



Voices

When Scientists Say, "Me, Too"

Listen to us when we share. Don't let us bear the burden of shame. Don't let us think it is our fault

By Ushma S. Neill on October 18, 2017



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Him: “Excuse me, Miss?”

Me: “Doctor.”

Him: “Miss Doctor? What a funny name!”

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It is truly irritating when it doesn't register that I could possibly have a doctorate.

I relayed this story in solidarity last month in an online forum after I wrote a post for this blog, sharing a few emails I received over the years during my time as a manuscript editor at biomedical research publications. Many of those emails exposed the sexist underbelly of science—some were pretty shameless in their sexual suggestion. In the wake of that post, and in more recent days, many women have revealed that they too have faced belittling attitudes and sexism within the sciences. It's a death by 1,000 cuts: when we women are not taken seriously by our colleagues, it's demoralizing and upsetting. It's hard enough to succeed in science without an additional hurdle.

Many women, and some men, have shared their stories over the last month of sexism, sometimes-blatant harassment, or of the micro (and macro) aggressions that resulted from the simple fact of being female. The more recent “me too” movement on social media erupted with a powerful bang; a significant majority of the women I follow on facebook and

twitter posted about it and nearly 100 percent of the female scientists I follow joined in the chorus.

I always knew I wasn't alone in experiencing sexism in science, but allow me to share some of the stories they disclosed to me. And to those of you who argued that *Scientific American* was not the place to discuss sexism in science, I counter: then where else can we engage in a public dialogue about how to treat fellow scientists? Furthermore, while I know that no good can come from arguing with the internet trolls who commented on my original piece, I want to take this opportunity to tell one commenter that I will not "Shut up and go back in the kitchen" and I'd also like to let a troll tweeter know that I'm not about to "drop my panties." None of us should have to endure such screeds, but even in 2017, we do.

(All names have changed, and some quotes condensed.)

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Keri

"A couple years ago after completing my PhD, my former mentor sent me a similar message to yours on FB. He has a wife and daughter, and I was very upset because I felt that all of my hard work throughout grad school was in question...did I succeed because I am a great researcher? Or was it because he paid extra attention to me because he was attracted to me? I immediately blocked him and had to avoid him in person at a conference a year ago. I am embarrassed by the whole situation, and don't know what I'm going to do when applying for grants and jobs if I need a letter of recommendation."

Mala

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“...we were doing TEM microscopy and he turned the lights off and grabbed me. I then tried to avoid him as much as possible... I thought he had given up and backed off and one night I gave him a ride home and I was clear I did not want anything to do with him outside of a professional manner, he said he understood but then proceeded to assault me. I filed a complaint with the university and endured a nearly 6-month investigation (during which I was not allowed on campus, then they had strict hours when I could be there, all the while my research suffered).

During the course of the investigation the university’s lawyer did everything she could to tear down my reputation to say it was my fault. Meanwhile, he confessed, and said of course she would want it, I thought she was just playing hard to get. He was found at fault, but the university merely put a piece of paper in a file for disciplinary action, and said one of us had to leave the lab, and it had to be me.”

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Anna

There was a male colleague told me he loved a zippered front shirt I wore because it just called for being unzipped.

Regan

Our engineering group went to a meeting, and I was the only woman. At one point in the discussion, my boss held up his hand, turned to me and said 'write that down' like I was his secretary.

Ulla

My colleague was interviewing for a position while pregnant. Wasn't taken. Few months later after giving birth she was at a conference, the PI was there too. Looked at her and greeted her with 'Oh, you got rid of it.'

Caroline

I was investigated THREE times for having affairs to get promotions. Seriously. Apparently people didn't think a woman could do science—only sex.

Here are a few facts: women now make up 50 percent of medical school trainees and 42 percent of all science graduate students so chances are high that at the trainee level at least, we are just as likely to find female colleagues as male. One would hope that this will translate into a more equivalent faculty ratio in the generation to come, but for the moment, women make up a much smaller portion (~20 percent) of tenured faculty in science.

Many other demoralizing stories were proffered, and I am sure that I have but scratched the surface in exposing what women have had to endure in the scientific workplace. Gratifyingly, there have been no Harvey Weinstein-like predators in our midst. But the issue for our scientific society to ponder is: now what? How do we level the playing field? How do we get true equality? How do male peers and allies ensure this doesn't keep happening?

As evidenced by the recent [#metoo](#) movement, women are less and less willing to take it on the chin and carry on in silence. Ask us and we'll tell you. Listen to us when we do share. Don't let us bear the burden of shame, don't let us think it is our fault, call out your colleagues when you see sexism happening, and make sure you advocate for your female colleagues.

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