



# Sandie Okoro

## “As women, our careers are not optional”

Interviewed by **Belinda Otas**

**L**isted by the *Powerlist 2011* as one of the most influential black people in Britain, Sandie Okoro is the global general counsel for Barings, one of the world's oldest and most prestigious financial institutions. The daughter of a Nigerian father and a Trinidadian mother, in her 40s, Okoro is one of few women currently functioning within the capacity of the Global General Counsel (GGC), a much coveted role in the financial world. In her

spare time, she is a director of International Lawyers for Africa and in an exclusive interview with *New African Woman*, she tells Belinda Otas why women must not view their careers as an option.

**Q YOU KNEW YOU WANTED TO BE A LAWYER AGED NINE, BUT WAS TOLD BY A TEACHER “LITTLE GIRLS FROM BALHAM DON'T BECOME JUDGES”. WHAT DID THAT DO YOUR PSYCHE?**  
It made me think they do now and because

it was a teacher, I thought she doesn't know that much. I might have had a very different reaction and taken it as factual if it had been a judge but I didn't and I like a challenge.

**Q WHAT DOES YOUR ROLE AS BARINGS GGC INVOLVE AND WHAT IS EXPECTED OF YOU ON A DAY-TO-DAY BASIS?**  
My overall job is to manage my company's legal risk across the globe. You are looking at lots of different aspects of law across dif-

ferent jurisdictions and no day is ever the same. That's what I like about it. I'm much more of a generalist than I'm a specialist. But I'm a generalist within the remit of financial services, so I understand the asset management industry, my particular area of expertise.

**Q YOU WENT TO WORK AT SCHRODERS, AN ASSET MANAGEMENT INSTITUTION, AT 25. DID THAT OVERWHELM YOU OR DID YOU VIEW IT MORE AS A CHALLENGE?**

Throughout my career, I have never thought and seen things that way. It's only afterwards that I say I should have given this some more thought. When I went in at 25, straight after qualifications, it was in the capacity of a management role, managing a team of 6-to-9 people. This was right after 'Big Bang', when London's financial services went through deregulation and significant changes. There were lots of opportunities as a result. I landed this great job and Schroders was a great organisation to work for.

**Q AS IN-HOUSE LAWYER AT ONE OF THE WORLD'S LEADING ASSET MANAGEMENT INSTITUTIONS, YOU MANAGE A TEAM IN LONDON, BOSTON AND HONG KONG. HOW CHALLENGING IS IT TO MANAGE ALL THREE JURISDICTIONS ON DIFFERENT CONTINENTS?**

It's challenging but I like a challenge. I think I work in one of the most interesting professions and with one of the best asset managers. I have done that with Schroders and Barings, and that's quite something. I have always worked with great people, real teams and I really enjoy my job, otherwise I wouldn't do it. In terms of managing people in other countries, I visit at least once a year and the important thing with all of these is good communication and people you can trust to get on with it. If you are delegating responsibility, which you have to do due to different time zones and offices, you must delegate and cannot be a micro-manager. That's the secret, not being a micro-manager, hiring the right people for the job and letting them get on with it.

**Q YOU TALK ABOUT YOUR LOVE FOR A GOOD CHALLENGE. WHERE DOES THAT MINDSET COME FROM?**

I had a formidable and interesting mother and a laid-back father, and my mum always told me I could do anything I wanted to do. I have always disliked injustice and I grew up in a time when you were fighting

against apartheid, racism and there was a lot going on in my formative years about the struggle of other people in different places. So, I got involved in all those sorts of things. It's really important to have a voice and some people don't have a voice. That's why I have always liked a challenge.

**Q THERE HAS BEEN A DEBATE ABOUT THE INTRODUCTION OF QUOTAS TO ENABLE WOMEN TO BREAK INTO PROMINENT DIRECTORIAL ROLES. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE HURDLES STILL PREVENTING WOMEN IN SOME SECTORS FROM HIGH PROFILE JOBS?**

It's very difficult and I think it's a combination of the hurdles are there, so deal with it and work out how you can get around it and don't put hurdles in front of you which may not actually exist. It's very difficult for women to have a family and a full-on working life but I don't think it's impossible. You have to be very organised. Don't worry about it, get on with it and do it. That's my theory. I understand the debate about quotas and one viewpoint I would put forward is that one of the benefits of quotas is it allows you to get in the room and prove yourself, which you might not get without the quota. But the quota doesn't mean you are going to stay in the room if you are no good and that's the absolute truth because they have got other pools of women to pull from. Also, rather than quotas, look at the criteria for entry into these boards and see if it's actually excluding women inadvertently. I would suggest that women lawyers, in the way that lawyers think and with training, would make excellent non-executive directors.

**Q YOU ARE A STRONG PROONENT OF DIVERSITY. IF MORE PEOPLE FROM DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS START COMING FORWARD, WHAT DO THE COMPANIES STAND TO GAIN?**

If you are always recruiting the same types of people from the same types of background, you are always going to get the same kind of ideas and attitudes, and the problem with not having a lot of diversity is that it will stifle innovation. So, with lots of diversity, you have lots of innovation and innovation is the future of everything. Diversity equals innovation.

**Q WHAT DO WE AS WOMEN NEED TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT ON OUR JOURNEY IN THE WORKPLACE, IN OUR APPROACH AND NEGOTIATING SKILLS WHERE OUR CAREERS ARE CONCERNED?**

I think the most important thing is the unpopular thing to say, but I'm going to say it. We must not think that our careers are an option. The first thing is that if it gets too hard or difficult, we should give it up and try something else. Men don't see it that way. Their job is to grow up, get serious, get a job and you work until you retire and there's a lot of pressure on men. For women, it's like, I have a family now, maybe I'll give up. But I think there has been a shift, which is that, it's not really acceptable for women to get married and stop working. Everyone would think that's a bit strange. It used to be like that but now it's when you have chil-



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dren. So, there's still a mindset that you don't work after you have had children. In my background and in many similar backgrounds, my mother worked all her life. It wasn't an option for her to work because my father was a teacher and he didn't have enough money to support us. Increasingly women are becoming the sole breadwinners, so many women are not seeing it as an option. When you have got it like that, you sort out the child care, you put food on the table and other things you have to sort out and you don't feel guilty about it because you realise that if you don't put food on the table, nobody else is going to. ■