

Wearing the Pants

What does it even mean to be a woman anymore? We wear what we want and do what we want. Nothing, save a few biological differences, distinguishes us from our male counterparts, and yet things are not equal. The doors of opportunity have swung open, but have we stepped through? Is something holding us back?

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“You need to know that this career will affect your home. You won’t be able to have a normal family life.” I was sitting in a conference room with six other interviewees, listening to a dean introduce his medical school and the medical profession. I had prepared all week to be grilled about my grades, my scores, and my reasons for wanting to be a doctor, but at that moment, I was stunned. Sneaking a glance around, I saw that everyone else seemed to take this news in stride. The other people nodded smoothly as the dean droned on. I stared at my pad of paper, thinking about the future.

As one of the three women in the room, I wondered if the others had thought about the implications of this statement. I was suddenly very conscious of the fact that I was the only girl in the room wearing pants; maybe I was also the only one who hadn’t thought about where I’d be in ten years. I remember the men who were at the interview session with me, dressed in their identical suits with their similarly parted hair. When the dean told them that this career would affect their ability to raise a family, I wonder if that statement even bothered them. Maybe they already knew they would have wives who would be staying home to raise their children; maybe they thought being a doctor would

just mean fewer goodnight kisses and bedtime stories. For me and for the other women, we had to ask ourselves if we even had time to *have* kids to read to and to kiss at night. Maybe the other two women in the room didn't want kids or already knew how they were going to deal with parental responsibility; I didn't.

Later, during my interview, someone asked me if I understood the effect this career would have on my life at home. I said yes, of course. That was a lie; I hadn't even thought about it before. I always knew I wanted a family; I have known for a long time that I want to be a doctor. How was I supposed to know that these two dreams would conflict so harshly with each other? When would I raise my kids? When would I even have time to find a husband?

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The president of Harvard University, Lawrence Summers, recently made a series of controversial remarks about women in science. His attempt to provoke discussion backfired when he implied that men and women might have innate differences that affected their aptitude in science. Reading about this in the *Boston Globe* the day after the speech was made, I laughed out loud. I live in a house of forty female MIT students, and I pointed this article out to each one that sat down with me that morning for breakfast. Everyone had the same reaction, laughter. The idea was ludicrous, and even if we actually believed this statement, we would have felt particularly proud of ourselves that morning. We had, in fact, defied nature; so had half the population of MIT.

On the first day of my biomedical engineering class this spring, one of the professors told us to look around. There were twenty women and one man. As an MIT

alum, he commented on how much things had changed since he was a student; the ratio would have been the reverse. We all laughed, glancing around at each other, applauding our own decisions and triumphs over the system.

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Going to college makes people find themselves; at MIT in particular, we acknowledge and celebrate our differences. My friend, upon leaving her rigid Mormon home, realized she was a lesbian. To support her, I went with her to a lesbian club, not knowing to what to expect. Where I grew up, there were not a lot of openly gay people; we just didn't talk about it. Homosexuality was used as an insult, especially the idea of being a lesbian. I had never met anyone who openly claimed they were gay; it would have invited too much criticism and ridicule from our relatively close-minded community.

Much like any other club, the lights were low, the music was loud, and the drinks were overpriced. As I danced with my friends, I noticed that the women, the lesbians, were really dirty dancers. While I was accustomed to, though still uncomfortable with, the idea of men and women fully "expressing" themselves on the dance floor, I hadn't realized that women, by themselves, would do the same. These women were completely free to express their sexuality and desire in front of their peers. Unlike guys, however, they didn't pressure you to join them and everyone was allowed to revel in their own rhythm, or lack of it. After this experience, I went with my friend to other popular clubs around the city who were all promoting gay nights; I found I enjoyed these nights away from predatory guys. For me, it wasn't about finding a partner; I was hard-pressed to find a single straight guy in the room. I liked the fact that I was able to be with my friends and

not have to worry about who's looking at me and who I have to avoid. That's the kind of freedom we seldom have, but it's the type of freedom that we all need, whoever we want to date.

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Being a feminist can mean a great many things. MIT alum Aimee Smith is a self-proclaimed feminist. She and her group of supporters stamp "THIS POSTER IS OFFENSIVE TO WOMEN" in red ink on posters around campus that they deem offensive. The school paper published a story that said she was a fanatic and made it seem all she did was insult and damage others. I always wanted to distance myself from her and her causes, even though I too was offended by some of those posters.

One day I was helping my friend raise money for AIDS education for women in Africa. My friend had made many summer trips to Uganda to help develop this educational system. As we stood there, being ignored by most of the people walking by, Aimee Smith approached with one of her minions. Inwardly, I cringed, but I greeted them as I did any interested donor. She smiled at me, handed me ten dollars, and went on her way. At that moment, I saw her as a person, someone not afraid to act and give whatever she had to something she believed in. At that moment, she was someone I admired.

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Weightlifting has been a big part of my life in the past three years. It's had enormous benefits for rowing, and I've relayed my excitement to the rest of my teammates, who all now lift regularly. Whenever we don't have practice or scheduled workouts, I make my way to the athletic center to lift weights. Bypassing other girls in cropped tops and spandex shorts on the cardio machines, I take my oversized shirt and

baggie shorts to the bench press, throw on weights, and prepare the lift. Often I find myself the only girl in that area of the gym. I don't grunt, and I don't sweat profusely, but I need, and have, the right to use the machines like everyone else. My good sense overrides my self-consciousness, and I ignore the stares and glares I get for taking up bench space.

During the season, we have our workouts at the boathouse. With both men's and women's teams trying to work out at the same time, we always get in each other's way. In particular, there's a battle over the cardiovascular machines we have. To accommodate our long workouts, members of our team arrive as early as 3 o'clock in the afternoon to have the whole place to themselves and get a satisfying workout. We are all pushing just as hard to excel, fighting with the guys to get a chance to make a difference in the outcome of our races.

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For eight months, I had a job for a local ambulance company. It wasn't the exciting, "ER" lifestyle; we basically transported patients to and from dialysis appointments. These patients were often elderly and unable to move; there was a lot of lifting and carrying. When we got our assignments, we would sometimes be notified ahead of time if the patient was very large; often someone else had had an unpleasant encounter with them. More often, we arrived on scene to greet a 300-plus pound patient, ready to be carried down the stairs and lifted into the ambulance. A part of me said I should be brave and do my job. The sensible part of me called for backup. It wasn't worth the possibility of hurting my patient, my partner or myself to satisfy my pride. Another ambulance would soon arrive, often with two large men, to carry the patient; I

carried her purse. I also carried my fair share of patients down treacherous stairs, through snow banks, etc. In one rare instance, my partner and I were running behind schedule with our 300-pound patient, but all the other ambulances were busy. I gritted my teeth, and carried her down the flight of stairs. Never again. I had my limits, and I told myself that if I were a spindly, small male I would also call for backup.

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What does it mean to be a woman today? I'd like to think that women have the capability to do whatever they want, but common sense tells me that physically, that's impossible. Nature has created innate physical differences between men and women, no question. I thoroughly recognize my inability to lift heavier things, jump higher or run faster than most men, but I laugh at anyone who doubts a woman's ability to do science, anyone who underestimates the competitive spirit of a woman athlete, anyone who wonders why that group of girls can have a good time by themselves. However, I know that women still get judged for doing certain things. A woman like Aimee Smith who speaks her mind is portrayed as a fanatic. A female student who wants to be a scientist still encounters men who doubt her innate abilities for science. A girl who works out too much or doesn't dress up all the time is deemed a lesbian. Upon reflection, I realize these situations have always been present in my life: the judgment of women who stray from the narrow path of tradition.

My mind drifts back to middle school, a time when everyone made fun of the science teacher because she kept her hair short and wore pants all the time. It angers me now that people would make fun of someone who was just comfortable being who she was. I now see that any time a woman is different, if she takes a challenging job, if she

likes sports, if she does anything that could be considered “male,” people call her femininity into question. I faced this question at my interview, when my decision to be a doctor would cause others to ask me if I was capable of raising a family. It was a question I was not ready to answer.

A male friend is also considering medicine as a future career, and when he learned about this potential problem, he too had a revelation. He realized that he never even considered that his career would be a problem for his future family; he had always *assumed* that his wife would take care of the children, regardless of his career. He only realized this truth because I was having a conflict. My friend, a person I would consider modern and very untraditional, became one of those suit guys with the parted hair, taking for granted the ability to have a family—an ability I wasn’t entirely sure I had.

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Lawrence Summers has been grilled by many important people for his comments regarding women in science, but when I read the rest of his speech, I realized that he was addressing the problem I encountered at my interview. In his speech, given at the NBER Conference on diversifying the Science and Engineering Workforce in January 2005, Summers gives three hypotheses to explain the gap between men and women in the scientific workforce. Before he jumped into the treacherous land of insult, he made a much more convincing argument to explain this difference: in the workforce, young employees are expected to be the workhorses, “and it is a fact about our society that that is a level of commitment that a much higher fraction of married men have been historically prepared to make than of married women.” Women have always been expected to have families, and this expectation to have children has probably hindered

some women from taking on those extra hours at work. It's difficult to imagine raising a family with a huge time commitment to a job, which to me seems trivial in comparison to the responsibility of raising children. Just the mention of these potential problems certainly sent me spiraling into doubt, doubt about my commitment and willingness to sacrifice success and happiness in one aspect of my life over another.

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My mom went to one of the best universities in Taiwan to get her degree in Agricultural Economics. My dad went to a not-so-good university to get his geology degree. After they got married, my dad worked as a petroleum engineer, and my mom stayed home to raise my sister and me, occasionally working various jobs. I don't know what she could have been with her degree; maybe she could have been a very smart farmer. She often tells me she made the wrong decision to get that degree, but she never says she made the wrong decision to stay home with us. She's raised two kids who went to MIT: My sister is getting her PhD in Materials Science; I'll be attending medical school in the fall. If my mom ever regretted not making her career in science, I hope we've made up for it.

Then again, I'll never know how much my mom gave up to help us succeed, and at this moment of my life, I don't know if I'm willing to make those same sacrifices to have a family. It seems that I have been given this great opportunity to become a professional, and it just doesn't seem right for me not to take advantage of it. But to satisfy those ambitions, I don't know when I'll be able to start a family. Maybe if I find a really supportive husband to take care of the kids, or if I suddenly become rich and could hire help, both unlikely situations, given my lack of free time and the enormity of my

future loans. I worry that if I don't have a family, I'll be letting someone else down in some way. I don't know if I can do it all.

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I attended the MIT Women's Studies 20th Anniversary conference a few weeks ago and the first speaker was the new president of MIT, Susan Hockfield. Dressed in deep purple, the color of royalty, she spoke of the important nature of our Women's Studies program here at MIT. When asked about Lawrence Summers, she said that despite the nature of his comments, they did well to bring attention to the status of women in science. Rather than dwell on them, she said we should learn from them and make improvements. As the mother of a daughter, she has an invested stake in the future of women in science. As a prominent scientist and now administrator, she has managed to find a balance between her professional and personal lives. She is someone to admire: someone to assure me that the future I want is possible.

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Being a woman today is still hard but in a different way from the past. Whether our futures are in the household or in the hospital, women can now make decisions like men: to have a job, to compete with others, to see what they can make of themselves. Given the ability to choose, we now have to handle the consequences of those choices, and we face judgment and doubt from our peers who question our abilities to stand among them and survive. But when your mother sacrificed her career to stay home, teach you math and wipe your tears, when every day you encounter people who inspire you to do great things and experience everything that is possible, when you suddenly see yourself standing on the shoulders of the women who protested and fought to give you

those opportunities, then you will have an answer to those questions: I can do it. I don't need your validation; I'm not listening to your judgment. I don't know what will happen, but whatever the outcome, it's going to be my fault and my decision. That's what it means to be a woman today.