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QUALIFIED YET QUESTIONED: THE EVERYDAY STRUGGLES OF PROFESSIONAL WOMEN

Padmaja E

"The civil law, as well as nature herself, has always recognized a wide difference in the respective spheres and destinies of man and woman. Man is, or should be, woman's protector and defender. The natural and proper timidity and delicacy which belongs to the female sex evidently unfits it for many of the occupations of civil life."¹

The infamous lines were spoken by U.S. Supreme Court Justice Joseph P. Bradley in the case of *Bradwell v. Illinois* (1873). The case concerned one Myra Bradwell, who had passed the Illinois Bar and was still deemed ineligible to own a law license for no other reason than her gender. She was assumed to be incompetent because she was a woman, even though she cracked the same bar exam as the men. Despite passing the exam and proving that she possessed the same calibre as the other candidates, she was, in the eyes of society and of the court, unfit to be a lawyer. The case was ruled 8-1 against her.

There is a notable gap of almost a century between the year men were provided professional education and the year women were “allowed” professional education. For instance, the first woman to graduate from an American medical school was Elizabeth Blackwell in 1849, which is unsettling, given the fact that men had been trained in medical schools since 1765.² A prestigious Ivy League school like Harvard only admitted women into its medical school in 1945, 163 years after its foundation.³ The schools still did not take them for their intellectual capabilities, but to humour themselves with what they thought were “whimsies and fancies” of women.

¹*Bradwell v. Illinois*, 83 U.S. (16 Wall.) 130 (1873).

²Ass'n of Am. Med. Colls., *AAMC History: A Need for Trust (1765–1900)*, <https://www.aamc.org/about-us/aamc-history?chapter=1765-1900> (last visited June 10, 2026).

³Countway Libr., Ctr. for the Hist. of Med., *Women in Medicine: Introduction*, OnView: Digital Collections & Exhibits, <https://collections.countway.harvard.edu/onview/exhibits/show/women/intro> (last visited June 10, 2026).

Centuries after being neglected, shamed, laughed at for having serious dreams, and the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, which contributed significantly to women breaking into colleges in the 1800s, we witness women entering serious professions, only to be asked, “Can I have a male doctor?”

After taking up the same education, cracking the same exams, and going through the same training as their male counterparts, women are still considered less eligible. If one thinks objectively about it, that assumption has no logical basis. How is it that genders that provingly score the same in IQ tests and have the same cognitive abilities are treated differently in intellectual spaces? Because men are physically stronger?

Women were and still are trodden on because an average man is physically stronger than an average woman. But why was the same analogy applied in intelligence? A study has shown that women are scoring higher in IQ tests in recent years due to changes in the environment and educational opportunities, concluding that gender was never the problem.⁴

Women in professions are talked over, ignored, and dismissed even today. Even today, in an age when those doors have been thrown wide open, and lectures halls no longer exclude them, the effects of those centuries of intentional exclusion cannot just wash away with some new policy. It can be found in the raised eyebrow when a woman speaks with confidence, in the co-worker whose work is considered only after the identical idea is repeated by a man, in the boardroom where competency needs to be constantly proven, and mediocre work wearing a suit coat must be trusted. A lie believed for too long becomes the natural inclination. Not because women lacked the capacity to join these professional ranks, but rather because it was declared that they lacked the capacity so that they might be excluded. When the barriers came down, what was left behind was a much more difficult obstacle to overcome: a cultural memory.

⁴Laura Edwins, *IQ Test: Women Are Now Scoring Higher Than Men*, **Christian Science Monitor** (July 17, 2012), <https://www.csmonitor.com/Science/2012/0717/IQ-test-Women-are-now-scoring-higher-than-men>

