

What a twenty-five-year career in retail has taught me about equality and inclusion



Zahra Coggins, Format Development Director and Co-Chair of the WHSmith Gender Equity Network.

Twenty-five years ago I graduated with a law degree but had no desire to become a lawyer. I feel incredibly fortunate that I landed on my feet joining a retail graduate scheme and never looked back.

I've had a varied career spanning more than two decades which has gone from working in stores, to senior trading roles, to my role today being responsible for setting our stores up to brilliantly serve customers at WHSmith.

I am also a founding Co-Chair of the Gender Equity Network (GEN) made up of colleagues from around the business. I take huge pride in my role particularly given the heritage of WHSmith and its track record of promoting equality and inclusion across the business, like being one of the first retailers to have female store managers from 1916. Our role as the GEN network is to hold our teams and leaders to account to carry this on.

This Friday's International Women's Day is a great opportunity for us to do a reality check as a business and ask if we are doing enough to support women and promote equality. Because we have to acknowledge that, while big strides have been taken in many areas, even across my 25-year career, I've still seen companies fall short.

One example which has stayed with me is when I made a flexible working request at one of my former employers after my return to work following my third son. This was rejected and I ultimately moved on from the business as a result. More companies need to wake up to the benefits that inclusion and investment in women can bring because what's good for colleagues is also good for business.

Thankfully the penny is starting to drop with retail and to me it speaks volumes of our industry that more women are progressing into senior retail leadership roles, which has been hugely supported as well by the flexibility we offer parents returning to work now. I am proud to work for a retailer where there are no ceilings on women's progress and ambitions.

However at an executive level, female CEOs, CFOs and Chairs remain the minority across retail. This is vital because not only is this not representative of retail's customer base, but seeing is believing and having women leaders in place will inspire others to achieve their ambitions and lean into opportunities.

Which is why over the coming weeks at WHSmith, our teams will be coming together to look at what inclusion and equality means and how we can all support positive change and advance equality.

For example, our Chair Annette Court will be speaking with CFO Robert Moorhead, Exec Sponsor of the GEN network, about the importance of driving fairness, opportunities, and success for all. While we will also hear from a panel of colleagues of both men and women who work in gender-stereotype roles and how they have been breaking barriers. Because it's down to everyone to drive progress and I have worked with some fantastic leaders who have facilitated my growth through their allyship.

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It's been 113 years since the first International Women's Day and women like me are standing on the shoulders of giants who have gone before us and made progress happen. I am where I am today because of the hard work of others, and I don't take this for granted. That's why I see it as a responsibility in my role to continue on the path they have forged to be inclusive and help others thrive in their careers.