



WHEN DO YOU BREAK THE GLASS CEILING? A GENDER-DIVERSE STUDENT'S EXPERIENCE OF THE LEGAL WORLD

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Introduction

I never thought the glass ceiling applied to me until I came out. Once I became aware about how it affected me, I started looking for ways to break it, so that it wouldn't compromise my future prospects – bringing forth the question, 'When do you break the glass ceiling?'

My biological sex is male, but I identify as trans-feminine.² I see myself as more female than male, and often present myself in society as somewhere between an androgynous being and female. Socially I use she/her and they/them pronouns.

I came out as a member of the transgender community in September 2018 whilst I was repeating my first year at college, but it wasn't until I wore my first 'female-typical' outfit in public that I realised how much the world would change for me. I felt more confident, freer, more myself. A lot of this I credit to my own exploration of my identity, but it would be amiss if I did not give some credit to my personal tutors at the time, Michelle and Clara, who always made every lesson and every meeting a place where students could be themselves, without any fear of disapproval or judgement.

However, shortly after coming out I started noticing disapproving looks from passers-by, muttered comments, slurs thrown at me from moving vehicles, and occasionally vehicles that would pull up by the kerb, the driver getting out and then harassing me. Because of these experiences I started hiding my trans identity, out of fear for my safety and an internal shame that had been forced upon me by those who did not understand me. Oddly enough, after moving to Plymouth and starting my degree the frequency of some of these interactions – namely the verbal harassment – died down and I found the freedom to be myself once again. Even so, a new city with new faces brought a fresh set of new challenges.

¹ Sami is currently in the final year of her law degree

² Trans-feminine comes under the transgender/non-binary umbrella of gender identities

Life at University

I moved to Plymouth in September 2020 to begin studying LLB Law (Hons) at the University of Plymouth. Studying during a pandemic was hard, especially studying law. There was no way to properly interact with anyone on your course. The closest you got would be when a lecturer would put you into little breakout rooms for discussion, except everyone would just sit there awkwardly in silence. Eventually I settled into a nice little friendship group (or a gaggle as we now call ourselves) who very quickly became some of my closest friends.

In my second year of my degree things started opening up a lot more: lectures were now in person and I was finally able to meet a lot of people that I'd only ever seen on a screen. I was finally able to fully immerse myself in my degree – at least, as best I could whilst also dealing with a chronic illness³. I joined The University of Plymouth Law Society (UPLS) and took part in both the debating and mooting competitions (where I reached the semi-final and quarter-final respectively), visited the Supreme Court and Gray's Inn, and attended the UPLS annual Cheese and Wine night (see further below).

For one of my second-year modules, I studied Community Legal Engagement. For my project within this module, I planned a lesson on the history and development of LGBTQ+ rights within the UK and the United States, and presented this at my former secondary school. This was an extremely liberating experience for me, as my secondary school experience as a queer person was not exactly positive. To go back and be able to talk freely about a topic that I had a lived experience of and a passion for, was very freeing. Through my research for this project, I learnt so much about the critical role of protest and campaigning for the development of queer rights. Many of the benefits that we reap today were only made possible due to the efforts of the transgender community, especially transgender people of colour.

During second year I also decided to apply for a position on the UPLS Committee as a Mooting Competition Officer, having competed previously and made it to the quarter-finals. When I was elected I was ecstatic, but that was soon replaced by anxiety, because as far as anyone could recall, I was the first transgender committee member of the UPLS – the first crack in my own glass ceiling. I felt the weight of expectation fall on me. If I didn't succeed, I'd be the first gender-diverse committee member who didn't have what it took to do the job. Fortunately, at the mid-point of the academic year, it's gone well so far.

³ Sami was diagnosed with Fibromyalgia with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome in June 2022 but has been living with symptoms since 2015

Assimilate or Deviate

As a law student, the best way to find and secure future career opportunities is through networking. One thing I've found with networking events is that there is a pressure on how you dress. As an AMAB⁴ gender-diverse person, there is a high level of anxious decision-making that goes into how you dress for an event. It essentially boils down to this: do you dress as your birth-gender and not ruffle any feathers, but instead feel uncomfortable in yourself all night? Or do you dress as your social-gender, being comfortable in yourself but risking a negative reaction and scuppering any chance of gaining work experience?

I've always been told that I shouldn't rock the boat until I'm in a position to make actual change, so for my first networking event – the UPLS Cheese and Wine evening in 2021 – I decided to suck it up and wear a suit. Whilst the event itself was great, all through the evening I had a profound discomfort and anxiety within me. I felt like an imposter every time I would talk to a professional, and I could tell that it was noticed.

I didn't get my next networking opportunity until October 2022, when I attended the Plymouth Law Society Annual Dinner. This time I decided that I wasn't going to squander it by pretending to be something I wasn't. I decided to turn up dressed how I felt comfortable: in a black dress, heels, and a full face of makeup on. I still felt anxiety when I was there – I always do when I present female as a defence mechanism – but I felt more confident both within myself, and when talking to professionals. It's funny how the little things like what you wear can drastically change how you feel about yourself. This in turn changed how professionals saw me, and led to two law firms asking me to send my CV in.

However, it can be isolating to feel like the only transgender person in the room – whether at a networking event, or within the legal sector as a whole. I've learned to see this as an asset rather than a hindrance. Few others at these events have seen the world through my eyes, or experienced how the legal sector is often stacked against transgender people. Yet this means that wherever I go, I bring a fresh new take that has probably not been considered before.

Conclusion

On reflection, being a gender-diverse law student has taught me that, so long as you are respectful, and conduct yourself with integrity and professionalism, people will respond a lot

⁴ AMAB means Assigned Male at Birth

better when you present as yourself. It's a lesson that I am still learning, but I am so grateful for the path that life is leading me down.

Which brings us back to the question: 'When do you break the glass ceiling?' Do you wait until someone breaks it for you or do you wait until you are in a position of power to break it? For me, neither of these options will do. I say: break it from wherever you are. Bring the whole thing crashing down around you if needs be: building, ceiling and all. Then you can help to rebuild what was into a better, more inclusive, what will be. The time for assimilation is over – the time for authenticity and diversity has come.