



Safiyya Patel
Partner

WEBBER WENTZEL

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People, purpose and passion in law

by Lerato Ramango

For Safiyya Patel, the law is about people, purpose and passion. During her 25 years in the South African legal profession, she has gradually pivoted her focus from public interest/human rights to transformative dealmaking, and Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) and Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) issues in the corporate sector.

She was inspired by the power of law to redress the wrongs she had seen and experienced in apartheid South Africa, but her path to a legal career was not an easy one. She was born in Vrededorp, which was declared a “white area” in 1962. When she was three years old, her Indian family was forcibly removed from their home, and she has vivid memories of that time. Her father’s family was active in struggle politics. After he died when she was nine, she saw how her mother, who had no education, had to bring up four children single-handedly.

“I made a decision at a young age that I would study, be socially impactful, and be financially independent,” she says.

But law wasn’t her conservative family’s choice for her. She began by studying dentistry, but after two weeks, realised that she could not become a dentist to make everyone else happy and moved to the law faculty.

Corporate law “happened by accident, but it was a good accident”, she says. She was a young associate in the late 1990s, when the new government was seeking advice on new legislation, and she assisted political activists and unions during their adjustment to the new democracy. In this era, her clients gradually started to need more advice on entering

the corporate world, setting up sustainable investment companies, and this ushered Safiyya into the corporate sector.

“I still have my roots in transformation and social impact, which is why I am still looking at ESG and transformation matters, where there is a greater purpose than a regular transaction,” she says.

Two major transactions in her career stand out for her. One was the groundbreaking Sasol Inzalo R26 billion Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) transaction in 2008, the largest to date. This was an innovative and landmark structure deal at the time, as it gave millions of ordinary South Africans the opportunity to own a part of Sasol and benefit from its success, and to create a legacy through major investment in skills development. Significantly, it was being put together shortly after the B-BEE Codes were published in 2007, so there was little practice or knowledge about how that legislation would apply to transactions. The teams working on the deal had to understand the legislation, interpret it, and create a structure that would achieve its purpose.

A second significant deal was the recent acquisition and delisting of IT group Alviva Holdings, where Safiyya was part of the team that advised the acquirers. This deal resulted in the creation of one of the biggest non-listed, black-owned IT groups in South Africa.

She says that the deal had been in preparation for several years, but the acquiring consortium, headed by Fannie Mahlangu and Puven Ramasamy, had taken time to find appropriate funding for it.

“Fannie had been a client (and wonderful friend) of mine for about 12 years, and this deal was very close to his heart. Unfortunately, in 2022, he was diagnosed with cancer and passed

away in December. We managed to conclude the transaction in early 2023, always with Fannie on our minds. He was a phenomenal person, who I think epitomises what BEE is about. He was one of the first black computer scientists to graduate from Wits in the early 1990s, and was always someone who worked hard, found opportunities, and flourished with them.”

Safiyya has managed to juggle both motherhood and a demanding professional career. She was helped by her family and friends, as well as colleagues at work and a supportive environment in the firm.

She appreciates the effort made by Webber Wentzel’s Gender Strategy Working Group, on which managing partner Sally Hutton sits, to make life easier for female lawyers by introducing policies such as flexible working hours. The firm has also made a significant effort to put more women in leadership roles, and they now constitute almost half of all partners.

“That is a noteworthy achievement, and it provides role modelling for our younger lawyers,” Safiyya says. “It sets the tone and environment for younger lawyers, and also for our clients who are women working in the corporate sector.”

When the opportunity to take on a leadership role at Webber Wentzel came up, Safiyya seized it. She says that it is a privilege to be offered the opportunity for personal growth, and although the role has its challenges, it can be fulfilling too. Being a leader demands resilience and tenacity, but becomes easier with the support of other women.

Over time, she hopes that this role will enable her to make a greater impact in South Africa for people with fewer advantages. “That is my North Star.” 