice, who also can benefit from support at Gray's, especially where their own chambers might not be particularly diverse.

We can and should be changing. But, as the panel impressed upon us, this is not a burden to simply put upon our BAME peers. Everyone has a role to play in the increasing diversity of the Bar generally, ensuring it is more reflective of society (and therefore our clients). So, what can we do? Watch the webinar (available on the Website until 1 November) for the first steps towards what each and every one of us can start doing. It is, after all, everyone's problem. ■