



SCIENCE | FIRST PERSON

# Harassment in Science, Replicated

By CHRISTIE ASCHWANDEN AUG. 11, 2014

As an undergraduate student in biology, I spent several weeks in Costa Rica one summer with an older graduate student on a research project deep in the cloud forest. It was just the two of us, and upon arriving at our site, I discovered that he had arranged a single room for us, one bed.

Mortified but afraid of being labeled prudish or difficult, I made no fuss. I took the lodge owner aside the next day and requested my own bed. The problem ended there, and my graduate student boss never made any physical advances.

Reflecting back, I'm struck by how ill equipped I was to deal with this kind of situation, especially at 19. My university undoubtedly had a harassment policy, but such resources were thousands of miles away. I was alone in a foreign country and had never received any training on my rights and resources in the field.

I'd forgotten about this experience from two decades ago until I read a report published July 16 in the journal PLOS One. Kathryn Clancy, an anthropologist at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and three colleagues used email and social media to invite scientists to fill out an online questionnaire about their experiences with harassment and assault at field sites; they received 666 responses, three quarters of them from women, from 32 disciplines, including anthropology, archaeology, biology and geology.

Almost two-thirds of the respondents said they had been sexually harassed in the field. More than 20 percent reported being sexually assaulted. Students or postdoctoral scholars, and women were most likely to report being victimized by superiors. Very few respondents said their field site had a code of conduct or sexual harassment policy, and of the 78 who had dared to report incidents, fewer

than 20 percent were satisfied with the outcome.

The findings are depressingly similar to the data some colleagues and I collected this year from an online questionnaire sent to science writers. We received responses from 502 writers, mostly women, and presented our results at M.I.T. in June during Solutions Summit 2014: Women in Science Writing, a conference funded by the National Association of Science Writers.

More than half of the female respondents said they weren't taken seriously because of their gender, one in three had experienced delayed career advancement, and nearly half said they had not received credit for their ideas. Almost half said they had encountered flirtatious or sexual remarks, and one in five had experienced uninvited physical contact.

Given their voluntary nature, neither report can be expected to tell us the true incidence of sexual discrimination and harassment among scientists and science writers. Still, the volume of responses sends an unmistakable message: Four decades after Title IX outlawed sex-based discrimination in public education and 23 years after Anita Hill pushed sexual harassment into the limelight, bias and harassment continue to hinder women's progress.

Dr. Clancy says she decided to collect data after being overwhelmed with responses to a post she published on her blog at Scientific American in 2012. A female student, "Hazed," recounted life in her graduate program:

"My body and my sexuality were openly discussed by my professor and the male students," the woman wrote. "Comments ensued about the large size of my breasts, and there was speculation about my sexual history." Her professor, she said, "often joked that only pretty women were allowed to work for him, which led me to wonder if my intellect and skills had ever mattered."

Comments and emails poured in, Dr. Clancy said: "One story quickly became two stories, and quickly became what felt like 100."

Similarly, our survey of writers grew out of well-publicized harassment accusations against a prominent male editor who was a mentor to many female writers. Those incidents led women to come forward with their stories of discrimination throughout the profession.

In academia, accusations of sexual harassment or assault are usually

handled internally, Dr. Clancy says, and this can create powerful incentives to cover up bad behavior, especially among perpetrators with tenure and power. “I’ve heard too many stories about the professor who isn’t allowed to be in a room with X, Y and Z anymore,” she said. Sometimes perpetrators even benefit by getting out of dreaded teaching assignments while keeping their jobs.

Harassment among science writers spawned a hashtag, #ripplesofdoubt, to describe how harassment undermines women. Some women who had been passed over for jobs wondered if they had been rejected for their looks rather than their work. Others worried that they might not have attained their positions on merit.

Indeed, data suggest bias in mentoring decisions. In a study published this year, a team of researchers led by Katherine L. Milkman at the University of Pennsylvania sent identical letters, purportedly from students, to more than 6,500 professors at 259 universities asking to discuss research opportunities. Professors were more likely to respond to email from “Brad Anderson” than from fictitious aspirants with names like Claire Smith or Juan Gonzalez. Such bias perpetuates discrimination.

“Our world is small and our resources are scarce,” said another author of the PLOS One report, Julienne Rutherford, a biological anthropologist at the University of Illinois at Chicago. If women are dissuaded or excluded from even a handful of opportunities, she continued, the loss to science is enormous.

Last year, at the annual conference of the National Association of Science Writers, I joined five leading female science writers to present data we had collected on gender disparities in bylines, top-level jobs, awards and salaries, and to recount personal stories of times when our gender had stood in the way of our careers.

Afterward, long lines formed at the microphones as people in the audience stood up to share their stories. Young women told of being harassed by sources. Seasoned journalists recalled male bosses with wandering hands.

Men rose to offer support. The director of a prominent science writing program said that the next time one of his students confided she was being harassed in an internship, he was going to intervene. (Apparently it had not

occurred to him before.)

Most men are not creeps, and they have a powerful role to play here. During a field trip at a journalism conference a few years ago, I had an engaging conversation with a keynote speaker. As we parted, he told me, in front of two other men, “Your husband shouldn’t let you out of the house.”

The two bystanders brushed off this insulting attempt at a compliment. It was easier for them to let it go than to call out a friend, and their behavior said it was all right to treat me like that.

Whether harassment or discrimination takes place at a field site in Costa Rica or in a conference room, the problem will not be solved with new rules archived on unread websites. The responsibility for pushing back should not rest solely with the victims. Solutions require a change of culture that can happen only from within.

It will take chief executives, department heads, laboratory directors, professors, publishers and editors in chief to take a stand and say: Not on my watch. I don’t care if you’re my friend or my favorite colleague; we don’t treat women like that.

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