



Divorce lawyers are all over the small screen this autumn — but what do women in the legal profession wear in real life? **Olivia Lidbury** speaks to the ultimate power dressers

There's a scene in the first episode of *War*, the upcoming Sky TV drama starring Sienna Miller and Dominic West as a high-profile couple embarking on a messy divorce, where Celia Imrie (playing a barrister nicknamed Budgie) sashays into the contemporary offices of Miller's solicitor. Sporting a black pinstripe, wide-leg double-breasted wool suit over a crisply tailored white shirt with her cropped hair dyed red, there's a subtle whiff of David Bowie about her.

"We definitely pushed the looks," says the show's costume designer, Matthew Price, who sourced said suit from Sandro and the shirt from Jermyn Street-based Emma Willis. "She's part of that old-school Savile Row

made-to-measure world. We wanted to channel a heightened power dressing," he says of Imrie's character. Miller, who plays a wronged but manipulative film star (West is her cheating tech titan ex), is a delight to watch in outfits by Chloé, Victoria Beckham and Stella McCartney. But the show serves up deliciously dynamic wardrobe semantics for legal professionals. As does *The Split Up*, a new six-part BBC drama — a spin-off from the hugely popular series *The Split* — centred on Manchester's moneyed divorce circuit.

In real life the looks adopted by the most sought-after marital solicitors working for the one per cent can be just as performative (see the veteran divorce lawyer Fiona Shackleton, who represented Paul McCartney and King Charles III, and her arsenal of PVC rain macs and neat dresses).

"If you're dealing with ultra-high-net-worth clients, they expect you to dress in a way that's commensurate with the way that they dress," says Ayesha Vardag, founder of the top law firm Vardags. A devotee of Givenchy tailoring, Chanel jackets and a sprinkling of Dior, she admits to spending a relatively high proportion of her income on clothes. "I don't buy lots, but what I do buy is the best I possibly can," she adds.

Davina Katz is the founder of Katz Partners and represented Kate Winslet when she divorced the film director Sam Mendes. Katz's wardrobe is primarily stocked with vintage Saint Laurent from the 1960s and 1970s, which she has collected over the past two decades. She never wears black but her outfits are always polished and considered, "and give, I hope, the impression of someone who is organised in their own mind", she says modestly. Dressing for court — especially the High Court — requires a more conservative dress code than for client meetings or days in the office.

In family court barristers are not required to wear wigs or gowns (in *War* one barrister sports a cropped Balmain jacket with gold buttons, paired with Valentino trousers). The KC Rebecca Carew Pole remembers arriving at the bar in the late 1990s when it was still frowned upon for female barristers to wear trousers, "but now I wear lots of suits and I've got a vast array of pussy-bow blouses — I feel like they're the female equivalent of a tie". She also favours long-sleeve shirt dresses by the British brand Beulah for their easy balance of femininity and formality.

Zoë Bloom, founder and partner of AFP Bloom, loves the theatre of the High Court.

"It has these extraordinary corridors and so I always wear incredibly noisy stilettos. Often I'll be tottering up and down to talk to the other side and negotiate, and so when the client hears the click-clack sound of me coming back they feel reassured." (Such is Bloom's mission to put her clients at ease, she once wore a T-shirt with the slogan "The Terminator" to meet with a barrister whose nickname — unbeknown to him — was The Terminator.) A more flamboyant dresser than most, Bloom wears tasselled jackets and full-length snakeskin coats over formal court dress. She mixes Cos and H&M with pieces from Ba&sh and Zadig & Voltaire alongside Balenciaga accessories, "accented with weird and wonderful stuff that you pick off on Vinted", she says. "I've also got the most amazing pair of studded 'showgirl boots' from Ibiza," she adds with a laugh.

The intimate subject matter of relationship breakdowns coupled with extreme wealth heightens the drama in the courtroom. Where Shackleton was once quoted as saying she considered her work uniform to be her "battle kit", Katz thinks times have moved on. "It's a bit of a stereotype that clothes are like this armour that you put on. That might have been true historically but, as with everything, that's evolved. I see my clothes as something that make me feel positive and good in my own skin, and so if I feel like that then there's no noise and I'm totally focused on the job."

Solicitors act as a buffer and formal representative during what is a difficult and invasive time, so clients are naturally attuned to how they dress. Abigail Elias-Lurie, who instructed Bloom in 2020 and now works as a divorce coach, says her solicitor's vibrant style had an empowering effect: "It showed that she's modern and up to date, which you want to feel your lawyer is. From my perspective she gave off this vibe of 'I'm in control', and as a result I didn't feel scared."

Vardag talks almost dutifully of projecting an image for her clients through her style: "Obviously they are coming to you for your brain and for what you can achieve for them,

but part of that package is that you look 'right' from their perspective. Clients really appreciate walking into court with a lawyer who appears sophisticated and elegant. It's part of the strength of the position."

Katz describes the tension of being a woman keen to establish a strong sense of personal style in such a combative milieu as "almost a taboo. Because if you're attractive and well put-together, then that's surely what you're thinking about. It takes a certain amount of confidence to step out of that and say, 'No, I've got a couple of law degrees and I'm definitely very good at my job, and I do think about what I wear and how I look, and the two can sit side by side perfectly fine.'"

In *War* West's solicitor, played by Nina Sosanya, works for a stuffy legal firm yet wears barrel-leg trousers, brogues and kimono-inspired shirts (and Issey Miyake). "She's been there and done it [the traditional suit attire], so she's almost like a floating entity," Price explains of the hierarchical freedom afforded to those who are more established.

Troubleshooting what to wear in the industry is something that the personal stylist Fleur Mandeville, of Fine Personal Styling, addresses in workplace sartorial sessions. "Men still have this uniform of suits, which hasn't changed an awful lot, whereas women have a lot more choice in terms of style and colour. And tailoring has completely changed — you can go much more relaxed



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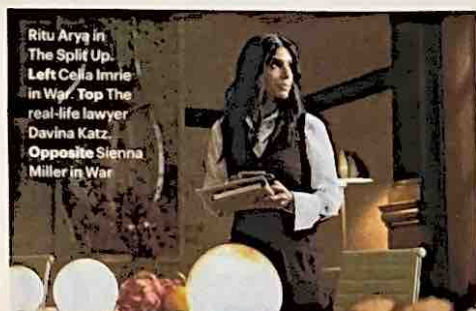
and oversized," she says. Brands Mandeville rates include The Fold, Theory and Me+Em.

A dress code sounds archaic but it can be helpful, particularly for guiding younger staff. In 2019 Vardag made headlines for sending a memo in which she told female team members they could be "discreetly sexy" and that cardigans are almost "never OK". The memo was sent after a trainee turned up in an extremely short leopard-print miniskirt that "wasn't really very lawyery or what our clients would expect at all". On reflection, Vardag chuckles at how the memo was "a bit mother henish. But the brand and the image of a firm is part of its identity and I'm responsible for curating the brand."

In *War* Price sought inspiration from the Instagram account Kat from Finance to dress the paralegal played by Emma Laird in more accessibly priced brands, such as Peachy Den and & Other Stories. Vardag concedes that not everyone can afford to shop designer: "One can do just as well from M&S and Zara, which are the sorts of brands I wore when I was starting out."

London is something of a destination for uber-wealthy "divorce tourists", owing to judges in the capital recognising nonfinancial contributions (such as parenting) made during a marriage. Competition is fierce but the leading law firms are seemingly on the same side — at least where knitwear is concerned. "I'm not a fan of anyone looking scruffy at all, and I'm quite vocal about that," Katz says. "And I'm not a fan of cardigans." ■

Sky BBC David Harrison



Ritu Arya in *The Split Up*. Left Celia Imrie in *War*. Top The real-life lawyer Davina Katz. Opposite Sienna Miller in *War*