

Youngest-ever Black female attorney, Nomlayo Mabhena, transforms the legal space

By [Chamdré Emma Kippie](#), issued by [Topco Media](#)

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Nomlayo Mabhena is known for being the youngest-ever Black female attorney admitted as a conveyancer. She was just 23 years old when she successfully completed her qualification at the University of Pretoria. During her time in university, she was placed on the Pretoria Law Faculty Dean's Merit List for her excellence in studying the practices and policies of the South African legal sphere. She completed her articles at Cliffe Dekker Hofmeyr back in 2017. Over the years, Nomlayo has gained valuable experience in the Dispute Resolution, Employment as well as the Real Estate and Conveyancing practices.



Nomlayo Mabhena

Nomlayo was appointed as an Associate as of 2019. Born in Olievenhoutbosch, a township in Centurion, south of Pretoria in Gauteng, Nomlayo has navigated a fruitful career, thus far, that is based on an acute appreciation for justice and equality. Her personal mission is to use her career to play an active role in transforming notions surrounding Black female practitioners in the industry.

How did you know that this would be the right career choice for you?

I believe that careers must be fashioned according to one's passion. When I was about nine years old, I read a book called "The Innocent Prisoner" by Kwasi Koranteng which ignited a passion for justice in me. So, my decision to study law was quite set from then. At that stage I thought that pursuing justice meant practicing criminal and/or family law. However, when I started studying law, I then realised that commercial law was more suited to my personality. I enjoyed contract law; transnational business law as well as property law and that steered me to a career in the commercial law space.

Real estate in SA: How is it transforming right now?

The legal space in South Africa in and of itself is a transforming industry. It is often said that the wheels of justice turn slowly. However, the wheels of transformation in the law industry seems to turn even slower. The real estate/conveyancing space much like the legal industry, if not more, still has some way to go in achieving substantive transformation. There are more junior conveyancers of colour coming into the industry which is amazing. But it would be lovely to see more Black females in the top management/executive positions in the real estate/conveyancing industries.

In terms of being recognised as the ‘youngest-ever Black female attorney admitted as a conveyancer’, how has this changed your life?

Personally, achieving this feat has made me more confident as a person as well as an attorney. It has made me feel that there is a lot that I can achieve as an attorney and in life in general. From a professional perspective, I believe that preparing for the conveyancing exam has made me consider legal concepts more broadly. This has made me better positioned to serve clients and solve their complex issues which helps to build confidence with clients.

How would you describe your work ethic, and who has inspired you to always strive for excellence?

I was raised by hardworking, salt of the earth parents who did everything they could to make ends meet. My parents are both primary school teachers and they instilled, in my brother and I, a culture of working hard. Further, because of all their sacrifices, I learnt to work hard and make a life for myself in order to create a better life for those that will come after me. Our parents had limited opportunities that could only take us to a certain point and now that the baton has been handed to us, we have got to run with it and take this race further for future generations. That is my inspiration for waking up and working hard.

What does a typical day in your job position look like? What major tasks do you focus on?

I am an attorney in the Cliffe Dekker Hofmeyr Inc. Dispute Resolution practice and most of my work involves conducting legal research and the drafting of pleadings; instituting legal proceedings and defending proceedings levelled against clients. I do not think that I have a typical day because litigation is quite unpredictable in its nature. However, a huge chunk of my day, should I not be in court, would be dedicated to drafting pleadings and/or conducting legal research and drawing opinions for various clients on their legal issues.

What is the most rewarding part of your job?

The most rewarding part of my job would be achieving the best results for a client. It gives a great sense of satisfaction and achievement when you obtain the best possible result for a client.

What have been some major obstacles in your career, as a woman, and how did you overcome them?

I entered the legal profession as a candidate attorney at the age of 21. Being young and a Black woman in the profession generally creates a “first impression” bias, be it with colleagues or clients, that you do not know what you are doing or what you are talking about. For example, you find that at that stage, it becomes easier to sit in meetings and just take notes and not make your voice heard in these settings. Therefore, my first job is usually to undo the bias in the minds of the people that I meet and prove that I know exactly what I am talking about. As previously mentioned, being named the youngest conveyancer in South Africa helped me to gain the confidence I need to make my voice heard and put out legal arguments in the best way I know how. However, it is an uphill struggle to undo these existing biases.

As an Associate Attorney, what are your goals for the future?

My goals at this stage are:

- To complete my Masters' Degree in International Dispute Resolution. I have enrolled at Queen Mary University, London for this program and aim to complete same over a period of two years through distance learning; funding allowing.
- I also aim to continue learning from my seniors in order to serve clients and build rapport in the industry. As a young and upcoming legal practitioner, there is still a lot I need to learn from people who have more experience than I do – this will help to hone my craft and refine my skills.

In terms of South Africa's Justice System, what wish do you have for future growth and development?

I hope to live to see more transformed large firms. South Africa has done well in transforming the bench and we see a lot of diversity in that space, from the Magistrates' courts up to the Constitutional Court. However, there is still a lot of work to be done on the ground, in law firms as well as the bar. We often hear of advocates bemoaning the briefing patterns of attorneys who choose to brief set groups of counsel, leaving many upcoming advocates of colour receiving at worst very few briefs and at best many low quantum briefs. These are areas that still need to be transformed but they are harder to monitor. However, we should applaud the current efforts in law firms to try to rectify these issues.

What advice do you have for individuals who aspire to work within the field of Law?

The field of law is not Suits. Be prepared to buckle down and work hard and aim to be the best version of yourself as a legal practitioner.

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