
Harassed Out of Science

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Gender bias, discrimination, and harassment in higher education are unacceptable, yet persistent issues facing the scientific community. As AAAS S&T Policy Fellows, it is our responsibility to raise the awareness needed to take a powerful stance to pressure academic institutions to take these issues seriously.

I left academia because of harassment, but it endangers more than just my personal and professional well-being. It endangers our entire community by deterring young scientific talent instead of encouraging a safe and supportive environment. This commentary is me speaking up and shining a light on the challenges that I faced as a young, female, teaching professor, and the discrimination that prevented me from advancing in my career. It is my call to both AAAS S&T Policy Fellows and

the scientific community to rise up and join us in this effort.

When I interviewed for teaching positions in the Spring of 2019, I was in the fortunate position of having multiple offers. But my first priority was to settle with my husband in a region that could provide job opportunities and growth for both of us. We had been living apart for a few years and wanted to start a family. Southern California was an obvious choice for us because of the strong life science industry and my husband's field. Despite the blatant sexism I experienced during my interview, I accepted a non-tenure track position in the physics department. As expected, my husband landed a great job and his career has flourished. Sadly, I decided to leave the career I had worked so hard for.

My department was both male-dominated and permissive of sexual harassment. I was the first female professor in the department and I felt an extreme sense of isolation. The male colleague who chaired my search committee never welcomed me to the department and hardly acknowledged my existence. His (and others') hostility toward women extends to students as well as he is notorious in the faculty for making derogatory and demeaning remarks to female students in his advanced physics courses. When I confronted the department chair about this individual's behavior, it was excused as nothing more than cultural differences. Instead of addressing the harassment of women students by this recently tenured faculty member, the department chair regularly has to provide independent study options to the women that refuse to take this faculty member's courses. Another male colleague openly mocked and belittled me in front of our students and regularly walked out of meetings if he didn't get his way.

The normalization of sexual harassment and gender bias in the faculty fuels the same behavior in new cohorts of students. In the final days leading up to my resignation, a small but vocal group of students threw a tantrum in class about their perceived unfairness of a quiz. Student-on-faculty harassment is a form of sexual harassment known as academic contra-power harassment. I do not believe this outburst would have happened in the classroom of a male counterpart, and these students felt empowered to openly and unashamedly organize themselves to protest the results of the quiz while I continued to lecture. In yet another altercation over grades, two male students cornered me in my office and used hostile physical posturing, intimidation, and aggression to coerce me into changing their grades. It wasn't until I excused myself from the conversation and begged a colleague in the office next to mine to join the encounter that the two students backed down. For me, this was a typical day at a self-proclaimed "top" private university in southern California.

Some Recommendations

I left because of a toxic departmental climate and an unwelcome environment for the retention of marginalized faculty. Action is needed at all levels to nurture female faculty in STEM, especially in an all-male department. At the institutional level, we should empower equity and diversity officers to study their current policies and reporting mechanisms to ensure effective action, and terminate funding to individuals that are non-compliant with anti-sexual harassment regulations. We should disassemble the "boys club" and invite women to leadership roles. At the departmental or college level, we should provide mentorships, scholarships, and funding schemes, and offer groups to support underrepresented groups in STEM such as women, racial and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, LGBTI, and others. We should facilitate regular opportunities to discuss issues of sexual harassment, racism, and other forms of discrimination. We should cluster-hire. At the individual level, senior scientists and those with institutional power should speak out against forms of discrimination. We should hire individuals (like AAAS STPF fellows) who left academia to work on educational reform and policy. And finally, at the public level, donors should earmark their money specifically for

programs that accelerate progress towards gender equality, women's empowerment, and women's rights and for programs that strengthen institution-wide accountability mechanisms for gender equality.

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