



## After failing his GCSEs, this CEO found a way to get his education back on track

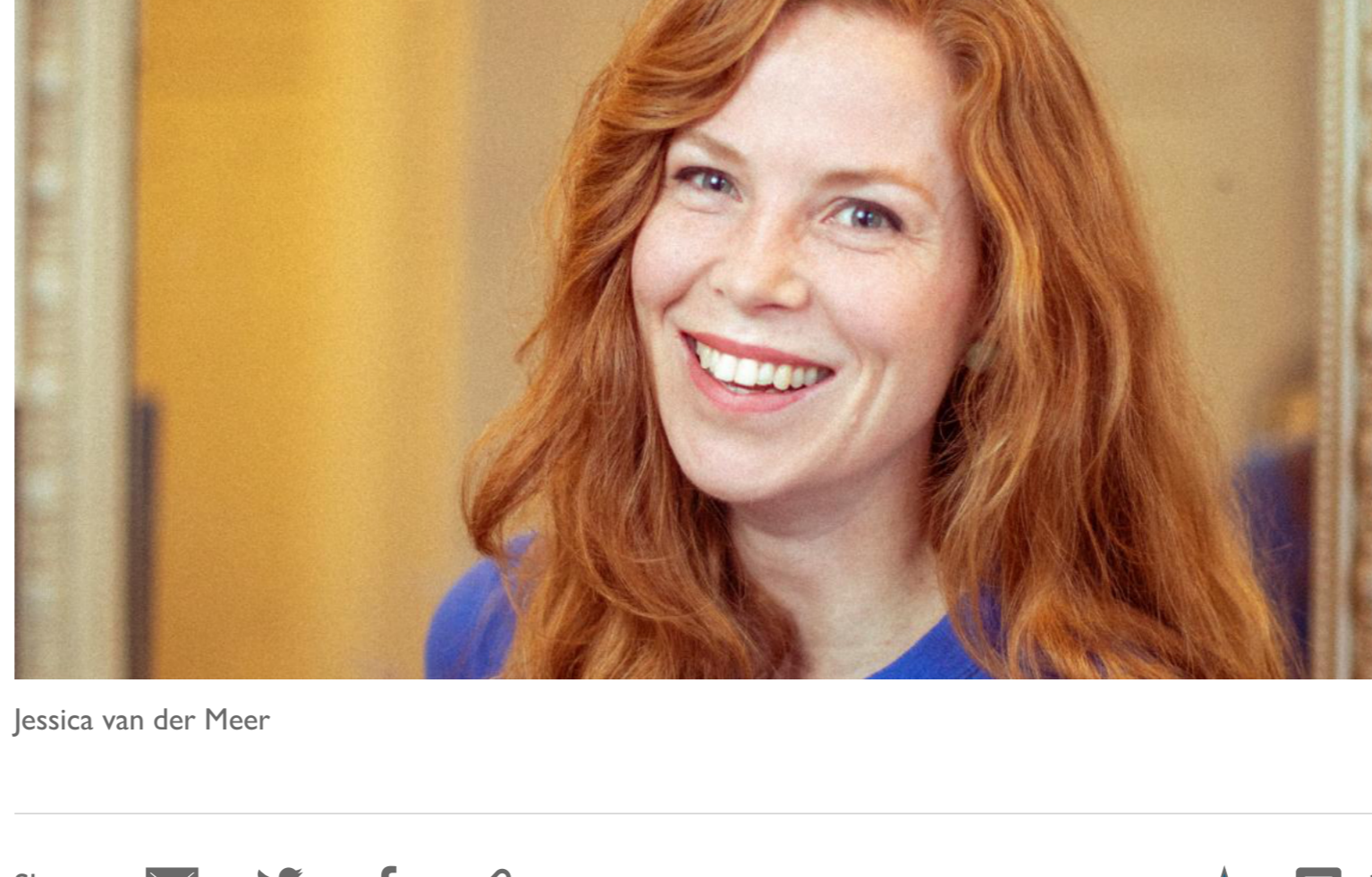
IN CONVERSATION

# The only woman in the room

Jessica van der Meer is dismayed by men's enduring dominance of the legal profession

Catherine Baksi

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Jessica van der Meer

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More than 100 years after women were allowed to become lawyers in the UK, some areas of practice remain dominated by men.

"It is normal for me to be the only woman in the room," Jessica van der Meer, a commercial barrister at 2TG, in London, says in the week that the world celebrated International Women's Day.

It happens so often that she has stopped noticing, but Van der Meer is clear this is "not OK".

Van der Meer specialises in contractual, insurance and reinsurance, professional negligence and property damage work. She has a particular interest in World Trade Organisation and international trade law, having advised companies and the UK government on Brexit and its trade-related consequences. At one stage, Van der Meer was seconded to the Bank of England's EU withdrawal unit.

As successful as she has been, Van der Meer points to research showing that across the wider profession, work is not allocated fairly between men and women. It is claimed that women are denied the most lucrative instructions and not given access to the best quality work before the most senior courts.

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The fact that the government did not instruct any women in the prorogation case in 2019, in which the Supreme Court ruled that the prime minister had unlawfully suspended parliament, she says is shocking: "It sends a signal that there are no able women to do the work, which is complete rubbish."

Solicitors, she suggests, have a role to play in improving the situation. "If they are only offered men, they can pipe up and ask for a more diverse list of advocates," she says.

More widely, she bemoans the profession's structure, which Van der Meer describes as "not designed for a working mother". It has not changed enough to accommodate people who are not "white men with a nanny or wife at home who takes care of the children".

Van der Meer is one of four representatives from Gray's Inn on the Inns of Court Alliance for Women, which launched last month, replacing the Temple Women's Forum.

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She hopes it will be a "step in the right direction to create equity and equality at the Bar" and stem the flow of talented women leaving.

The "pervasive" sexism at the bar, she says, also needs to be addressed. While she experiences it in the form of slights exhibiting prejudice against difference — sometimes based on her accent — van der Meer says colleagues face worse examples.

Van der Meer had an international upbringing. She was born in Venezuela to Dutch parents, where her father, a civil engineer, was working in the oil industry. When she was six, the family returned to the Netherlands for three years, before moving to the US, where she completed her schooling.

Van der Meer studied political science and cultural anthropology at the Leiden University in Holland, and peace studies and conflict resolution at Utrecht University, before working as a consultant in development economics for a non-governmental organisation.

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She also has a masters degree in development economics and international development from Oxford University.

The financial crisis in 2008 made it hard to get funding. "We spent all our time chasing money to fund work. It was disillusioning and not why you go into development," she says.

The situation made her "dream job not so dreamy" and she went back to the drawing board to establish what she enjoyed doing. Having debated at school and university, Van der Meer realised it was advocacy, and decided to qualify as a lawyer.

After shopping around, she says that her decision to study in England was a "slam dunk" because the profession was split between barristers and solicitors. All her strengths, she says, are in the barristers' box, and all her weaknesses on the other side, adding: "I would have made the world's worst solicitor."

Despite that, she says, it was not an easy journey. It took her three rounds of applications to secure pupillage, while completing the conversion course and bar professional training course at City, London University and working as a paralegal at the law firm Bindmans.

"I was a barista before I was a barrister," says Van der Meer, who had a job running a coffee shop in the City near to the Bar school. "I spent all my time and money during the BPTC there, if I wasn't in a lecture, and got to know the owners and staff well. I've always been into coffee and I enjoyed the fact that they took their coffee seriously."

Starting pupillage aged 30, Van der Meer started on clinical negligence claims, which she says provided good advocacy experience. Insurance work had always interested her, because there is "always a sexy angle — something has gone wrong, exploded, caught fire or been demolished".

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Conversations with colleagues led her to start hosting a podcast, *You'll be hearing from my lawyer*, where she talks to women barristers about life at the Bar, where she talks from sexism and racism to anxiety generally and how to act and dress without it detracting from the advocacy.

She says that the podcast is a way of tackling issues a lot of barristers — women and men — think about, but have not had a forum in which to discuss.

Some people, she says, feel that they have had to "squash themselves" in the profession, because they are not accepted as they are. "There's a feeling that we have to be an acceptable, inoffensive version of ourselves. I hope that stops and we become a profession in which you can be yourself and still be accepted as a professional."

Van de Meer lives in Camberwell in south London and enjoys competitions involving multiple running and swimming stages.

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