

'Speak your truth even if your voice shakes' - Lerisha Naidu, Baker McKenzie

 By [Shan Raddiffe](#)

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Head of the Competition & Antitrust Practice at Baker McKenzie in Johannesburg, Lerisha 'Lee' Naidu is a torchbearer for diversity and inclusion with a deep social conscience. It was this principle which sparked her interest in law, and following some sage advice from Dikgang Moseneke - then-deputy chief justice of the Constitutional Court - decided to use her talents to advance corporate social transformation from the inside out, rather than battle it on the surface. This has paved the way for her many successes. Now 36, Naidu was appointed as one of Baker McKenzie's youngest partners when she was only 32, and is currently the youngest member of the Johannesburg office's management committee - proving that just because you're young and a woman, it doesn't mean you can't be successful.



Lerisha Naidu, head of the Competition & Antitrust Practice at Baker McKenzie, Johannesburg

And her achievements don't stop there. Naidu is also a Mail & Guardian Top 200 Young South African, an Avance Media Top 100 Influential Young South African, a Chambers and Legal 500 ranked practitioner and an alumnus of the International Visitors Leadership Program hosted by the United States Government. She was also invited to participate in BM's global LIFT programme for high performing women partners, which she says "is just one of the notable opportunities afforded to me during my time at a firm that has stretched and moulded me."

This Women's Month, we chat to Naidu about her work, the challenges women in the legal industry face today and her vision for gender equality.

Tell us a little bit about yourself...

Lerisha Naidu: I am a proud South African and African, believing passionately in the uniqueness and magic of this continent and its people. I started out my career wanting to become a human rights lawyer and an advocate for change, but soon came to understand that the transformative project is not confined to NGOs and civil society groups.

“ In a country with a progressive Constitutional dispensation but deep divisions and inequality, I find it important for me to recognise my privilege, encouraging a constant dialogue with myself around learning and unlearning. I believe that we

should all make an effort to pay it forward. In this sense, I try to be human first. ”

I am exceptionally proud of the team of which I form a part, comprising a group of impressive lawyers that have, together and individually, made notable strides in the market (in our representation of clients on pioneering and precedent-setting cases). I believe that the mandate of the competition authority is at the forefront of the national transformative project in South Africa and, to this end, I am a passionate advocate for its importance.

While I lead the Diversity and Inclusion portfolio in Johannesburg, as well as its pro bono and corporate social responsibility pillars, I do not believe that these projects can be assigned to a specific office or person to be meaningfully achieved, lest it descends into a tick-box effort without any authenticity.

■ ***What are some of the challenges facing women in the legal industry today?***

Naidu: I would characterise the challenges, without seeking to simplify them, into two categories: (i) the measurable ones; and (ii) the subliminal, less tangible ones.

In relation to the measurable ones, it is clear that the legal sector is characterised by gender gaps in relation to leadership positions, career progression and pay. Of course, these challenges should not be overcome by tokenising female staff without ensuring genuinely inclusive cultures that ensure retention, including access to opportunities, fair measurement of performance and internal policy reform that enable women to combine family and work.

Real inclusion helps to overcome both the measurable and the less tangible challenges that women face in the legal sector. Of course, it is also important to take an intersectional approach to the inclusion project, factoring in all important aspects of identity, as well as socio-economic factors, in developing inclusion strategies. For example, the additional burdens placed upon women during the pandemic, job insecurity as well as the rise in domestic violence and sexual and other forms of harassment, should not be ignored in understanding the full suite of the challenges that persist.

As part of the Baker McKenzie's Diversity & Inclusion initiative, the firm has set aspirational, measurable targets for gender, that focus on increasing female representation in partner and leadership roles. The firm announced in 2019 that it had set new global aspirational targets at 40:40:20 percent gender diversity, to represent 40% women, 40% men and 20% flexible (women, men or non-binary persons). This target applies to partners, senior business professionals, firm committee leadership and candidate pools for recruitment. Globally, nearly 40% of the firm's 3,800 lawyers are women. In South Africa, around 61% of the firm's staff is female. To empower female leaders, the firm also has an intensive mentorship programme to support and help female lawyers rise through the ranks, so that they can take up leadership positions in the future.

■ ***What do you think is the most important piece of legislation affecting women that has been passed – either locally or internationally - within the last 20 years?***

Naidu: To be able to answer this question with any modicum of credibility, I would need to be better informed in relation to local and international legislative history - I cannot profess to be so informed. Having said that, I believe that an important development to date arises from United Nations' (UN) efforts to achieve gender equality by 2030 (Goal 5 of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals). This is indeed an excellent aspirational target and one that I wholeheartedly support. I intend for that support to extend to active contributions, minor as they may be, towards the project for change. Aspirations are important but actions more so.

■ ***If you could create one law to either assist women empowerment or protect them, what would it be?***

Naidu: There are a myriad of challenges that require action and resolution, none more important and/or valid than the other. I would legislate for measures that are in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals at a domestic level, and other additional ones that I can (non-exhaustively!) think of. These measures would -

- Take gender-based violence violations more seriously;
- Require firms to submit vetted inclusion plans;
- Prescribe targets around leadership gaps;
- Legally prohibit pay gaps (although there is likely constitutional and employment law recourse for this, more can be done to require proactive enforcement);
- Address the impact of the pandemic on women, including, for example: measures that focus on support grants for female-led households;
- Offer business stimulus packages for women running small businesses;
- Implement employment initiatives that focus on representation and leadership opportunities for women;
- Offer services to address social support for women at home, including ensuring women are able to connect to the right help; and
- Offer health protection packages aimed at women.

■ ***If you could have dinner with any three women – dead or alive – who would they be and why?***

Naidu: Where do I begin?

Nina Simone - as an avid music lover and one seeking to always have regard to my social conscience (including on race discourse), this is a no-brainer;

Virginia Wolfe - she was a literary genius whose work I devoured voraciously in my formative years. She had a feminist voice and is a notable case study on the importance of prioritising our mental health. We also share a birthday;

Caster Semenya - the epitome of courage and resilience.

There are innumerable others - Brene Brown, for her discourse on vulnerability and courage; Ruth Bader Ginsberg for her inspirational role in the profession and the equality project; Christine Lagarde, a once-Baker McKenzie antitrust lawyer and now the MD of the IMF, whose continued impact is palpable; Lauryn Hill, so that I can talk about one of the greatest albums of all time; the pioneers of the 1956 South African women's march, whose change agency helped secure our democracy. I could go on. This bears testimony to the greatness that this world, both past and present, offers from its women.

■ ***What is your message to young women this Women's Month?***

Naidu: I have a framed quote in my office. It reads: "Speak the truth even if your voice shakes". When I look at it every now and again, I read it as: "Speak *your* truth even if your voice shakes".

ABOUT SHAN RADCLIFFE

Shan Radcliffe is the editor of Bizcommunity HR, Education and Legal.

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