

Women in Medicine: Stories From the Girls in White

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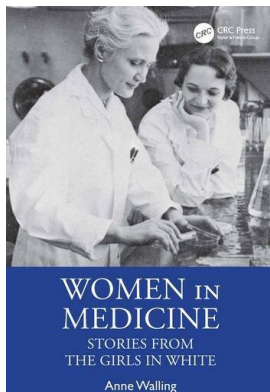
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Women in Medicine, a 19–chapter qualitative analysis of interviews compiled and analyzed by Anne Walling, documents and maps out the firsthand history of female physicians who entered the medical workforce between World War II and the 1970s. The 37 women interviewed matriculated through the Kansas University (KU) School of Medicine. While statistical facts about KU graduates compared to women physicians throughout the United States are sprinkled throughout the text, the author provides quotes and anecdotes to paint an authentic picture of the lived experience of women minorities in their field, highlighting stories of ambition, doubt, and success.

Emerging from the interviews are distinct themes that make up the chapters of the book covering topics such as motivation, early life experiences, medical school, residency, and career. Perhaps the most powerful chapter is the last one, “The Gender Thing,” which grapples with unwanted sexual attention, sexual abuse, and sexual coercion, making connections to the contemporary #MeToo Movement. It would be incomplete and silencing for a book about groundbreaking women to ignore this troubling and traumatic reality. Some stories highlight purpose and resilience, while others address systemic bias, burnout, and heartbreak. The contributors contend with questions about work–life balance, gender stereotypes, mentorship, and belonging.

This book has limitations worth noting. Because the author pulls quotes out of interviews, the writing style feels disjointed at times and lacks cohesion in the reading experience. Additionally, the author focuses on only the first cohorts of female physicians at KU, who were White and from the Midwest, thus limiting the exploration of intersectionality and systemic bias. That said, the interviewees were from a variety of backgrounds, went into different specialties, and were in different stages of their careers; all describe a recurring theme—the tension between personal identity and professional expectations.

This experience of identity clash for female physicians was evident in the 1940 s and certainly persists today. The population of medical students in the United States is now made up of more women than men.¹ And yet, in 2026, being a female physician still requires navigating long-standing structural and cultural challenges. While this book highlights the women who first cracked the physician ceiling and articulates the progress made since, female physicians still face gender bias, pay gaps, harassment and gender discrimination, and contend with work–life balance obstacles that persist, especially while juggling motherhood.

One of the challenges female doctors consistently identify is a lack of mentorship and representation, which can impact confidence, networking, and career advancement. Having another woman in your corner who is a role model and a supporter can make a world of difference in combatting the loneliness, overwhelmingness, and emotional toll the work can take. In this regard, perhaps this book, as a written documented history, can provide an asynchronous sense of community with those who came before. As Marjan Kamali wrote in *The Lion Women of Tehran*,² “While to our eyes, waves appear suddenly on the shore, their abruptness is an illusion. Waves begin their journey thousands of miles out at sea. They accumulate shape and power from winds and undersea currents for ages.” This is a perfect metaphor for the evolution of women as physicians: Society did not just end up here, a place in time when women are encouraged and enabled to pursue

physicianship, but it was struggled and fought for by the generations who came before. Perhaps the reader can find community in these stories.

The intended audience for this book seems to be other female physicians, so they know on whose shoulders they stand. The text undoubtedly invites the reader to see the need for advocacy for a still more inclusive and supportive medical culture. It would be a valuable read for any aspiring health care professional seeking to understand the vast progress made over an objectively short period of time.

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