

# Women in Academia Are Not Obligated to Listen to Your Bad Opinions

By NICOLE PERKINS

There's something my father used to say all the time when I was little, especially when we were at the mall and I would ask for something before I had seen the outrageous price tag. He would laugh and then remark that he hoped I "marry someone who makes a lot of money."

At some point, I asked my brother if he'd ever been told the same. Unsurprisingly, he never was.

I pointed this out to my father, and he never said it again. He apologized and I forgave him, but I think about this whenever I'm reminded that society views women and nonbinary people as things to be supported, as children, as something to be taken care of — that we cannot possibly carry ourselves or fight for ourselves because the world has been built around men.

A recent op-ed by Wall Street Journal (WSJ) columnist Joseph Epstein reminded me of this belief. Epstein spent the entirety of his piece bemoaning the downfall of education and argued that Dr. Jill Biden should drop her title so she can just be referred to as the first lady.

The piece received widespread condemnation, from Epstein's former employer Northwestern University to Biden's spokesperson, but not from the WSJ. WSJ Opinions Editor Paul A. Gigot wrote an article defending the decision to publish the piece while criticizing the response from the Biden team.

Contrary to Gigot's belief, it's clear that Epstein's piece not only argues something that is sexist and misogynistic, but is also poorly written and unsubstantiated by facts, making it unworthy of publishing in the first place.

This man — in 1991 — wrote that the "feminists roll on, perpetually angry" followed by a joke about a couple who, scared for their safety, decide to get a feminist to guard them rather than a pit bull or a gun.

It's not uncommon for the qualifications of women and nonbinary people to be thrown into doubt. The only reason this article is getting so much attention is because Biden is a public figure who is wealthy and white, and it's politically prudent to come to her defense right now. This, however, doesn't make what Epstein has written any more acceptable.



GAGE SKIDMORE VIA FLICKR

Upon becoming first lady, Wall Street Journal columnist Joseph Epstein argued that she should stop using her existing "Dr." title in favor of her new title, sparking widespread backlash from those who wonder why she cannot have both.

The article opens with “Madame First Lady—Mrs. Biden—Jill—kiddo.” Biden is 69. Were she to shop at the grocery store in my hometown, she would qualify for the senior citizen discount by four years.

She is not a kid. She is not a teenager. She is not even a middle-aged adult. Take away her career, her economic status, her various achievements, and it would still be wildly inaccurate to refer to her as “kiddo.”

But why are we surprised? This man — in 1991 — wrote that the “feminists roll on, perpetually angry” followed by a joke about a couple who, scared for their safety, decide to get a feminist to guard them rather than a pit bull or a gun.

But let’s suspend our anger at this for a second. Let’s say we forgive him and continue to read this article.

The article is eight paragraphs long. Five of those paragraphs do not mention Biden in the slightest; rather, they tout Epstein’s own career, his honorary degree, his many years teaching at a prestigious university and all the articles he’s written for many widely read publications.

Biden raised two children while getting her master’s degree taking one course a semester. When she graduated, she was pregnant with her third child. Biden chose to teach Monday through Thursday at a community college a month before the November 2008 election, when she and her husband were in the national spotlight.

Of her students there, she said, “I feel like I can make a greater difference in their lives ... I love the women who are coming back to school and getting their degrees because they’re so focused.”

Troy Vettese, an environmental historian and research fellow at Harvard University, in an article titled “Sexism in the Academy,” wrote, “There are still two tenured men for every tenured woman, a ratio that increases with the prestige an institution has. The proportion of black women among tenured female faculty in the US has actually fallen since 1993.” It’s already difficult to be taken seriously while studying for a degree — nevermind the years that follow where credentials are constantly being thrown into question.

I had a professor who once told us that when she gets emails addressed to her and her male colleagues — despite the fact she is wildly successful in her field with multiple degrees and accolades — they always receive a Dr. in front of their name while she gets a Ms. She is continually mistaken for their secretary.

To be clear: Jill Biden uses the title “Dr.” not because she has an honorary doctorate, but because she earned, through years of study, a doctoral degree in education. Whether honorary degrees can be used to give one the title of Dr. is another matter altogether, but not one that is relevant in any way, shape or form to this article. So why is it mentioned so often?

Not a single time in his article did Epstein deign to explain to us why Biden could not be referred to as the First Lady and with her title; why she couldn’t be First Lady Dr. Biden?

Epstein also mentions that he has an honorary doctorate, but that he never uses it. He recalls being “often addressed as Dr.” during his tenure as an editor at a literary magazine.

He decided to focus on the decline in honorary degree prestige for three of the eight paragraphs in the piece. A question: Why did the WSJ editorial team allow this to remain for print? A simple Google search would show you that Biden studied for her doctorate degree; it was not bestowed on her. An honorary degree isn’t in question here.

He also argues that Ph.D.s that are not honorary are not as difficult to get as they used to be, and that Biden received hers 15 years ago after the standards were relaxed. It should immediately be noted here that Biden does not have a Ph.D. — she has a Ed.D., which also confers the title of “Dr.”

In 1974, when Epstein began as a guest lecturer at Northwestern, not a single state had outlawed marital rape. A woman had not been to space, served on the Supreme Court, or been elected to the U.S. Senate without following her husband or father in the job. Societal norms are allowed to change. Just because Ph.D. examinations may not require you to speak Latin anymore does not lessen the credibility of the degree.

But let's say we overlook this as well. We keep reading. We reach the final paragraph. Here Epstein writes, "As for your Ed.D., Madame First Lady, hard-earned though it may have been, please consider stowing it, at least in public, at least for now. Forget the small thrill of being Dr. Jill, and settle for the larger thrill of living for the next four years in the best public housing in the world as First Lady Jill Biden."

When I read this final sentence I thought: Who said she can't have both titles? Not a single time in his article did Epstein deign to explain to us why Biden could not be referred to as the First Lady and with her title; why she couldn't be First Lady Dr. Biden? Does he expect Doug Emhoff (the husband of Vice President-elect Kamala Harris) to drop the J.D. from the end of his name as well? If so, he neglects to mention that.

Generally, when one shares an opinion, it's because they're qualified to give it in some way. In this case, they would have a doctorate, or they're a medical doctor contesting the use of the term.

Epstein has none of these. As he mentions, he received a bachelor's degree in absentia and an honorary doctorate from a university whose president was fired that same year. Why does he get to dictate when someone with a doctorate can use their title and when they can't?

The answer is that he shouldn't, but he does because he is a cisgender white man, he's old, and he gets to have a general aura of intelligence and esteem while practicing sheer mediocrity.

The problem of the Joseph Epsteins of the world can be lessened by various initiatives.

Epstein, however, would have you think he was a beloved professor. As he mentioned in an earlier article, "Evaluations of my teaching were mostly approving, but not very helpful: 'He knows his stuff.' 'Good sense of humor.' 'Like his bow ties.'"

Student evaluations, which are sent out each semester and are used in evaluations of tenure for professors, have been proven to be unfairly harsh on women/nonbinary folks and those who are Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC).

A 2016 study concluded that the evaluations are "biased against female instructors by an amount that is large and statistically significant" and can actually give more effective instructors lower scores than those who are less effective.

Epstein doesn't just have an opinion that I disagree with — he has an opinion that is unsupported, poorly written and constructed in a way that makes little sense.

The problem of the Joseph Epsteins of the world can be lessened by various initiatives: requiring gender-bias training in academia settings, setting quotas for doctorate programs, making the use of doctoral titles a formal requirement and prioritizing the hiring of women, nonbinary people, and BIPOC, to name just a few.

The important thing is implementing these ideas now and wholeheartedly committing to it — lest more informed and educated Jill Bidens have to deal with more Joseph Epsteins in the future.

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