

# **Breaking Barriers: The Journey of a Black Woman Lawyer in Leadership**

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From as early as I can remember, I was called a leader. I recall being introduced as a “little leader” at church, later a junior leader in school, and eventually in law and business, always part of the “Leadership Team.” I didn’t always seek the title, but when something needed organizing, I stepped in. Looking back, I realize how my imagination was shaped by the portraits and stories in my home. A picture of Queen Amina of Zaria hung in our TV room. She was the first woman to rule as Queen in a male-dominated Hausa society, leading her people with vision and strength. For years, I passed that portrait without much thought, but one day I stopped and wondered: how much of my image of myself was influenced by that picture? That moment stayed with me—not only as a reflection of Queen Amina’s example, but as a reminder that the images, books, and magazines we place around our children, intentionally or not, help shape their sense of what is possible.

At this phase of my career, I have continued to step into leadership because it aligns with my goals and with the leader I have always imagined myself to be. I was raised to connect with other leaders, shoulder responsibility, and improve the systems we inherit. In conversations with other Black women in law and leadership, I hear familiar stories—of strength leading to greater responsibility, and of obstacles becoming part of the service we give to our communities. Yet despite this collective resilience, I am still struck by how few Black women lawyers are visible in senior leadership. I continue to ask: how can it be that we have not done enough to ensure full recognition and presence in the profession?

Research confirms what we already know: Black women remain underrepresented in senior levels of law. Recent data shows some progress, but it is slow and uneven. In many offices there are still no partners of color. Women of color are only a small fraction of partners nationwide. Gains are real, but fragile.

The lived experiences behind those numbers are sobering. The ABA has documented persistent microaggressions, exclusion from high-visibility work, and higher attrition risks for women of color. These are not abstractions—they are daily frictions that accumulate over time. At a leadership conference years ago, I heard women partners and general counsel at top law firms admit they sometimes felt like imposters. They had earned every

step of their success, yet still wrestled with doubt amplified by external barriers. For Black women, those burdens can weigh heavier.

When I moved to Chicagoland in the 1990s, I became part of a thriving Black community in Evanston. I hadn't known such communities existed, with their own hospital, businesses, and institutions. Some of these survived; others, like the hospital, were eventually absorbed through integration. The stories told in church and at community gatherings often reflected pride—but also the loss of what had once been self-sustaining.

The legal profession's power centers mirror this story. Too often, we are urged to join existing institutions rather than build our own; to assimilate rather than create parallel structures. Many Black women lawyers aim for Big Law partnerships or Fortune-level in-house roles. Some succeed and thrive there. But those are not the only worthy destinations. Leadership also looks like entrepreneurship, community lawyering, policy work, or cross-border counsel. Still, these paths are rarely presented as “the way to the top.”

When I attended programs in towering law firm buildings, I felt like I was on top of the world—literally and figuratively. Yet I soon realized that for many inside, the view no longer held meaning. That realization unsettled me, but it also gave me clarity: leadership is not about being inside the tower, it is about choosing the spaces where you can build and lead authentically.

The national conversation around diversity has also shifted. In 2025, federal executive orders directed agencies to roll back or rename “DEI” programs. A change that resulted in the almost immediate firing across professions of over 300,000+ Black Women professionals. Some provisions were challenged in court, but the effect was immediate: institutions changed their language, and hires considered DEI were swiftly removed even when much of the underlying equal-opportunity work continued. Terms like “Equal Opportunity,” “Respectful Workplace,” and “Fair Access” replaced “DEI.” But language shifts did not erase the realities of bias, microaggressions, and inequity of access.

Layered on top of this is AI. Employers are rapidly adopting algorithmic tools for recruiting, review, and operations. At conferences I've attended, we've discussed both the promise and the risks. The EEOC has already brought cases—like *iTutorGroup*—where AI tools allegedly excluded applicants by age. Employers remain liable under Title VII for discriminatory outcomes, regardless of whether a human or an algorithm made the decision. “Black box convenience” is not a defense.

Fortunately, frameworks exist. The NIST AI Risk Management Framework and ISO/IEC 42001 provide ways to test and reduce bias. These standards don't rely on the politics of “DEI”; they build on civil-rights law. A new term, \*\*EOAB—Equal Opportunity, Access,

**and Belonging—\*\*is gaining traction as a way to frame this work. EOAB focuses on ensuring nondiscrimination, broadening access, and cultivating respectful workplaces. It shifts the conversation forward, without abandoning the substance of inclusion.**

**When you widen the table, you widen the options. Black women leaders bring cross-cultural fluency, resilience forged under scrutiny, and practical insight into risk, reputation, and people. These qualities improve client service, problem solving, and innovation. That is not a slogan—I have witnessed it in my own teams.**

The pipeline at the entry level is improving, but the test remains at partnership and leadership levels. Counsel for law firms and corporations are beginning to require EOAB/AI checklists to document Title VII compliance when using algorithmic tools for hiring, promotion, or discipline. Respectful-workplace training that addresses microaggressions under existing policies is also gaining ground. These changes are not cosmetic—they will help move us into a future where more Black women lawyers are not only at the table, but shaping the agenda.

For me, leadership has never been a single title. It is a through-line: supervising attorney, trial lead, arbitrator, board chair, and most recently Advisory Board Chair for Global Chamber Chicago. That role opened doors into global trade, where the focus is growth, not gatekeeping. By contrast, law can still feel like a closed club. Yet the profession can retain its rigor without the rituals of exclusion. We can welcome new builders without punishing those who choose to build outside the old walls.

**If our institutions want to grow, innovate, and reflect the communities we serve, then Black women must have real seats at the leadership table, not as tokens, but as decision-makers. The work ahead is practical and lawful: strengthen Equal Opportunity, Access, and Belonging; govern AI with rigor; and remove the frictions that keep talent from compounding.**

**I was raised to lead. Many of us were. The profession will be stronger, fairer, and more innovative when more Black women are not only invited into leadership, but trusted to define it.**