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The UK's Leading Ladies in Law



Dame Linda Dobbs

LINDA DOBBS

At seven years old, in 1958, Dame Linda Dobbs came to Britain from Sierra Leone. Her father had been a High Court judge there, so it seems law has always been in her blood, although she initially was very resistant to starting a career in law.

Originally, she went to study Music at Edinburgh University but left after one year. From there, she fell in love with law in a rather unconventional way, taking a course on Russian with law, ultimately obtaining a Doctorate (PhD) in Soviet Criminology and Penology several years later.¹

In 1981, Dame Linda Dobbs was called to the Bar. During her time at the Bar, dealing mainly with sexual assault and murder cases, she has often spoke of the sexism she faced, with clerks often giving her an especially hard time. Speaking to Leah Henderson of Chambers Student she commented: *“Their default position was that the men were better than the women. They’d allocate work to the male pupils and then the female pupils, if we were lucky. But if solicitors liked you they would put your name on the brief... I found out that my clerk would sometimes tippex my name out and give the brief to one of the male pupils.”*²

Despite this, Dame Linda Dobbs persevered and specialised in fraud and regulatory work until being appointed to the Queen’s Counsel in 1998. She was very active in a number of committees during her time at the Bar, chairing three different committees: Race Relations, International Relations (Africa Sub-Committee), and Professional Standards.³

Continuing her success in law, in 2002, Dame Linda Dobbs was elected a bencher. This is a common matter of course when appointing a High Court judge, which followed soon after. But first, in 2003, Dame Linda Dobbs became the Chairman of the Criminal Bar Association where she set up the first Equality and Diversity sub-committee. Finally, in 2004, she was appointed as a High Court judge, the first non-white person to do so and has made it clear that she wants and expects more diversity in the legal profession.⁴

While often discussing her struggles with being a role model, especially to people of colour, she was often reluctant to give interviews, as she was not a fan of the limelight. Nevertheless, after a publication criticized her for not taking on the mantle, she recognised that she needed to accept her position as a role model as people were looking up to her because she was doing something revolutionary. Revolutionary because of her position of power and how she has helped to rework the images that are associated with people of colour. Talking more about this, she said: *“When you think of successful black people, you tend to think of sports people and musicians, whereas we’ve got successful black people across the whole country in a range of disciplines. There will be images of us in our professional lives so kids can see they’re just like us.”*⁵

In 2013, Dame Linda Dobbs stepped down from the High Court Bench working instead as a patron of two charities in South Africa. Both charities seek to advance the opportunities afforded to people of colour. The first being Masicorp, which is an NGO that works to increase education in Masiphumelele, a small town near Cape Town. The second charity, the Pinotage Youth

¹ Desiree Artesi, “Potential Difference: Dame Linda Dobbs,” *Counsel Magazine*.

² Leah Henderson, “The Big Interview: Dame Linda Dobbs – Chambers Student Guide

³ “Mrs Justice Dobbs DBE,” *BLD Black Lawyers Directory Home*.

⁴ Leah Henderson, “The Big Interview: Dame Linda Dobbs – Chambers Student Guide

⁵ Ibid.

Development Academy runs courses in wine, tourism, and the fruit sector. She is very proud of this program, as it has led to the employment of almost every participant.⁶

Dame Linda Dobbs holds several other top positions in the Caribbean, currently sitting as an acting judge in the Grand Cayman, a member of the panel of the Turks and Caicos Appeal court, and is also a Judicial Commissioner. In addition, she also trains judges and lawyers internationally, focusing on those in the Caribbean and Africa, all of which is done pro bono.

Of course, Dame Linda Dobbs has been recognised for all of her contributions, and rightfully so. She has been named one of Britain's most powerful black women and was listed as one of the 100 Great Black Britons.⁷ Additionally, she has been featured regularly in the Powerlist's 100 Influential Black Britons, which she now chairs the selection panel of.

Ultimately, Dame Linda Dobbs is a beacon of strength. She has broken down both racial and gender barriers. She most definitely has fulfilled her position as a role model and continues to do so even after having stepped down from the High Court. In solidarity with her, we hope that the legal world continues to become more diverse, and we look forward to seeing what she does next.

⁶ Desiree Artesi, "Potential Difference: Dame Linda Dobbs."

⁷ "Dame Linda Dobbs DBE," *Oxford Law Faculty*.