

Zahida Manzoor has always been on the side of the 'real people', from the NHS frontline to legal complaints, writes Sophie Elmhirst

Staying loyal to her roots

Passion crops up a lot when talking to Zahida Manzoor. She is passionate about equity, passionate about fairness. It's a zeal that seems genuine, not recited. Manzoor is the first legal services complaints commissioner – a role that she took on in 2004 in addition to her position as the legal services ombudsman, which she had held for three and a half years. As a title it lacks inspiration, but Manzoor, in discussion, manages to fill it with potential and clearly has the bit between her teeth for the task in hand: to reform the Law Society's shoddy complaint handling.

The commissioner's offices in Leeds – on the 19th floor of a looming tower block in the centre of town – are a far cry from her professional beginnings. Manzoor began working life, as the cliché goes, at the coalface – as a nurse, midwife and then health visitor. As an entrance into public service, it has acted as a reminder throughout her career of what families and communities struggle with on a daily basis. She remembers working during the miners' strike in villages around Durham, seeing first-hand the poverty the families faced. "I decided the way I could help was looking at prevention at a much earlier stage."

Turning point

She switched to education, obtaining a teaching qualification then lecturing in child development. The turning point in her career came while she was working in Bradford council developing education programmes across the city. There was still however, an ambition to effect change at a higher level:

"Someone said to me: you need to be working with people who are leading organisations." So she did just that, becoming programme director at Common Purpose, the charity that runs leadership courses for all types of "leader" – from business to community. There, she enabled CEOs to think about crime, education and the NHS and the role formed a stepping stone to her own leadership roles within the NHS, first as a non-executive director of an NHS trust and then as chair of Bradford district health authority. In this role she instigated the one-stop shop services, where consumers could visit a GP and a dentist and the post office at the same time. It was, as she put it, "thinking about real people – the convenience of having something in one place".

Along with passion, "real people" figure highly in Manzoor's vernacular – the sense that she is battling on the public's behalf is clearly a motivating force. Her commitment was quickly rewarded when she was promoted to become a chair of the Northern and Yorkshire region of the NHS executive, managing a budget of £3.5bn and 100,000

staff. Her remit extended from the borders of Scotland to the edges of Sheffield and included one of Europe's major hospitals in Leeds. She was, at this point, the youngest chair of a health authority, and the only one from an ethnic minority. She describes this as a "disappointment". Her response was typically proactive however, and she produced a report on the issue in association with the King's Fund.

Healthy move

Her move away from health came when the position of legal services ombudsman cropped up. She wanted to do something different, but was equally attracted by the parallels. "When you're sick, you're at your most vulnerable ... similarly when you go to the legal profession you might be at your lowest point – divorce, death, issues of custody or personal freedom." The ombudsman was non-statutory and paid for by the Law Society. Professional regulation in the law has moved on and out of that role came the statutory legal services complaints commissioner. The office has powers transferred from the lord chancellor in order to tackle with more force the way complaints about solicitors are handled by their professional body.

The appeal of the job was, as before, the fight on behalf of the consumer. She is complimentary about the legal services in this country but acknowledges that there are some lawyers, predominantly solicitors, who "let down the profession". It became clear that she had to work closely with Law Society in particular. On this relationship she is painstakingly diplomatic, but her face betrays a level of frustration and she admits she "would have liked to have seen greater

The essential Manzoor

Age: 47

Education: Applied Social Studies MA

Career: Legal services complaints commissioner and legal services ombudsman for England and Wales. 1997-2001, member of the NHS Policy Board. 1997-2001, regional chair of the NHS Executive, Northern and Yorkshire Regions. 1993-1998, commissioner and deputy chair of the Commission for Race Equality. 1992-1997, chair of the Bradford Health Authority.

Other roles: Vice-patron of Crimestoppers, independent assessor for the Foreign Office and Home Office, member of the Home Secretary's Advisory Panel on Race Relations and patron of the Asian Disability Network.



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improvement" by the regulator. But she is resolutely positive: "You've got to have a constructive dialogue, you've got to work in partnership. You have to listen carefully, but you have to know what you want as well."

One of the powers she now has is a fine of up to £1m she can impose on the Law Society if it fails to handle complaints satisfactorily. This is a last resort, but she makes clear that if the situation demands it, she will not shy away from implementing the fine. Beneath the smiles and graciousness, one senses that Manzoor is not to be messed with.

As a young Muslim woman, determination was something she needed just to defy conventional expectations and pursue an independent career. "For my generation, Muslim women didn't go off to university – it

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was frowned upon. My parents were different – my father believed passionately in the importance of getting a decent education, irrespective of whether you were male or female." She describes, amusingly, her decision to leave her community to go to university. Her neighbours were in uproar, disbelieving of how her parents could allow her to live elsewhere, unsupervised. But her father, who she cites as her main source of inspiration, paid no heed.

Role model

Manzoor has since become something of a role model for young Asian women, although she modestly denies it. She was voted Asian Woman of the Year in 1999 and also served as deputy chair of the Commission for Racial Equality from 1995-1998 (she was in the running for the post of chair taken by Trevor Phillips in 2003). Of her own experience as an Asian woman in the workplace she is philosophical: "Of course sometimes doors close, but then another opens ... the thing is, you have to make it open."

The sacrifices that accompany such ambition are predictable. On the subject of

Positive outlook: but under the smiles, Manzoor is not to be messed with

her family, she says, "if I'm falling anywhere that would be it". She has two daughters – one who is studying law at university. She laughs ruefully: "They're well-adjusted kids in spite of me really..." But she is adamant that weekends are devoted to them.

Her next step career-wise is uncertain. Her recommendation to the white paper on legal services reform, published in October, is that her own office should be abolished and an independent body should handle all complaints. "The problem with the Law Society is that they regulate the same people they're trying to represent. It's like the English football manager refereeing in a crucial England game." On the subject of her own trajectory, she is typically forthright, if unspecific: "Whatever I choose to do next, it will be something where I can make a difference – it won't be drafting something for others, it will be something where I can see tangible results." The frontline spirit, carved out during those early days in the NHS, is still very much in essence.