

Not Just Women's Work



In 1982, a landmark case was heard by the U.S. Supreme Court. It involved Joe Hogan, a registered nurse and qualified applicant, who was turned down by the Mississippi University for Women for entrance into their baccalaureate program for nursing on the basis of gender.

A lower court had ruled against Hogan stating the “maintenance of MUW as a single-sex school bears a rational relationship to the State’s legitimate interest ‘in providing the greatest practical range of educational opportunities for its female student population.’” This decision was then overturned in the court of appeals which held that MUW’s admission policy was unconstitutional because it discriminated on the basis of gender. The university appealed to the US Supreme Court which decided to hear the case.

In a 5 to 4 vote, the Court ruled in favor of Hogan. In writing for the Court, Sandra Day O’Connor, the first woman Supreme Court Justice, noted that because the university discriminated against applicants based on gender, it fell under the scrutiny of the Fourteenth Amendment and thus had to show an “exceedingly persuasive justification for it.” In the Court’s view, the state failed to prove that justification. Instead, the university’s admissions policy tended to “perpetuate the stereotyped view of nursing as an exclusively woman’s job.”

MUW v. Hogan has become an important precedent for cases involving single-sex educational institutions. Sandra Day O'Connor was an important voice for the Court during this case. She is also the fifth cousin (once removed) of my eldest son who serves as a nurse in Colorado.

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