

# International Women's Day 2024

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Chantelle Staynings

All parents will be aware of the seismic shift that having young children brings. For women, the impact will inevitably be that much greater. The daily battle against nausea and tiredness in the first trimester is particularly difficult when you are self-employed: not only must existing commitments nevertheless be honoured, but most pregnancies are not even public knowledge at that point. After the birth, breastfeeding mothers will bear the heaviest burden of night (and day) feeds, alongside coping with physical recovery. The struggle continues at least into toddlerhood: it's rare that I finish work within the hours of my son's "full-time" childcare, and his protests when I try to work outside that time are both noisy and persistent.

My own experience, however, is that motherhood is far from a death knell for a rewarding career at the bar. I am now at the stage of mentoring aspiring barristers, and it is notable how many still think of commercial or commercial chancery law as being less compatible with family life than family or criminal law. My experience has been the opposite: the willingness of the Companies Court to embrace remote hearings is in stark contrast to the experiences of friends who need to juggle the nursery run with long and expensive trips to regional courts for short hearings. It is also easier to work part-time or flexibly in a practice that offers a proportionately higher amount of advisory work or preparation time in comparison to being in court.

The Chancery Bar Association has been excellent at amplifying and responding to concerns expressed by women at the bar, from encouraging fair working policies to generous parental leave provision. Much, of course, depends on the culture of individual Chambers. I took the decision early on not to apologise for working around childcare responsibilities, something which I felt able to do because other members of Chambers (including several fathers) had led the way. The clerking team has been impeccable, never putting any pressure on me to take work that might be incompatible with a young family. At the same time, there has never been any sense that I am seen by my clerks as less ambitious or committed to the bar.

There are undoubtedly times when the competing pressures feel difficult to manage. The climb up the ladder may also be slightly slower after taking maternity leave and choosing to turn down certain work (for example, work that might involve long or unpredictable periods away from home, such as some offshore work). Overall, however, there are more and more reasons for women to feel positive about breaking into the higher levels of the commercial or chancery bar and judiciary: even if it is perturbing to realise that my two-year-old's powers of persuasion are vastly superior to my own (though I hope that my submissions are accompanied by slightly less flailing of limbs).