Dean Harold Hongju Koh of the Yale Law School opened the national conference entitled “Legally Female: Ms. JD” co-hosted by Yale Law Women at Yale Law School on March 31, 2007, with the following remarks:

Welcome and Congratulations to Yale Law Women and especially to your Yale hosts, Michelle Morin, Julia Simon-Kerr, and Anna Nelson, for all you have done to put today’s conference together.

In the 1992 vice-presidential debate, the third party candidate began by asking “Who am I and What am I doing here?” Well, I’m Harold Koh. I am the Dean here, and on behalf of the university, the law school, the faculty, the students, and the staff, I want to welcome all of you to Yale Law School, and to this very important gathering. All of us are excited and proud that you are here beginning this journey together and we are very honored to be a part of it. I also happen to be the son of a woman who taught in this law school, the brother of a woman who teaches in this law school, the husband of a woman who has practiced law for 27 years in New Haven who has taught in this law school, and the father of a young woman who someday might study law (although she hasn’t decided that yet). In the State Department, I proudly worked for the first woman to serve as Secretary of State, and I am the dean of a law school that annually matriculates and graduates the finest young women law students in the country, who go on to become outstanding cabinet members, judges, professors, deans, prosecutors and government lawyers, partners, CEOs, and NGO and civic leaders. Finally, I am a dean of a law school whose graduate is running to become the first woman president, with her First Gentleman, a guy she met while studying up here in the Yale Law School library. So in all of these respects, I am proud to live in a world that is legally female.

But at the same time, as we all know, we are not gathered here because the world is as it should be. We live in a world that is far less than that: a world that remains legally male, with a gender gap and a glass ceiling. It is a world that makes it harder for women to enter the legal workforce, harder to progress there, harder to stay on the fast track, and harder to reach career pinnacles and distinctions. And the legal world we live in is part of a global environment in which, as Amartya Sen observed, more than 100 million women are missing: disappeared through abortion, disease, mistreatment, discrimination. We live in a world in which many countries deny their women citizens their most basic human rights, and in which our own country, the United States, shamefully remains the only industrialized democracy that has not ratified the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women or enacted an Equal Rights Amendment.

To what can we attribute this defective state of affairs? Let me suggest that there are five gaps, which our meeting today is designed to address.

First, an opportunity gap. As we all know, there are opportunities that are available to male lawyers that young women never hear about. It used to be blatant—Sandra Day O’Connor was at the top of her class at Stanford Law, but had trouble getting a firm job and was offered positions as a legal secretary. Ruth Bader Ginsburg was on the law reviews at Harvard and Columbia and couldn’t get a firm job in New York. Carla Hills
graduated with honors from Yale Law School, and had great difficulty breaking into the legal world in Los Angeles, although she went on to serve in the Cabinet of two different Presidents. Today, the opportunity gap is less visible, but you still hear men talking about offering positions to “the best man for the job” or leaning toward the candidate with whom they have the highest comfort level, because he looks like them, or went to the same schools they did, or reminds them of the younger male version of themselves.

Second, there is a knowledge gap. Even famous educators have been heard to suggest that there are scientific differences in the ability of men and women to do science.

Third, there is a tolerance gap, a respect gap. We see it in many places, most recently in electronic trash like the disgusting Auto-Admit website, where anonymous cowards daily post slander about accomplished women that they would never post about men, which other anonymous cowards believe and encourage, and other cowards—who are not anonymous—host in the name of free speech. And it is not just women who are targeted by the respect gap—it is every kind of racial, religious, sexual and political minority—anyone who is perceived as different, distinctive, more vulnerable, or more exposed.

Fourth, there is, quite frankly, a courage gap. We don’t speak up enough. We don’t take enough chances. But it was a woman, Linda Brown, who had the courage to tell the Board of Education that she would not attend segregated schools in Topeka, Kansas. It was a woman, Rosa Parks, who had the courage not to move to the back of the bus. And it is not just American women who teach us about courage: Aung Sun Suu Kyi, for example, still fights valiantly for democracy in Burma while another woman, Shirin Ebadi, calls courageously for human rights in Iran, for which both of them won the Nobel Peace Prize.

So how to address these four gaps—opportunity, knowledge, tolerance and courage? These gaps exacerbate one another, because of a fifth and final gap, a networking gap. Women lawyers have always faced a networking gap. Carla Hills recalled that when she went to Los Angeles as a young lawyer, she was not admitted to the young lawyers’ association where contacts were made, information was exchanged, and jobs were offered. This networking gap continues to this day. But if the Auto-Admit controversy shows that cowards and scoundrels can network on the web, why can’t the better people do so as well? Why can’t lawyers and law students concerned by the rates at which women opt out of the legal profession, the lack of representation of women in the highest courts and echelons of the legal community, and the role of gender in the progression of many women’s legal careers network to produce positive change?

They can, and as of today, they do. And so today we formally launch that network, an online community intended to be a forum for dialogue and networking among women lawyers, which we call “Ms. JD.” I congratulate all the students from Boalt Hall (UC Berkeley), Cornell, Georgetown, Harvard, NYU, Stanford, UCLA, UTexas Austin, the University of Chicago, the University of Michigan, the University of Virginia, and Yale who have come together to create Ms. JD as a service for women in law school and the legal profession.
The title “Ms. JD” has a particular resonance for those of us who grew up in the 70s and 80s. Just as “Ms. Magazine” built a collective consciousness among America’s feminists—male and female—in the 70s and helped join those individuals into a movement through the print medium, through the electronic medium, this website will do the same for women lawyers in the 21st century, with the goal, as the logo says, of “Changing the face of the legal profession.”

So who am I am what am I doing here? I am a proud member of the Ms. JD network, and I am here to join your effort to change the face of the legal profession. I am also one of your bloggers, and one of your biggest supporters. We have so much important work to do together, so as they say, “let’s get it started in here.”

Thank you.