



# She distinction

Wisdom to Help Women to Advance and Rise

## Interview with Justice Fiona Mwale: High Court Judge

[September 1, 2015](#) [Vera Ng'oma](#)



*“Success is an attitude. Circumstances are there to challenge us, not bring us down. Whilst I can’t do it all, I do my best at what I can”*

*Fiona is a High Court Judge in Malawi. She previously worked as a legal researcher with the Southern African Development (SADC) Tribunal and as Deputy Chief Law Reform officer with the Malawi Law Commission. She has served as President of the Women Lawyers Association of Malawi. Fiona is an accredited trainer on Gender-based Violence and the law on behalf of several United Nations Agencies. She currently serves on the editorial team of the Malawi Law Journal as Associate editor.*

**Alice: What would you say is responsible for the level of success you have achieved?**

**Fiona:** I believe consistency and determination are the main driver of my success. I consistently deliver on my assignments and have gained a reputation for this. I make it a point not to let my extremely difficult family situation get in the way. As a mother, a wife and the carer of a child with a severe disability I have often met with skepticism in terms of my ability to deliver and I have had to prove myself over and over again. This is where consistency and determination come in. I go for very challenging projects and I go over and beyond the call of duty to deliver the best work possible. My education obviously plays a role. Having a post-graduate degree in Law with a Distinction helps my CV to stand out and having studied for both my Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees at reputable institutions also helps.

**Alice: You have remained in the Public Sector in Malawi throughout your career which is unusual for a lawyer. What has kept you there?**

**Fiona:** I find work in the Public Service highly fulfilling. It comes with a lot of frustration due to problems with limited resources that make it difficult to operate at times. But the gains are amazing. It puts you in contact with real people on the ground and handling real issues firsthand. At the end of the day, it’s all about service delivery and I suppose I am just the type of person that was born to serve. Moving from the Malawi Public Service to regional public service in SADC (Southern Africa Development Community) was a logical step in my progression regarding my dream to work at international level. It is interesting to note that at whatever level, local, regional, or international, the fundamentals are the same and that is to work with the

same level of dedication to a cause greater than oneself and apply oneself fully.

**Alice: How do you balance career and your other life roles?**

**Fiona:** The most important thing for me is to recognize that there really isn't such a thing as a balance. Naturally, if you ask most mothers "What is more important, work or family?" most would say family. But what does it mean to have your family come first? Is it measured by how many hours you spend together? Can it mean providing good opportunities for your children that may require being away for long hours?

I realized a while back that I cannot equate the time I spend at work and the time I spend at home in trying to achieve what most call balance. For me it's about quality. If I must spend time away from my family, I must be able to justify it for the good of the family, for creating opportunities that will make the difference in my children's lives, health and ultimate happiness. In most of my dealings I try to put my children's happiness first, realizing that a happy child is a healthy one and the memories we create now will last longer than any of the other investments money can buy.

**Alice: You do actively expose your children to your work; is there a reason?**

**Fiona:** I like to do work that inspires my children and by showing them how to give back to society, they appreciate more why I may have to be away sometimes. At the end of the day, my philosophy is that whilst I can't do it all, I do my best at what I can in a way that does not take away from my family.

**Alice: If there were one thing you would do differently on the professional front what would it be?**

**Fiona:** I would take on less work and rest more. Whilst I always strive to deliver my best, I often get tired to my own detriment and feel that I would do an even better job if I managed to rest more.

**Alice: What advice would you give to young women who are starting their professional journeys and young girls who are still in school and who one day want to be like you?**

**Fiona:** Success is a choice and an attitude. Life can throw very challenging situations at you, but if you make the choice to keep going forward regardless of the struggles, you will make it. I always give the example of how despite the fact that I am the mother of a severely brain injured child, I was able to take up a job abroad and take my child with me. I studied for my Masters degree in a foreign country setting out just after my first child was born. I also took my child with me. In both these situations, the task seemed impossible, but I made the choice to make it work and I managed to perform, and excel because in my scheme of things, failure was not an option. Circumstances are there to challenge us, not bring us down.

*\*This interview was conducted by Alice Nthenda-Msosa*

*For more information on Vera Ng'oma's work and resources in leadership, personal and career development and excellence building, click [here](#).*