

By Naomi De Silva

International Women's Day 2026

#Rights.Justice.Action.ForALL #IWD2026

In essence, the women who worked in law before us enabled increased access to justice for women and girls — sometimes at great personal cost — so that those who followed could gain equality. They gave their courage, their intellect, their persistence, and often their comfort and security. In doing so, they created a profession that, while still imperfect, is far more open and equitable than it would otherwise have been.

The theme of International Women's Day is, in many ways, the story of women in law across every generation.

International Women's Day 2026

#Rights.Justice.Action.ForALL #IWD2026

This list is by no means exhaustive, but it highlights some of the most significant female lawyers who have shaped the UK's legal landscape:

Historical pioneers

Eliza Orme (1848–1937)

Born in London in 1848, Eliza Orme was the first woman to earn a law degree in England, becoming a student at University College London in 1871. As women were not permitted to qualify as a solicitor or barrister at the time, she established her own chambers on Chancery Lane with fellow UCL student Mary Richardson — the first legal office in the country to be run by women.

Madge Easton Anderson

Following the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919, Madge Easton Anderson was the first woman to graduate and become a professional lawyer in the UK, qualifying in Scotland in 1920. In 1937, she also became the first woman to qualify as a solicitor in both Scotland and England.

Ivy Williams

Based on my own general knowledge, Ivy Williams was the first woman to be called to the Bar of England and Wales in 1922, though she did not practise as a barrister.

Helena Normanton KC

Helena Normanton campaigned for women's rights and suffrage, advocating for divorce reform and becoming the first woman in Britain to hold a passport in her maiden name in 1924. She was also the first woman to join an institution of the legal profession — the Middle Temple — following the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919 and was the second woman to be called to the Bar of England and Wales after Ivy Williams.

The first women solicitors in England and Wales

Carrie Morrison

On 18 December 1922, Carrie Morrison became the first woman admitted to the roll of solicitors by the Law Society of England and Wales. She came to law following an extraordinarily varied career, including supporting the International Labour Office in Istanbul during World War I and studying mediaeval and modern languages at Cambridge University.

Maud Crofts

Maud Crofts was one of the original plaintiffs in the famous test case *Bebb v The Law Society* in 1913. In 1925, she published *Women under English Law*, the first book to be written by a British woman lawyer on women's position in society, which led to her becoming a BBC presenter in 1928.

Mary Pickup

Born in 1881, Mary Pickup was admitted to the roll in early 1923 and was a champion for equality and women's rights. She was elected president of the Birmingham Soroptimist Society and frequently addressed women's meetings to fight for equality, peace, and the betterment of the lives of women and girls.

Mary Sykes

Huddersfield's only practising woman solicitor at the time, Mary Sykes was admitted to the roll in February 1923 and later set up her own firm, employing other women in the profession. She made history as Huddersfield's first woman alderman in 1937 and, in 1945, as the first woman to be elected as Lord Mayor of the town.

International Women's Day 2026

#Rights.Justice.Action.ForALL #IWD2026

Judicial trailblazers

Rose Heilbron

Born in Liverpool in 1914, Rose Heilbron gained three law degrees from the University of Liverpool before becoming the first female judge of the Central Criminal Court (the Old Bailey). During her tenure, she became the first woman to lead in a murder case. In 1968 she became a bencher at Gray's Inn, and eventually became Treasurer in 1985 — the first woman to head one of the four Inns of Court.

Dame Elizabeth Butler-Sloss

Dame Elizabeth Butler-Sloss was the first woman to be appointed as a Lord Justice of Appeal in England, and subsequently became the first woman to be appointed as President of the Family Division of the High Court of Justice, a role she held until her retirement in 2005. She chaired a number of government inquiries, including the inquest into the death of Princess Diana and the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse.

Lady Brenda Hale (Baroness Hale of Richmond)

Lady Brenda Hale achieved many firsts, including being the first woman appointed as a Justice of the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom, where she served for over a decade and became the first female President in 2017. She was also the first woman appointed as a Lord Justice of Appeal, the first woman appointed as a High Court judge, and the first woman appointed to the Law Commission, where she pioneered ground-breaking legislation, including the Children Act 1989, the Family Law Act 1996, and the Mental Capacity Act 2005.

Representation matters

Representation matters profoundly. When women in law see others who look like them occupying different roles in law — as solicitors, barristers, judges, silks, managing partners, and heads of state legal departments — it is empowering, expanding a person's sense of what is achievable. Every woman who forged a legal career before it was common to do, and often against hostility, gave those who followed a tangible example to aspire to.

Who has inspired you in your career? Are you doing anything to support women in the field of law or make changes which help others to access justice and equality? I would love to hear your stories.

Contemporary figures

Baroness Helena Kennedy KC

Baroness Helena Kennedy is a Scottish barrister, broadcaster, and member of the House of Lords who has been at the forefront of the fight for human rights and social justice. She wrote the book *Eve was Framed: Women and British Justice*, critiquing the British legal system and uncovering many of the misconceptions surrounding women in law.

Baroness Haleh Afshar Baroness

Haleh Afshar was a British life peer in the House of Lords and a prominent academic and expert on human rights and gender equality. She was Emeritus Professor of Politics and Women's Studies at the University of York and a founding member of the Muslim Women's Network. She was awarded an OBE in 2005 for services to equal opportunities.

I. Stephanie Boyce

I. Stephanie Boyce made history as the Law Society of England and Wales' first Black president in 2021. As a passionate advocate for access to justice, social mobility, mental health, and public legal education, she spent her presidency encouraging young people to pursue their dreams.

Lubna Shuja

Lubna Shuja became the first Asian, Muslim, and seventh female president of the Law Society. Having qualified as a solicitor in 1992, she set up her own firm, Legal Swan Solicitors, in 2007, and continues to take action to break down barriers to accessing the legal profession and promote diversity within the legal industry.

Contact us



Naomi De Silva
Associate

+44 (0)330 045 2336
+44 (0)7715 634 414
naomi.desilva@brownejacobson.com

Sources: [Law Training Centre](#), [GOV.UK – Pioneering Women in Law](#), [The Law Society](#).