



Sexual harassment must not be kept under wraps

A female scientist who was harassed by a senior male colleague feels let down by the system that is supposed to protect her.

As cases of sexual harassment in science receive more attention, female researchers are being urged to report such behaviour. We are told by our employers that they do not tolerate sexual harassment. My experience shows that this is not the case, and that universities need to update how they deal with such complaints. I was sexually harassed by a male colleague, my former postdoctoral supervisor, who is 30 years my senior. Several years after I complained, I still suffer the professional and personal consequences of having stood up to him.

The harassment began when I was working at a university in a different country from my former supervisor, but continuing to collaborate with him. He was planning a work trip and asked if he could stay at my home to save money and so that we could work on publications together. The harassment during his visit was daily and persistent. He made suggestive and lewd comments, such as asking me one morning whether his masturbating in the next room had kept me awake. He would try to kiss me. Each time I would ask myself: "How do I say no without damaging my career?" On the final occasion, I told him repeatedly that I found the aggressive way that he was talking to me intimidating. He then questioned why I was being so prickly around him and why I was shaking. My response triggered more verbal abuse, so I locked myself in a room and contacted a friend for advice. The following morning, he packed his bags, went through my possessions and left without a word.

I was reluctant to make an official complaint in case it made things worse. I decided to restrict communication to e-mail, rather than using Skype, which was a change in working practice that I had to justify to colleagues whom we worked with in his department. A few weeks later, I learned from one of these collaborators that, without permission, the harasser was taking my data, PowerPoint presentations and conclusions and using them to write a grant proposal. The colleague suggested that my name be included on the grant.

When my boss questioned why, less than one working day away from grant submission, our university had not yet received the paperwork necessary to approve my involvement, I told him about the sexual harassment. The harasser subsequently informed me that it was simpler to submit the grant without me. At this point, my boss advised me not to attend an upcoming field expedition, because my harasser was the lead scientist. My boss told the organizers that I was withdrawing for personal reasons.

A few months later, my harasser published my data sets in a journal article without my permission and without my name on the author list. My boss advised me to submit a formal complaint.

When I did — to his university — my harasser responded with dozens of pages of denials and counter-complaints, to which I was expected to respond. He belittled me, demanded access to my data sets, misrepresented evidence and argued for restrictions that would significantly detriment my career. Because of these issues and the confidential nature of the accusation, I found it nearly impossible to publish during the lengthy complaint process (which took much

longer than laid out in the university's own grievance procedures). I felt I had to excuse myself from international conferences, because I knew that he would be there. His career continued unaffected.

After almost a year and a half, his university told me that it had found in my favour. It said that he was guilty of both research misconduct and inappropriate behaviour, including sexual harassment. It did not fire him and stressed that I should keep the verdict confidential.

Although many universities claim zero tolerance of sexual harassment, this phrase is empty until the perpetrator's actions become enough to warrant dismissal. The confidentiality (secrecy) around verdicts leaves other women unaware that there is a confirmed harasser working at or visiting their department, teaching their lectures, leading their field trips or conversing with them at conferences. The secrecy leaves victims, like myself, unable to explain to collaborators, colleagues, funding bodies and potential employers why their CVs look so lean during that time.

Recently, my boss and I contacted the organizers of a scientific conference to enquire whether measures could be taken to ban my harasser from the event so that I would feel safe in attending. We were told that, because the outcomes had not been disclosed publicly, they were unable to act.

Until victims feel able to speak up freely, and details of such situations are shared, it is not the guilty parties who are punished, but young scientists. I was willing to put my name to this account, but I was reluctant to identify the offender. *Nature's* lawyers advised me, rightly, that this would be unfair on other male colleagues, who might find themselves subject to speculation. Hence, to prevent other men from being falsely accused, I chose to remain anonymous. ■

*The author is a researcher at a major university.
e-mail: nature@nature.com*

UNTIL
VICTIMS
FEEL ABLE TO
SPEAK UP
FREELY,
IT IS NOT THE
GUILTY PARTIES
WHO ARE
PUNISHED,
BUT YOUNG
SCIENTISTS.

➔ **NATURE.COM**
Discuss this article
online at:
go.nature.com/stodoy