



REGULATING BARRISTERS

Interview Transcript: Gisela Abbam, BSB Lay Board Member and Aminat Suleman, BSB Head of Equality and Access to Justice

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Aminat Suleman: My name is Aminat Suleman. I am the Head of Equality and Access to Justice for the BSB. In the light of Black History Month it is important that we highlight Black Excellence across the profession. Today I am fortunate enough to interview Gisela Abbam,

Gisela Abbam is a Senior Director for Government Affairs at PerkinElmer, a global science and technology corporation. She is the Chair of the General Pharmaceutical Council. She also serves on the Board of the Bar Standards Board. She has worked in conjunction with the WHO, World Bank and the UN to improve health outcomes globally. She is also a Global Goodwill Ambassador.

Gisela was the winner of the 2019 Black British Business Person of the Year Award, Gisela has written over 45 white papers on various public policy issues.

Aminat Suleman: Thank you for so much for your time today, Gisela. It's an amazing opportunity for us to have you here at the Bar Standards Board as a Board Member and to also be able to profile you for Black History Month. You've done commendable things within your profession and within your society and I couldn't think of anyone who would be better suited to profile as someone of excellence for Black History Month, so thank you again for honouring us and thank you for your time.

Gisela Abbam: Thank you so much for your kind words, Aminat and it's a pleasure to be here today.

Aminat Suleman: So we're going to go straight in and I'm going to start by asking you what is your mantra, as a professional or personally, within your life?

Gisela Abbam: Interesting question! My mantra which I created myself, each and every one of us has a gift inside of us, if we find it and use it our lives will never be the same again and to summarise, a quote from Woodrow Wilson as well, which I use, "we are here to enrich this world and we impoverish ourselves if we forget this mission,"

Aminat Suleman: So beautifully and eloquently said. I think that is also key, the idea of being able to contribute to the world and give back to the world. What advice would you give to someone who is perhaps struggling with what their identity is within the world or who is trying to figure out what's next?

Gisela Abbam: I would say, think about finding your purpose in life and by doing that look at your strengths and weaknesses. What are you good at, what do you enjoy? Do you enjoy reading, do you enjoy talking to people, do you enjoy reading and researching, do you enjoy talking to people. If you're an introvert or an extrovert, it's about talking to people. It's understanding that sometimes you need to do these psychometric tests.

I know people laugh about them, but actually they do give you some insight into your personality and why you are a certain way. That's why I said about the mantra, because everyone has a gift, and the problem is, sometimes people try to mirror others and don't.

You have to be your own authentic self, you have something inside you that makes a difference that is strong, that is creative, but you just have to find what it is, so it's trying different things, if you are already a career professional or you're already in a profession, don't give up, just try different things.

After a couple of years, if you are not happy where you are try something else. I'm not saying that barristers should try another profession, but try another area of law and see where that takes you.

Aminat Suleman: I mean I think that trial-and-error is an absolutely fantastic approach, because trial and error gives you space for growth and this advice is coming from someone who has absolutely thrived within their career, so who or what would you say is your biggest inspiration and why?

Gisela Abbam: My biggest inspiration is Oprah Winfrey: despite all the trauma, the pain she suffered with as a child, she's turned it around to improve her life and the life of others. She has used her power and her influence to make a difference to the lives of people all around the world and I really admire her.

Aminat Suleman: Well, I'm sure somebody is also admiring you just the way you admire her, not to take light away from Oprah Winfrey. I think she's absolutely amazing and she has fought the fight for black excellence through her entire career. She also inspires me too. I'm glad you said her.

What is the biggest challenge you have faced as a result of your identity and how did you overcome this, when I say identity, I'll give you the free floor to say what you identify as. I also recognise that you are a black woman, so when I ask that question, I ask from that narrative.

Gisela Abbam: indeed, so rather than talk about my biggest challenge, because I think I have a few, I want to focus on one area - a challenge I still face in a basket of challenges - and that I think that a number of black people still face: you are judged

by the colour of your skin and every so often I realise and I notice, that I am being judged differently from other people and it's obvious that it is because of the colour of my skin.

It is a shame that that occurs but unfortunately we live in a society where we are judged and it can be quite excruciating for a black person, but what I've done to deal with it, is by saying "I am not giving up. Someone has to be the first. Someone has to continue to persevere. Someone has to come together and get supporters and allies" and a lot of us have supporters and allies who actually open doors for us. Incidentally all the doors that have been opened in terms of promotion and career opportunities have been by white people for me, so there are supporters and allies.

So you get racism in one hand but on the other hand you have people who support you, who push through and help you. So I think it's being able to draw on those who are positive and those who appreciate us for what we are rather than what we look like and that's what has kept me going, and I hope that what I do, in a small way along with what other black people are doing will help the younger generation to be able to have new doors that are opened for them as well.

Aminat Suleman: You answered that very eloquently. I think what stood out to me was the importance of allyship and that's something that we take very seriously here at the Bar Standards Board. We can't do it without the support of everyone. It's so important for us to work collaboratively to solve this problem of discrimination, of racism, and all the other issues that we face as a nation, and if we can create a more equitable world, we can create a world where people thrive as themselves and they thrive as individuals and we get the best output of people that way. So I'm a big advocate of allyship and I hope that we can continue to create meaningful allies so that we can have long lasting change.

That takes me to my next question, which is "what advice would you give to a young black person watching this video how to succeed in their career?"

Gisela Abbam: Really really, good question. I would say don't give up. I would say to young black people don't give up, persevere, look for new avenues, new ways, new job opportunities. If you're in a particular organisation and it starts to get unbearable, you know that it's your time to leave. Find another job and move on. I also encourage you to do some volunteer work if you can, because you learn new skills, that you wouldn't have learnt in university or whatever schooling you've had, and it will help you to contribute to the betterment of society.

Research and evidence shows that, if you actually give, whether you're giving through charitable giving or giving through voluntary work, you actually have a happier life and as a black person it is important to have that balance, and to be able to be happy in some of your endeavours, so that even if your career profession limits you because of what you are, or because of the kind of constraints you have within your organisation, if you're doing this voluntary work it gives you a new leaf, it gives you that confidence, that satisfaction that you are appreciated for what you are doing as well and it's so important to us for our mental health as well.

Aminat Suleman: So, so well said. I think what stood out to me in your response, is the importance of giving back that you've highlighted, because this is a common theme and what perhaps the viewers that are watching this may know or may not know is that Professor Thomas also mentioned the importance of giving back in his interview as well, and Gisela hasn't actually heard that and I think that it's brilliant the fact that you are both able to identify the importance of giving back and the mindset of abundance.

There is enough for everyone and that's why we should make things easier for the people before us and the people after us, and these are two seasoned professionals within their industries who are thriving and they have identified the importance to give back, so if you're not finding a way to give back it's time to find a way to give back.

This leads me to what is my question before my last: "if you had all the resources what would you do to change or influence your profession to make it more equitable?"

Gisela Abbam: Really interesting question and a really important question. I would conduct an elaborate media campaign to showcase the thousands of black professionals who make a difference and some of them in small corners of society, some of them in large organisations and there are so many and by showcasing them I would hope to reduce the stigma that black is synonymous to inferiority or poverty, with not good enough, with never being able to achieve anything and for me that is so important for the younger generation.

I say there's nothing wrong if you come from a poor background. It's not a crime, but the fact that every black person is brushed with the same brush basically, that we're not good enough, we're inferior, unless that changes and people begin to realise that we have a problem ...

For example, and I'm going to be slightly political, the ex-chancellor is from Ghana, he is a black person. Then you had a lot of people say "he's not a normal black person because he went to good schools", and there are a lot of black persons that went to good schools and did well. My ancestor was a barrister who actually graduated in 1888, at the age of 19, and was called to the Bar at Lincoln's Inn, but was not allowed to practise until he was 21 - I think in 1891 - because he was too young at the time. So there are black people who have achieved a lot, but no one talks about it and people do not realise, there are so many of us who have done so much more, there are others who have done far more than I have done but people don't know that. So that would be my campaign, I would throw a lot of money at it and make it as elaborate as possible.

Aminat Suleman: I would be so excited to help you in conducting this campaign and I'm sure the people watching it would also have the same passion as me in bringing that campaign to light. I think what you said is super important, black excellence is black excellence, and I think that we should continue to show black excellence stories and profile black excellence and that way people who are coming after us will know that it is possible to achieve those things, and you're doing exactly that today, so I just wanted to say thank you.

Gisela Abbam: Thank you.

Aminat Suleman: So that brings me to my last question, what three words would you use to describe your legacy and why?

Gisela Abbam: Authentic, Passionate and Creative.

Authentic because everyone who knows me, knows I say it as it is. I criticise, constructive criticism and I praise where praise is due.

I am passionate because I really want to make it my mission to change the lives of people, and I'm not just talking about black people, I'm talking about everyone. Anything I can do to help I will do it. I always believe that if people reach out to you, especially on Linked in, apart from those who are trying to sell you something - good grief, avoid them like the plague! But apart from that, if someone reaches out to me and says "I've read about your career, and I want to spend 5-10 minutes can you speak to me?" I have never said no. I know other black professionals who have said no, but we need to change that, if we do that, that makes a difference.

The last for me is creativity, we need out of the box thinking to change a lot of things. If we had the same ideas and we use the same tools, the same skills, how would we make a difference? We need competition, we need creativity. So for me I'm always thinking of finding new ways to solve a problem rather than the same old ways that have not worked before.

Aminat Suleman: So, authentic, passionate, and creative, that is who your board member of the BSB, the Bar Standards Board, is: she is authentic, she is passionate and she is creative. And I am very very thankful to you for giving us so much of your time today, it means a lot and it speaks to your character and your person and I think we should all take a leaf out of your book to be as poised as you are, as intellectual as you are and to also continuously give back just the way you effortlessly do it. Thank you so much for your time today.

Gisela Abbam: Thank you, it's such a pleasure to be here

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