GENDER AND PROFESSIONALISM IN LAW: THE CHALLENGE OF (WOMEN'S) BIOGRAPHY

Mary Jane Mossman*

This paper explores the story of a woman who “created” her life in the law in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although now almost unknown, Cornelia Sorabji achieved prominence as a woman pioneer in the legal profession, who provided legal services to women clients in northern India, the Purdahnashins. Sorabji’s experiences as a woman in law were often similar to the stories of other first women lawyers in a number of different jurisdictions at the end of the nineteenth century: all of these women had to overcome gender barriers to gain admission to the legal professions, and they were often the only woman in law in their jurisdictions for many years. Yet, as Sorabji’s story reveals, while ideas about gender and the culture of legal professionalism could present formidable barriers for aspiring women lawyers, these ideas sometimes intersected in paradoxical ways to offer new opportunities for women to become legal professionals. In exploring the impact of gender and legal professionalism on Sorabji’s legal work, the paper also suggests that her story presents a number of challenges and contradictions that may require new approaches to gender history so as to capture the complexity of stories about women lawyers.

Cet article examine l’histoire d’une femme qui a « créé » sa vie dans le domaine du droit à la fin du dix-neuvième et au début du vingtième siècles. Quoique présentement presque inconnue, Cornelia Sorabji a acquis une certaine renommée comme femme pionnière dans la profession juridique qui offrait des services juridiques à des femmes clientes dans le nord de l’Inde, les Purdahnashins. Les expériences de Mme Sorabji en tant que femme dans le domaine du droit ressemblaient souvent aux récits d’autres premières femmes avocates sur un nombre d’autres territoires à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle : ces femmes devaient toutes surmonter des barrières sexistes pour être admises à la profession juridique, et elles étaient souvent la seule femme à exercer le droit sur leur territoire pendant de nombreuses années. Pourtant, comme le fait voir l’histoire de Mme Sorabji, quoique les idées liées au sexe de l’individu et la culture de professionnalisme légal pouvaient constituer des obstacles formidables pour les femmes qui aspiraient à devenir avocates, ces idées parfois se croisaient de manières paradoxales de façon à créer de nouvelles occasions aux femmes de devenir des professionnelles du droit. En examinant l’impact du sexe de l’individu et du professionnalisme légal sur le travail légal

* Osgoode Hall Law School, York University. Warm thanks to Mitra Sharafi and the Center for South Asia at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for comments on an earlier version of this paper, and to Karen Schucher for helpful comments about gender and professionalism in law.

de Mme Sorabji, l'article suggère en plus que son histoire présente un nombre de défis et de contradictions qui pourraient nécessiter de nouvelles approches à l'histoire vue en rapport au sexe de l'individu afin de saisir la complexité des récits au sujet de femmes avocates.

I. TELLING THE STORIES OF WOMEN IN LAW

The concept of biography... has changed profoundly in the last two decades, biographies of women especially so.... [Biographers] of women have had... to reinvent the lives their subjects led, discovering from what evidence they could find the processes and decisions, the choices and unique pain, that lay beyond the life stories of these women... because there were no models of the lives they wanted to live, no exemplars, no stories.¹

This paper explores the story of a woman who 'created' her life in the law in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although now almost unknown, Cornelia Sorabji achieved prominence as a woman pioneer in the legal profession who provided legal services to women clients in northern India, the *Purdahnashins* or women living in seclusion. I [re]discovered Sorabji in the context of a research project in which I was trying to unravel connections between historical ideas about gender and about professionalism in law, both of which were in flux in a variety of different ways at the end of the nineteenth century.²

Yet, although Sorabji's life certainly revealed how ideas about gender and about legal professionalism were often connected, her individual life story also challenged traditional approaches to the history of women's entry to the legal profession. In a now-poignant conversation with Rose Voyvodic in 2006, I remember explaining the challenges of trying to tell Sorabji's story, particularly because gender was only one factor, albeit a very important one, in creating both constraints and opportunities in Sorabji's life. However, in addition to gender, her race and religion, as well as the impact of British imperial policies in nineteenth-century India, contributed to the nature and extent of 'choices' available to her. In spite of these challenges, Rose encouraged my efforts to untangle some of the puzzles in Sorabji's life story, enthusiastically affirming the need to "[re]tell the stories" of women in law, to [re]examine the paradoxes within professional cultures, and to begin to create new models of women lawyers' lives. So, in this paper, in honour of Rose, I want to continue our conversation by briefly telling the story of Cornelia Sorabji and her legal work, and also provide some reflections on the connections between ideas about gender and legal professionalism for Sorabji as a woman in law.³

1 Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Ballantyne Books, 1988) at 31.

2 Mary Jane Mossman, *The First Women Lawyers: A Comparative Study of Gender, Law and the Legal Professions* (Oxford and Portland OR: Hart Publishing, 2006), c. 5 [Mossman, *Women Lawyers*].

3 This paper focuses mainly on the gender factor in relation to ideas about legal professionalism, but some of the interrelationships with other aspects of Sorabji's identity(ies) are discussed in Mossman, *Women Lawyers*, *supra* note 2. In addition, see Antoinette Burton, *At the Heart of the Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in Late-Victorian Britain* (Berkeley: University

Clearly, Sorabji's experiences as a woman in law were often similar to the stories of other first women lawyers in a number of different jurisdictions at the end of the nineteenth century. With "no exemplars, no stories:" all of these women had to overcome gender barriers to gain admission to the legal profession, and many of them remained isolated as the only woman in law in her jurisdiction for many years.⁴ However, although their individual experiences were often shaped by the particularities of their social and political contexts, women who began to seek admission to the legal profession in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did so at time when ideas about gender and about legal professionalism were changing significantly in many different parts of the world. Thus, the decades just before and after the end of the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of women's movements for equality, which focused not only on suffrage but also on significant family law reforms and the creation of women's access to higher education and to the professions.⁵ In the same period, moreover, there were important developments in the practical arrangements for law, including new kinds of legal work, the establishment of university law schools, and the creation of national and local bar associations; these changes were forging a new sense of professionalism in the law in a number of jurisdictions.⁶ To some extent at least, it was the convergence of changing ideas about gender and about legal professionalism that provided opportunities for individual women, like Cornelia Sorabji, to pursue their aspirations for legal work. In this context, her story reveals not only how ideas about gender and legal professionalism could present formidable barriers for aspiring women lawyers, but also how these changing ideas sometimes intersected in paradoxical ways to offer new opportunities for women to become legal professionals.

Yet, in the context of women's entry to the legal profession, the story of Cornelia Sorabji presents special challenges. As in other British colonies (including Canada), women who aspired to enter the legal profession faced a significant problem in the fact that British courts and the British Parliament continued to reject women's claims to become barristers and solicitors until after World War

of California Press, 1998); Sonita Sarker, "Unruly Subjects: Cornelia Sorabji and Ravinder Randhawa" in Sonita Sarker and Esha Niyogi De, eds., *Trans-Status Subjects: Gender in the Globalization of South and Southeast Asia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); and Sukanya Banerjee, *Imperial Diasporas and the Politics of Nation-Space: Indian Identities and Metropolitan Englishness (1855-1935)* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, 2001) [unpublished].

4 See Mossman, *Women Lawyers*, *supra* note 2 for analysis of the "first women lawyers" in the United States, Canada, Britain, New Zealand, Australia, and several countries of western Europe. There are also some historical studies in Ulrike Schultz and Gisela Shaw, eds., *Women in the World's Legal Professions* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2003).

5 For some analyses, see Christine Bolt, *The Women's Movements in the United States and Britain from the 1790s to the 1920s* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993); Linda Kealey, ed., *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada 1880s to 1920s* (Toronto: Women's Educational Press, 1979); Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal 1849-1905* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984); and Louis Frank, *Essai sur la Condition Politique de la Femme: Etude de Sociologie et de Législation* (Paris: Arthur Rousseau, 1892).

6 For example, see Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: WW Norton & Co., 1976); Magali S. Larson, *The Rise of Professionalism: A Sociological Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); Terence C. Halliday & Lucien Karpik, eds., *Lawyers and the Rise of Western Political Liberalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); and W. Wesley Pue & David Sugarman, eds., *Lawyers and Vampires: Cultural Histories of the Legal Profession* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2003).

1.7 Unlike the pattern in the United States, where at least some states began to admit women as attorneys in the last decades of the nineteenth century,⁸ women in different parts of the British Empire did not gain access to law schools and to the legal profession until almost the end of the nineteenth century. In addition, of course, Canada and New Zealand, where women first succeeded in becoming lawyers just a few months apart in 1897, were white settler colonies;⁹ by contrast, the relationships between Britain and India were much more complicated in terms of prevailing ideologies of race and imperialism. In this context, Sorabji's success in becoming the first woman to sit the Bachelor of Civil Law (BCL) exams at Oxford in 1892 and then in representing an accused charged with murder in a British court in India in 1896 were formidable achievements that were widely publicized at the time all over the common law world.¹⁰

Moreover, as I discovered, Sorabji was involved in a wide range of activities in her lifetime: she not only engaged in legal work, but also published nine books and a large number of journal articles, focussing on issues concerned with law, politics, and Indian culture.¹¹ Yet, after her death in 1954, she seemed to disappear from history. As Suparnu Gooptu's recent biography concluded, Sorabji's invisibility resulted in part because "Cornelia went against the spirit of her time,"¹² particularly in her ardent support for the British Raj and her public opposition to Gandhi's

7 Women were enabled to enter the solicitors profession and to join the bar as a result of the enactment of the *Sex Discrimination (Removal) Act*, 1919, 9 & 10 Geo. V, c 71. Prior to this statute, however, a number of women had initiated court actions to gain admission to the legal professions in the UK: see *Hall v. Society of Law Agents* (1901) 3 *Sessions Cases*, 5th ser, 1059; *Cave v. Benchers of Gray's Inn*, *The Times*, 3 December 1903; and *Bebb v. Law Society* (1913) 29 *Law Times Reports* 634. There were also a number of women who sought admission to the bar, both in England and in Ireland, whose cases did not result in reported decisions: see Mossman, *Women Lawyers*, *supra* note 2 at 113-121.

8 Although there is some evidence of women acting in legal matters, both for themselves and for others, in the American colonies, it is generally accepted that the first woman to gain formal admission to a state bar was Arabella Mansfield in 1869. And even though the US Supreme Court held in *Bradwell v. Illinois*, 83 *US* 130 (1873) that it was not a breach of the privileges and immunities clause of the constitution for a state to deny women's right to practise law, there were nearly 300 women lawyers in the United States by the end of the nineteenth century. See Virginia G. Drachman, *Women Lawyers in Modern American History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); and Mossman, *Women Lawyers*, *supra* note 2 at 23-29.

9 Clara Brett Martin was admitted to the Ontario bar in February 1897: the first woman lawyer in Canada; Ethel Benjamin was admitted to the New Zealand bar a few months later in May 1897. See Mossman, *Women Lawyers*, *supra* note 2 at c. 2 and 4.

10 See Mary Jane Mossman, "Cornelia Sorabji: A 'Woman in Law' in India in the 1890s" (2004) 16:1 *C.J.W.L.* 54. See also the anonymous comment in Canada at the time of Sorabji's recognition in 1896: "Women Barristers" (1896) 32 *Can. L.J.* 84.

11 Two of her publications provide memoirs of her life and activities: see Cornelia Sorabji, *India Calling: The Memories of Cornelia Sorabji* (London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1934) [Sorabji, *India Calling*], republished as Chandani Lokugé, ed., *India Calling: The Memories of Cornelia Sorabji, India's First Woman Barrister* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Cornelia Sorabji, *India Recalled* (London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1936), republished as Cornelia Sorabji, *India: Ancient Heritage* (New Delhi: SBW Publishers, 1992). For further detail, see Mossman, *Women Lawyers*, *supra* note 2 at 192-196 and accompanying notes.

12 *Cornelia Sorabji: India's Pioneer Woman Lawyer* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006) at 203 [Gooptu, *India's Pioneer Woman Lawyer*]. See also Suparna Gooptu, *Cornelia Sorabji 1866-1954: A Woman's Biography* (D. Phil. Thesis, University of Oxford, 1997) [unpublished].

nationalist movement in India. In addition, Sorabji was on the “wrong” side of controversies in the 1920s concerning tradition and modernity in the lives of Indian women, particularly in relation to the *Mother India* controversy.¹³ As a result, Gooptu concluded that Sorabji’s “struggle as a single professional woman working in a gendered social space was ... overshadowed by her political beliefs.”¹⁴ And significantly, Gooptu suggested that Sorabji’s life demonstrates the need for new approaches to gender history, so as to capture the complexity of stories about women like Sorabji.¹⁵ In this way, the story about the intersection of ideas about gender and about legal professionalism in Sorabji’s life must confront the challenges of (women’s) biography. As Jill Ker Conway argued, the lives of these first women professionals did not conform to the traditional “script” for women’s lives; instead, these first women in law had to create new scripts for their lives.¹⁶ In reflecting on these challenges, this paper provides a brief overview of Cornelia Sorabji and the life in the law that she created, and then explores the ways in which her story reveals the complexity of relationships between gender and legal professionalism.

II. CORNELIA SORABJI: A WOMAN IN LAW IN INDIA¹⁷

Cornelia Sorabji was born in 1866, just a decade after the infamous ‘mutiny’ (or first war of independence) of 1857. She was one of seven daughters and one surviving son of Rev. Sorabji Kharsedji and his wife Francina.¹⁸ Cornelia’s father was Parsi, and had converted from Zoroastrianism to Christianity as a young man; he eventually became Agent for the Church Missionary Society at Poona (now Pune). Cornelia’s mother had been adopted as an orphaned child by Lady Cornelia Ford, wife of a British administrator in India, and Francina had converted from Hinduism to Christianity. Francina was active in educational endeavours in India, founding the Victoria High School in Poona in the 1870s.¹⁹ Both

13 See Mrinalini Sinha, “Reading *Mother India*: Empire, Nation and the Female Voice” (1994) 6:2 *Journal of Women’s History* 6; and Katherine Mayo, *Mother India* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927).

14 Gooptu, *supra* note 12 at 203.

15 Gooptu, *supra* note 12 at 205.

16 See Jill Ker Conway, *When Memory Speaks: Exploring the Art of Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1998) at 6-7, 15-16.

17 This account of Sorabji’s life is based on Sorabji’s voluminous writings, including books and journal articles, as well as secondary accounts of her life and work: for example, see Vera Brittain, *The Women at Oxford: A Fragment of History* (London: George Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1960); and Randall Blackshaw, “A Portia Parsee: Miss Cornelia Sorabji, Oxford Graduate, Lawyer and Author Too” (1903) 43 *Critic and Good Literature* 432. However, there is also a major archival source at the British Library in London, where Sorabji’s papers, including personal correspondence, were deposited after her death. References to the Sorabji fonds in the British Library are identified as BL F165.

18 In Sorabji, *India Calling*, *supra* note 11 at 1, Sorabji wrote that she was born “into a post-Mutiny world” in the Bombay Presidency at Nasik in 1866. According to Lokugé, *supra* note 11 at ix, three influences shaped Sorabji’s life: British, Indian, and Parsi; and Burton, *supra* note 3 at 218, identified Sorabji’s six sisters and one brother. In relation to the context of British India, see Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

19 Sorabji frequently emphasized her Parsi heritage: for example, see Cornelia Sorabji, “The Parsees”

parents encouraged their children to pursue education, and Cornelia became the first woman student at Deccan College, from which she graduated with a first, thereby obtaining a Bachelor of Arts degree from Bombay University. As a result of this achievement, she was automatically entitled to a government scholarship to study in Britain, but she was denied access to it because she was female. As she explained in *India Calling*, "It was in fact impertinent of any woman to produce circumstances which were not in the mind of the Authorities as a possibility when they dangled a gilded prize before eyes that should have been male eyes alone!"²⁰ Although it remains unclear how her situation became known in Britain, it seems likely that her father's work as a Christian missionary and her mother's educational work (including her role in giving evidence to an Indian education commission in the 1880s) were attractive to British patrons. In any event, Lady Mary Hobhouse, whose husband, Lord Arthur Hobhouse, had previously served as a law member of the Council of the Governor-General of India in the 1870s, wrote a sympathetic letter to *The Times* in 1888, when Sorabji was denied access to the scholarship. And Sorabji then wrote to Lady Hobhouse to thank her,²¹ beginning a correspondence that lasted until the death of Lady Hobhouse.

A year later, in August 1889, Lady Hobhouse wrote again to *The Times* to announce the creation of a "substitute scholarship" for Cornelia Sorabji, and requested subscriptions; several well-known British men and women, including Florence Nightingale, made contributions.²² On the basis of this financial support, Sorabji arrived in Britain in 1889 to study at Oxford; she resided at Somerville College, which had been established as a college for women students just a decade earlier.²³ During her time at Oxford, Sorabji attracted a number of important supporters;²⁴ indeed, she became a particular favourite of Benjamin Jowett, who intervened in 1892 to enable her to write the BCL exams even though, as a woman, she was not then entitled to receive an Oxford degree.²⁵

(October 1893) *The Nineteenth Century* 605. She also published the story of her father in *Therefore: An Impression of Sorabji Kharsedji Langrana and his Wife Francina* (London: Oxford University Press, 1924). Lokugé, *supra* note 11 at 226-228, described Francina's adoption and conversion to Christianity, and her evidence to the Education Commission in 1882. See also T.M. Luhrmann, *The Good Parsi: The Fate of a Colonial Elite in a Postcolonial Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

20 Sorabji, *India Calling*, *supra* note 11 at 20. Sorabji's B.A. degree from Bombay University, which stated that she had graduated from Deccan College, is in the British Library: see BL F165/116.

21 Since Sorabji's letter to Lady Hobhouse included greetings from Sorabji's mother, it suggests connections between Sorabji's family and prominent patrons in Britain: see Burton, *supra* note 3 at 120 and Lokugé, *supra* note 11 at 226-227. For the letters, see BL F165/17: letter from Lady Hobhouse to *The Times*, 13 April 1888; and BL F165/16: letter from Sorabji to Lady Hobhouse, 10 May 1888.

22 The undated pamphlet that was printed to obtain subscriptions can be found at BL F165/17. By December 1889, 137 subscriptions had been collected to support Sorabji at Oxford.

23 See Brittain, *supra* note 17. The first principal of Somerville College was Madeleine Shaw Lefevre, appointed in 1879, and Sorabji wrote to her about her plan in June 1889: see BL F165/17. Shaw Lefevre requested assistance for Sorabji from Professor William Markby, Reader in Indian Law: see BL F165/17.

24 See Sorabji, *India Calling*, *supra* note 11 at 22-27.

25 See Sorabji, *India Calling*, *supra* note 11 at 27-29. Sorabji corresponded with Jowett after leaving Oxford, and published a sketch about him after his death: see Cornelia Sorabji, "Benjamin

Before returning to India in 1893, Lord Hobhouse assisted her to obtain an apprenticeship for six months at a solicitor's firm in London.²⁶ She also presented a speech about women's property in India to a gathering at Queen's House in Chelsea; that paper was later presented *in absentia* in Chicago in August 1893, at the Congress of Law Reform and Jurisprudence held in conjunction with the World's Columbian Exposition.²⁷

On her return to India in 1893, Sorabji initially enjoyed some success in finding legal work: some legal practitioners provided opportunities for her to advise clients and she was also permitted to appear in some native courts.²⁸ Moreover, in July 1896, it seemed that she had clearly triumphed in her quest to work as a legal practitioner, when she was permitted by the presiding judge to appear on behalf of an accused charged with murder in a *British* court in Poona.²⁹ When Sorabji achieved an acquittal for the accused, her success was widely reported, particularly in Britain and its colonies because no woman had yet been formally admitted to the bar anywhere in the British Empire:

For the first time in any land under the rule of the British flag, a woman has pleaded before a British judge, and, strange to tell, this new thing comes from Conservative India.... Of course, there was opposition to such a novel departure as a Portia in Conservative India, but she soon showed the great need for a woman lawyer.... She has pleaded several cases, and won them all. But her last great achievement was in a *British* court in Poona, presided over by a Civil Service Judge.³⁰

In a context in which women were not admitted to the bar for the first time in

Jowett - Master of Balliol College: Some Reflections" (1903) 54 *Nineteenth Century and After*, A Monthly Review 297.

26 The firm was Lee and Pemberton. Henry Whately, a partner at the firm, also became a long-time supporter of Sorabji and her work. Although Sorabji gave credit to Lord Hobhouse for arranging this apprenticeship in Sorabji, *India Calling*, *supra* note 11 at 34-35, letters in the British Library suggest that it was actually arranged by the mother of one of Sorabji's school friends from Somerville College and sister of Henry Whately: see letter from Lily Bruce to Henry Whately at BL F165/19. Lord Hobhouse did, however, provide the funds required for Sorabji to apprentice at the firm.

27 "The Law of Women's Property in India in Relation to her Social Position," read at the home of Mary Haweis at Queen's House, Chelsea, 19 March 1893; see BL F165/117 [Sorabji, "Law of Women's Property"]. In relation to the Chicago Exposition, see Louis Frank, *La Femme-Avocat: Exposé Historique et Critique de la Question* (Paris: V Giard et E Brière, 1898) at 133. Sorabji's paper was later published: see "The Legal Status of Women in India" (1898) *The Nineteenth Century* 854.

28 See BL F165/16: letters to Lady Hobhouse, January 1894 and 16 February 1894. Sorabji also described some of these events in *India Calling*, *supra* note 11 at 55-59, but the dates there are sometimes inconsistent with information in the letters.

29 Sorabji based her right to appear in this case on section 4 of the *Criminal Procedure Code* (25 of 1861) which permitted any "person" to appear for the defence; she obtained leave from Judge Crowe in the District and Sessions Court to appear pursuant to this provision: BL F165/57: diary entry for 4 March 1896.

30 "A Pioneer in Law" (1896) *Englishwoman's Review* (ns) 217-218.

Canada and New Zealand until 1897, Sorabji may thus be regarded as the first woman law practitioner in the British Empire.

Yet, in spite of this noted accomplishment in 1896, Sorabji encountered new, sometimes more formidable challenges as she sought unsuccessfully to be formally admitted to the legal professions in India in the late 1890s.³¹ In this context, it seems that her situation was often financially precarious too.³² Eventually, she was successful in mobilizing support from her well-connected British friends to obtain a unique government post as Lady Legal Assistant to the Court of Wards in 1904.³³ In this position, she provided legal advice to Muslim and Hindu women in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, and Assam; these *Purdahnashins*, who were precluded from speaking to men who were not family members, were Sorabji's legal responsibility until her retirement after World War I.³⁴ Her reports of this legal work reveal important details about circumstances in northern India in the early twentieth century, as well as the challenges they presented; for example, Sorabji's annual report for the year 1916 confirmed that she had dealt with 110 estates, representing 276 women, 139 boys and 95 girls, in 510 *zenanas*, and that she had travelled more than 20,000 miles by rail, road, and water.³⁵

Eventually, following her retirement from this government post, she returned to Britain to obtain her BCL degree at Oxford in 1922; and after a further period of apprenticeship at Lincoln's Inn, she was finally admitted to the bar in Britain and in India in 1923, thirty years after completing the BCL exams at Oxford.³⁶ She was fifty-five years old. Thereafter, she worked as a barrister in Calcutta for some years, but moved permanently to Britain in the 1930s, where she published a number of books and a stream of articles, including many which criticized the independence movement in India and its leader, Mahatma Gandhi.³⁷ According to Vera Brittain, writing in 1960, Sorabji and her accom-

31 Although she passed the LLB exams at Bombay University at the end of 1896, exams which automatically entitled a candidate to be admitted to the Indian bar, her applications for formal admission were rejected. Similarly, after two more years of study, she passed the *vakil* exams, but was also not permitted to be admitted in this category. In both situations, the courts refused her admission because she was a woman, often on the basis that women were not permitted to join the legal professions in Britain. See BL F165/16: letters to Lady Hobhouse between January 1897 and March 1899. (Note: *Vakils* were "pleaders" in the courts in India, although they "never commanded the respect... accorded to barristers." See John J. Paul, *The Legal Profession in Colonial South India* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1991) at 5-6.)

32 There are a number of letters in the British Library that suggest that patrons in Britain were forwarding financial assistance to her: for example, see BL F165/16: letters to Lady Hobhouse, 3 May 1899 and 6 July 1899.

33 BL F165/17: letters to Lady Hobhouse, 7 April 1904 and 10 May 1904.

34 In Sorabji, *India Calling*, *supra* note 11 at 118, Sorabji identified her work pursuant to the *Court of Wards Act*. She identified five categories of work: inspection tours and visits on request to estates; legal work; the education, health, domestic comfort and contentment of the wards; correspondence and routine office work; and special work necessitated by World War I: see BL F165/131.

35 BL F165/132.

36 In relation to the degree at Oxford, see Brittain, *supra* note 17 at 152-156. The Bar books of Lincoln's Inn show Sorabji's admission to the Bar on 13 June 1923: see Archives of Lincoln's Inn.

37 Sorabji also visited the United States and Canada to critique the independence movement and its leader; see "Gandhi Interrogated: An Interview" (April 1931) *Atlantic Monthly* 133, discussed later in the text [Sorabji, "Gandhi Interrogated"]. For similar journal publications, see Cornelia Sorabji, "An Indian Looks at the New Proposals" (January 1935) *The National Review* 63; and Cornelia Sorabji, "Where Stands India?" (26 January 1939) 52 *Great Britain and the East* 102.

plishments were all but forgotten after India's independence; as Brittain argued, Sorabji had chosen "the wrong direction at an important moment in history, and [had thus been] repudiated by the currents of her time with a completeness which tends to withhold from her the status that is her due."³⁸ At the end of her life, Sorabji rented rooms at Lincoln's Inn, where she lived, old and almost blind during the bombing of London in World War II; in 1945, she was moved to a mental hospital and then to a nursing home, where she died in 1954, just before her eighty-eighth birthday.³⁹

III. REFLECTING ON GENDER AND PROFESSIONALISM IN CORNELIA SORABJI'S STORY

Sorabji's experiences as a woman in law reveal some of the complexities of ideas about gender and legal professionalism, and how they intersected, sometimes in paradoxical ways. One example is her experience of obtaining admission to study at Oxford. Clearly, it was her gender which precluded her from receiving the government scholarship to study in Britain in the late 1880s, even though she had otherwise qualified for it by her outstanding performance in the final examinations at Deccan College.⁴⁰ In this way, gender operated to exclude Sorabji from an award that she had obtained on the basis of merit. At the same time, however, it seems likely that her gender was critical to winning the support of Lady Hobhouse and her prominent friends in Britain, all of whom were energetic supporters of education for women. As the announcement in *The Times* about the "substituted scholarship" indicated, the invitation to donate to the Cornelia Sorabji Fund was addressed to "friends of female education" in Britain.⁴¹ In this way, Sorabji's gender both foreclosed access to the government scholarship, while at the same time creating a unique opportunity to achieve support among British women committed to women's education. And, although her parents' friendship with prominent patrons in Britain probably created this opportunity, it was Sorabji's status as a woman within the context of British colonial interests in India which cemented this opportunity for her.

In addition to the way that gender was essential in creating her "substitute scholarship," it is possible that Sorabji received particular attention at Oxford because of her gender. Although Indian men had begun to study law in Britain some years earlier,⁴² Sorabji was one of only a handful of Indian women students in the late nineteenth century in British universities, and she was the only one studying law. Certainly, even among women students at Oxford, she is easily identifiable in photos with her classmates at Somerville College because of her traditional Indian dress.⁴³ In this context, her unique position as a woman studying law, and the 'exotic' nature of her personal appearance, may have contributed to the

38 Brittain, *supra* note 17 at 84-85.

39 See BL F165/51: letter to Elena Rathbone, 18 April 1941. See also obituaries in *The Times*, 8 July 1954; and in the *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, 15 July 1954.

40 *Supra* note 20.

41 *Supra* note 21.

42 According to Daniel Duman, the first Indian barrister was admitted to the Inns of Court in 1862: see *The English and Colonial Bars in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Croom Helm, 1983) at 132.

43 See Brittain, *supra* note 17.

support and attention that she received; thus, while she became the special favourite of Benjamin Jowett, she also received assistance and social invitations from William Markby, Frederick Pollock, and A.V. Dicey. In addition, she also visited regularly with her primary sponsors, Lord and Lady Hobhouse, who introduced her to William Gladstone, George Bernard Shaw, and Lord Tennyson, and she was also presented to Queen Victoria.⁴⁴ Moreover, as Antoinette Burton argued, Sorabji desired “to be ‘the’ Indian woman at Oxford, and indeed, in England,”⁴⁵ and her gender clearly contributed to her unique position: an Indian *woman* engaged in legal studies. Moreover, because neither Sorabji nor her supporters expected her to try to gain admission to the legal professions in Britain, she seems to have been relatively unopposed in her efforts to study law. In this way, while her gender initially precluded her from attaining the scholarship to which she was otherwise entitled, it seems that it was her gender that created an alternative opportunity and opened doors to high-level support in Britain.

A second example of the paradoxical relationship between gender and law in Sorabji’s career is illustrated by her initial experiences of legal practice in India following her return from Oxford in 1893, by contrast with the subsequent rejection of her applications for formal admission to the bar. Interestingly, it seemed in the early 1890s that her gender did not create an obstacle to undertaking legal work. For example, she obtained a position in a solicitor’s firm, where she was able to advise clients and was successful in representing clients in native courts and even in some magistrates courts; moreover, from the beginning, many of her clients were women, suggesting that there was a ‘niche’ practice available to her.⁴⁶ Then, in July 1896, when she appeared for the defence in the murder case in Poona before a British judge and obtained an acquittal, her success was reported widely and enthusiastically.⁴⁷ In this context, however, it seems that Sorabji’s success at Oxford and her apparent acceptance as a legal practitioner in India contributed to a growing ambition on her part to be admitted to the bar in India. At the same time, she must have been aware of the challenges related to this endeavour, as the Chief Justice at Bombay had advised her early on that her aspiration was doomed; he told her quite bluntly, “You see you are not a man, & no woman should be allowed to meddle with the law.”⁴⁸

All the same, Sorabji’s letters to Lady Hobhouse in the mid-1890s increasingly revealed frustration with her limited role in preparing cases for the courts and then having to permit qualified (but often less competent) barristers to present them on behalf of her clients. Yet, Sorabji was still circumspect in her reasons for wanting to gain admission to the bar. As she emphasized in a letter to Lady Hobhouse, Sorabji was *not* acting on the basis of personal ambition, specifically distancing herself from ‘Advanced Women;’ instead, she carefully explained her

44 See Mossman, *Women Lawyers*, *supra* note 2 at 205–206. Frederick Pollock was also one of two references provided in relation to Sorabji’s application for admission to Lincoln’s Inn: see Admission bond for Cornelia Sorabji, 1 May 1922, Archives of Lincoln’s Inn.

45 Burton, *supra* note 3 at 143–145; and Sorabji, *India Calling*, *supra* note 11.

46 Sorabji worked at Framji and Moss, a solicitors’ firm in Bombay, and appeared in a number of native courts on behalf of clients: see Mossman, *Women Lawyers*, *supra* note 2 at 210–213.

47 *Supra* notes 10 and 30.

48 Chief Justice Sir Charles Sargent, Bombay High Court, reported in BL F165/16: letter to Lady Hobhouse, 16 November 1893.

interest in seeking formal admission to the bar in relation to the *needs of her (female) clients*. Even more pointedly, Sorabji asserted that she had no intention of competing with male lawyers, but rather of filling a vacuum in legal representation for women *Purdahnashins*.⁴⁹ In formulating her interest in gaining admission to the bar in this way, Sorabji seemed to be delicately negotiating between the boundaries of gender and ideas about legal professionalism.

It was in this context that Sorabji decided to write the LLB exams at Bombay University, because successful candidates in these exams were automatically entitled to be admitted to the Indian bar. However, when she passed the LLB exams in late 1896 and sought formal admission to the bar the next year, her applications were denied by the High Court in Bombay and also by the High Court at Allahabad. Significantly, however, the letter of rejection from the Allahabad court suggested that she might qualify for admission as a *vakil*;⁵⁰ yet, two years later in 1899, in spite of the High Court's earlier encouragement and her success in the *vakil* examinations, the Allahabad High Court again denied her application *because she was a woman*.⁵¹ At this point, after studying and passing exams for nearly four years in India (and after successfully completing the BCL exams at Oxford), it seemed that the auspicious beginning of Sorabji's legal career in India had ended abruptly, with her formal applications for admission to the bar rejected, solely *on the basis of her gender*.

Clearly, gender was the main problem in this downward spiral concerning legal work available to Sorabji in the 1890s in India: her gender was the sole reason for rejection of her applications for admission to the legal professions, first as a barrister in 1897 and then as a *vakil* in 1899. Indeed, in spite of the fact that she had been permitted to appear in lower courts a few years earlier, the rejection of her applications for formal admission by the high courts resulted in decisions in 1899 to preclude her from further representation of clients in these lower courts as well.⁵² Thus, in assessing Sorabji's experiences as a woman in law in India in the 1890s, it seems that her early success in providing legal representation for clients, particularly in the murder case in 1896, resulted from the exercise of discretion on the part of judges in lower courts, in contrast with later decisions in the high courts to reject her applications for formal admission to the bar. Arguably, these differences reflect different degrees of responsiveness to British legal precedents, with lower courts in colonial India more attuned to the need for competent legal representation; if the person available to provide representation was Oxford-trained, albeit a woman, lower courts exercised discretion to permit her to represent clients. By contrast, the high courts needed to maintain their authority by scrupulously following British legal precedents and traditions within the legal professions in Britain, which still denied women's access to the bar or to the solicitors' profession.⁵³ In this way, the tradition of male exclusivity in the legal professions in Britain was clearly being reinforced in the

49 BL F165/16: letter to Lady Hobhouse, 18 April 1894.

50 See Mossman, *Women Lawyers*, *supra* note 2 at 211-212, 217-223. For a definition of *vakil* see *supra* note 31 and accompanying text.

51 BL F165/16: letter to Lady Hobhouse, 13 April 1899.

52 Apparently, these courts felt bound by the High Court decision to deny Sorabji admission: see BL F165/19: letter to Henry Whately, 22 June 1899.

53 See the case law listed at *supra* note 7.

courts of colonial India.

In spite of these setbacks in 1899, Sorabji eventually forged an altogether different strategy for doing legal work in India, and this third example clearly reflects her creativity in negotiating an intersection between ideas about gender and about legal professionalism. Her strategy required several years of work and a good deal of careful lobbying, but her efforts were eventually successful when she was appointed to an imperial post as Lady Legal Assistant to the Court of Wards in 1904.⁵⁴ She did not formally retire from this post until 1922, at the time when she received her BCL degree from Oxford (thirty years after completing the exams successfully); and then, after completing six months of apprenticeship, Sorabji was finally called to the bar of Lincoln's Inn.⁵⁵ However, for nearly two decades at the beginning of the twentieth century, Sorabji worked as a legal advisor in her imperial post, providing legal assistance to *Purdahnashins* long before women were admitted to the bar in Britain or in India. In carrying out this work, Sorabji was doing the only legal work available to her as a woman in law, while also providing legal advice to clients who were precluded from obtaining legal assistance from anyone other than a woman. Since Sorabji was never successful in obtaining an assistant in her work, and since she was not replaced when she retired, her position also demonstrates how her story involved the creation of a unique 'niche' for legal work at the intersection of gender and law.

Significantly, Sorabji had identified the need for legal assistance for *Purdahnashins* in her speech presented at Queen's House in Chelsea, just before her return to India in 1893. In explaining the property rights of women in India, she outlined the legal entitlements of Muslim and Hindu women, but explained how social customs which required many Indian women to live in seclusion made it difficult for them to *enforce* their property rights.⁵⁶ In recommending a role for Indian women educated in law, Sorabji was identifying a position for which she was then the only qualified applicant! Yet, even in this context, Sorabji diplomatically underlined how such a role for a woman in law would not challenge the role of male lawyers; as she said, "We need not *supplant* men. There is enough to do if we will *supplement* them."⁵⁷ In this way, her proposal revealed her aspiration to create a role for providing advice to clients whose situation necessitated the appointment of a *woman in law*.

The record of Sorabji's activities as Lady Legal Assistant suggests that she often provided useful advice to the *Purdahnashins*, as well as considerable support for the British imperial administration in northern India in the early twentieth century.⁵⁸ In this context, Antoinette Burton argued that Sorabji's primary identification with the British Raj, coupled with her Parsi sense of superiority, meant that she "pathologized the world of the *purdahnashin*."⁵⁹ Burton's assessment fo-

⁵⁴ BL F165/17: letter to Lady Hobhouse, 31 May 1904.

⁵⁵ *Supra* note 36.

⁵⁶ "Law of Women's Property," *supra* note 27.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ BL F165/135.

⁵⁹ "The *Purdahnashin* in Her Setting: Colonial Modernity and the *Zenana* in Cornelia Sorabji's Memoirs" (2000) 65 *Feminist Review* 145 [Burton, "Purdahnashin in Her Setting"]. See also works of Antoinette Burton, "The White Woman's Burden: British Feminists and the Indian Woman, 1865-1915" (1990) 13:4 *Women's Studies International Forum* 295; "Stray Thoughts of an Indian

cused particularly on Sorabji's autobiographical memoirs, which were published in the 1930s in Britain,⁶⁰ arguing that Sorabji interpreted the lives of Indian women in *zenanas* in order to idealize their traditional ways of life, and to oppose the rhetoric and mythology embedded in the nationalist movement for Indian independence led by Gandhi in the 1930s. At the same time, Burton suggested that Sorabji's idealization of past traditions enjoyed by Indian women manifested Sorabji's identity as a woman whose life represented a different and better kind of modernity than that offered to women by the nationalist movement.⁶¹

In my view, Burton's overall assessment of Sorabji is consistent with Sorabji's well-known opposition to Indian independence. However, it is less persuasive in relation to Burton's claim that Sorabji was aligned with "the modern, secular, and male colonial/legal establishment."⁶² Even though Sorabji herself recommended the creation of a position for a woman in law to provide advice to the *Purdahnashin*, identifying this need in terms of "a role for men of business of their own sex,"⁶³ such views, in my opinion, represent Sorabji's aspirations much more than her achievements. Thus, although Burton is clearly correct that Sorabji always identified herself as quite different from the women of the *zenanas*, it is nonetheless much less clear that she was ever fully successful in overcoming the gender barriers of the colonial/legal establishment, even after she was finally successful in gaining admission to the bar in the 1920s.⁶⁴ Indeed, even though her work may have been valuable to the colonial/legal establishment, Sorabji was always viewed as an 'Indian woman' and as a lawyer who was 'outside' the boundaries of its male world. In this way, although she forged a new model for women in law in India, she nonetheless lived and worked "at the margins" of the intersection of gender and of legal professionalism.⁶⁵

IV. CORNELIA SORABJI: RETHINKING BIOGRAPHY AND WOMEN IN LAW

Although Cornelia Sorabji became a woman in law more than a century ago and in another part of the common law world, her story nonetheless offers some insights for us about the intersection of ideas about gender and legal professionalism and the challenges of (women's) biography. For example, although Sorabji's self-presentation as a woman in law and in public life was always self-assured and quite confident, her letters and diaries in the 1890s seesawed between optimism

Girl' by Cornelia Sorabji, *The Nineteenth Century*, October 1891" (1996) 3:2 *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 249; *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); and *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

60 *Supra* note 11.

61 Burton, "Purdahnashin in Her Setting," *supra* note 59 at 147.

62 *Ibid.* at 149. Similarly, Chandani Lokugé concluded that Sorabji always sought "the promise of gender-free liberalism and individualism," and independence to participate openly and equally with men in social and public life: see Lokugé, *supra* note 11 at xxxii.

63 Sorabji, "Law of Women's Property," *supra* note 27.

64 *Supra* note 36.

65 See Margaret Thornton, *Dissonance and Distrust: Women in the Legal Profession* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996) at 291, who described women lawyers as "fringe-dwellers of the jurisprudential community."

and profound distress, particularly in relation to her precarious financial circumstances and her rejected applications for admission as an advocate.⁶⁶ In this context, there is evidence that she very carefully organized advance support for her letter, published in *The Times* in 1902, recommending a special appointment: Lady Legal Assistant to the Court of Wards.⁶⁷ Significantly, just a few months before her appointment was announced in early 1904, Sorabji received news of the unsuccessful claim by Bertha Cave for admission to Gray's Inn; although there is no evidence that she spoke publicly about Cave's case, she expressed her annoyance of this "unripe test" in a letter to Lady Hobhouse.⁶⁸ Clearly, Sorabji may have been concerned that all *her* efforts to fashion an appointment that would *supplement* rather than *supplant* men might be undone by efforts such as Cave's. Since Sorabji had carefully negotiated her appointment *within* the intersecting constraints of gender and legal professionalism, in contrast with a direct assault on male exclusivity at the bar, she seemed quite dismayed that younger women, who had only recently taken up the challenge to gain admission to the legal professions, might undermine all her efforts.⁶⁹ In this context, the contrasts between Sorabji's confident self-presentation in public, and the distress and annoyance revealed in her private papers about other women's claims for admission to the bar, necessitate careful attention in telling her story.

In addition, Sorabji was always careful to distance herself personally from 'women's rights' claims. Indeed, in a letter to Lady Hobhouse in 1898, she tried to distance herself from the legal work being done by Eliza Orme, the first woman to obtain the LLB degree from the University of London in 1888; as Sorabji declared, she had no intention of gaining admission to the bar in order to become another Orme and undertake "ugly" divorce proceedings for clients.⁷⁰ Moreover, Sorabji seemed to work hard to ignore gender; in another letter to Lady Hobhouse, for example, she described legal work as essentially ungended: "I have come to the conclusion that work is never intrinsically of any gender, particularly - it is the way in which it is done which classifies it...."⁷¹ And even when her application for admission as a *vakil* was rejected, she complained, rather off-handedly, to Lady Hobhouse, "What a bother one is a woman!"⁷² Thus, even as she carefully began to negotiate for an appointment that could be undertaken *only* by a woman, Sorabji was downplaying the impact of gender in her life.

At the same time, however, there is evidence in Sorabji's letters to her friend, Elena Rathbone, in the 1920s that, even after her admission to the bar in Britain and in India, she was often subjected to discriminatory treatment in her legal

66 See BL F165/16 and 17: Sorabji's letters to Lady Hobhouse.

67 "Purdahnashins in India," *The Times* (26 September 1902) 6.

68 BL F165/17: letter to Lady Hobhouse, 23 February 1904. For Bertha Cave's case, see *supra* note 7; and "Lady Law Students" (January 1904) *Englishwoman's Review* 49.

69 By 1904, Sorabji was already 38 years old.

70 BL F165/16: Letter to Lady Hobhouse, 16 October 1898. Eliza Orme engaged in patent work, wills, and conveyancing from an office in Chancery Lane from 1875 to the early twentieth century; in the late 1890s, she acted for the novelist, George Gissing, who was involved in difficult divorce proceedings with his wife. See Leslie Howsam, "Sound-Minded Women: Eliza Orme and the Study and Practice of Law in Late-Victorian England" (1989) 15:1 *Atlantis* 44.

71 BL F165/16: letter to Lady Hobhouse, 6 December 1894.

72 BL F165/16: letter to Lady Hobhouse, 3 May 1899.

work and vilified for her imperialist political views.⁷³ It seems that she may also have received a smaller pension than expected, so that her financial circumstances remained precarious.⁷⁴ She never married, and it seems that she never owned a home, residing instead in rented rooms in India and in London. Although she attended the conference of the International Council of Women in Vienna in 1930,⁷⁵ it seems that she remained ambivalent about 'women's rights.' By contrast, Sorabji remained firmly outspoken in her opposition to Indian independence, and she visited both the United States and Canada in the early 1930s to participate in debates about the future of India; her firm opposition to the nationalist movement was evidenced in her highly critical article about Gandhi in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1932.⁷⁶ Thus, in (re)writing her 'life script' as a woman in law in India in the early twentieth century, Sorabji clearly faced challenges that complicated those of gender and legal professionalism.

As Gooptu argued, Sorabji's life demonstrates a need for women's biography to accept that there are often "historically grounded contradictions in women's lives."⁷⁷ Indeed, Sorabji's story is complicated, not only by issues of gender, but also by issues of race, class, religion, and politics.⁷⁸ As Gooptu concluded, "Cornelia's experiences illustrate that challenges to certain gendered social formations may not always mean corresponding challenges to class or racial formations, and show how women in particular historical circumstances use their racial, cultural, or class privileges to enhance their status as individuals."⁷⁹ Clearly, Sorabji's exclusion from the male legal profession and her consistent efforts to distinguish herself from less 'civilized' Indian women, even as she devoted her life work to their interests, resulted in the formation of complex personal and professional identities. Acknowledging this complexity, Amartya Sen commented on Sorabji's success in *choosing* her identities:

Consider the case of Cornelia Sorabji.... She was variously described *by herself and by others* as an "Indian" (she... wrote an engaging book called *India Calling*); as being at home in England ... ("homed in two countries, England and India"); as a Parsee ("I am Parsee by nationality"); as a Christian (full of admiration for "the Early Martyrs of the Christian Church"); as a sari-clad woman ("always perfectly dressed in a richly coloured silk sari..."); as a lawyer and barrister-at-law (at Lincoln's Inn); as a fighter for women's education and for

73 Letters from Sorabji to Elena Rathbone, BL F165/53.

74 See BL F165/121 and 129 for correspondence about problems with Sorabji's pension entitlement.

75 BL F165/167.

76 Sorabji, "Gandhi Interrogated," *supra* note 37.

77 Gooptu, *India's Pioneer Woman Lawyer*, *supra* note 12 at 206.

78 For further analysis, see Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 1986); Sudhir Chandra, *Enslaved Daughters: Colonialism, Law and Women's Rights* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); and Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds., *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

79 Gooptu, *India's Pioneer Woman Lawyer*, *supra* note 12 at 205.

legal rights, particularly for secluded women (she specialized as a legal advisor to “purdahnaschins”); as a committed supporter of the British Raj...; as always nostalgic about India (“the green paroquets at Budh Gaya; the blue wood-smoke in an Indian village”); as a firm believer in the asymmetry between women and men, despite her self-conscious modernity...; as a teacher at an exclusively men’s college...; and as “the first woman” of any race to get the degree of Bachelor of Civil Law at Oxford.... Cornelia Sorabji *chose her plural identities* under the influence of her background, but through her own decisions and priorities....⁸⁰ (Emphasis added)

Clearly, Sen is suggesting that we need to understand Sorabji, not only in relation to the constraints and opportunities she experienced, but also in relation to the ‘choices’ that she made in writing her ‘life script’ as a pioneer woman in law. Thus, as Glazer and Slater suggested in relation to the biographies of women who first entered the professions in the United States, we need to attend to “the texture, the range, and the *limits of the possible* in ... [her life].”⁸¹

In the end, Sorabji’s story as a woman in law presents many challenges. Her experiences powerfully reflect the dynamics of colonialism embedded in the law of early twentieth-century India, as well as the ways in which fissures in its hegemony permitted Sorabji to negotiate a career in law within the constraints of her gender, and the additional challenges presented by race, class, religion and politics. In doing so, she fashioned a unique post as a woman legal advisor to the *Purdahnashins* in northern India: while male exclusivity in the legal profession precluded her from practising law *because she was a woman*, her gender enabled her to create a space for her legal work on behalf of women clients who were precluded from obtaining *legal advice from men*. As a result, Sorabji created a model of professional work in law, as a woman, but without ever really acknowledging the significance of gender. Yet, ironically, when Sorabji died in Britain in 1954, the *Manchester Guardian Weekly* published an obituary, declaring that “Sorabji had no peer among the women of India,”⁸² a comment that clearly emphasized her prominence *as a woman*. Thus, in spite of a lifetime of ignoring or circumventing it, gender remained a defining feature of Sorabji’s life as a woman in law. And, only by grappling with this paradox in Sorabji’s life script can we begin to tell her story.

80 Amartya Sen, “Other People: Beyond Identity” (18 December 2000) 223:25 New Republic 23.

81 Penina M. Glazer and Miriam Slater, *Unequal Colleagues: The Entrance of Women into the Professions 1890-1940* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1987) at 14 (emphasis added).

82 *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, *supra* note 39.