

Turning a “Mad as Hell” Moment into Action

By Jessie Kornberg

I remember the moment I decided to dedicate myself to helping women. I was a rising third-year law student sitting in the conference room at Legal Momentum with the other summer interns, eating a brown bag lunch and listening to Françoise Jacobsohn describe the organization’s advocacy on behalf of women in the New York City Fire Department. Somewhere between the story of a captain who was sexually assaulted by her own ladder company and the details of the chemical burns another firefighter sustained because the department refused to buy protective gear in women’s sizes I had my “I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it any more” moment.

I am a Title IX baby. For the first 25 years of my life, my classrooms were generally half or majority female. I was rarely conscious of my gender. On the first day of what would be seven years at an all-girls school, my mom asked me how it was without boys, and I realized I hadn’t noticed. When it came to joining a student group in college, I never considered feminist organizations.

This is not to say I wasn’t experiencing gender bias. I remember a professor expressing surprise when I aced my first physics exam “even though I was pretty.” I was the only woman admitted to my major (military history) in the undergraduate program at Columbia in New York City. When I was 16, I was the victim of a sexual assault. At the time, I thought of each of these moments as being about the individuals involved, not larger social norms. I didn’t connect these experiences to one another or to the bigger picture of gender stereotyping and discrimination.

So there I was at Legal Momentum when it clicked. I sat there thinking about how much more I paid in rent every month than my guy friends because I needed to be able to walk home at night, and how I didn’t have a single female faculty on my 2L transcript, and why every time I told a guy of a certain age where I was working he told me a story about a woman who got a job unfairly because of affirmative action.

Stories I heard at Legal Momentum impressed upon me the severity and pervasiveness of violence against women.

I also thought about the overwhelming pride I felt that I lived in a place where people volunteered to run into burning buildings to save strangers. I’m still hard-pressed to imagine a more inspiring image than women, despite harassment and disproportionate risk, signing up for that work. They were so committed to saving lives. It was easy for me to commit to protecting them.

These stories, along with others I heard during my summer at Legal Momentum, impressed upon me the severity and pervasiveness of violence and discrimination against women. I think my evolution is typical of



many women my age. Generation Y is rarely witness to blatant sexism. We expect gender parity.

Now I’m the executive director of Ms. JD, a student-founded nonprofit dedicated to supporting and advancing women in the legal profession. Among other things, I’m engaged in an awareness campaign for my generation. Most people I talk to think that *more* women graduate from law school than men, but—of course—the opposite is true. Most women don’t join women’s initiatives and women’s bar associations until after they’ve had children and begin experiencing more intractable bias. When I ask junior associates, “What is the percentage of female partners at your firm?” they usually guess about a third, when it’s really more like half that number. Women generally register shock when I tell them that they represent a *decreasing* portion of law school graduates, a small minority of law review editors, and a consistently undercompensated subclass of the profession.

I often think about that summer day in that conference room and what it meant to me because now I’m the delivery vehicle for the “mad as hell” moment. 🍷

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