



# Women at the Bar ~ Roundtable

*Isabella Maxwell-Williams,  
Associate to Blokland J,  
Supreme Court of the Northern Territory*



On 11 July 2013 members and friends of Northern Territory Women Lawyers Association met at William Forster Chambers for a Roundtable Discussion 'Women at the Bar'. It was hosted by the female barristers of William Forster Chambers and was an invaluable opportunity for female lawyers working in the Territory to gain an insight into the multifaceted challenges and rewards of life at the Bar in the Top End.

The four speakers, Libby Armitage SM, Sonia Brownhill, Bronwyn Haack, and Koula Rousos spoke candidly about their respective personal experiences of legal practice and were unanimously positive in their encouragement of women as barristers. Each of them had followed unique professional paths which had led them to the Bar and I found the discussion of these histories important and inspiring.

Advice was openly offered on the practical and financial considerations of joining the Bar and the best way to self-manage what is essentially a business. The consensus from the speakers was that there were not enough women at the Bar in the Territory

and that this was *not* reflective of the standard of female advocacy in the Territory.

For Sonia Brownhill, one of the advantages of being at the bar is that you can decide how much work you take on. She sees women as suited to working at the bar as they are good at problem solving, hard working and multi-tasking.

Koula Rousos spoke about the importance of networking in order to get business. Having senior members of the profession make themselves available as mentors is important. She sees a role for NTWLA in facilitating this.

Bronwyn Haack stressed the need to be business minded and to run the practice as a business. The start-up fees as a barrister are low compared to other professions. She enjoys the sense of independence.

The qualities needed to be successful at the bar were raised by Libby Armitage; these are that you are competent, reasonably well organised and confident in your own ability as well as being able to manage stress. There is a need for more senior criminal barristers in the Northern Territory. As being

a barrister is a business, it is ideal that you use billing software so it is easy to keep track of the finances. It is important to use down time constructively.

I appreciated that the discussion was not overly gendered however, it was stated that women have a tendency to consciously or possibly unconsciously underestimate their capacity as legal practitioners. The speakers collectively disapproved of this regressive way of thinking, and indeed stood as examples of how female lawyers are mistaken in prescribing to this line of thought.

A comment was made by one practitioner about the importance and utility of mentoring relationships between senior and junior lawyers and, as a junior lawyer. I really appreciated the suggestion that this might be more formally facilitated by the NTWLA.

Having not previously considered a future at the Bar for myself, I found the personal perspectives provided by the female practitioners useful, insightful and thought-provoking in the consideration of my future prospects in the Northern Territory. The comments made were well-received by all who attended. ●

