

Gender asymmetry

Investigations of sexual harassment are difficult and potentially destructive to all involved. It is imperative that they are carried out quickly, with high priority and acted upon decisively where misconduct is identified.

Academic life can look very different to men and women. Systematic differences in pay are prevalent at universities and research institutions, just like in other sectors of society^{1,2}. On a more individual level, a number of recent high-profile cases of sexual harassment in the context of academic research^{3,4} are a stark reminder that women often face an entirely different working environment from men — at the same institutions. Most incidents are never reported, and this silence is not surprising. Sexual harassment usually takes place without witnesses or written record, and is inherently difficult to prove. But even when a case is confirmed, the consequences for those who have suffered from harassment can outweigh the burden on those who have carried it out. This must change, and in this context, the call on the American Geophysical Union⁵ to implement a culture of zero tolerance towards harassment — sexual or otherwise — is to be applauded.

An anonymous report in January illustrates some of the problems with the current system⁶. When an older, established professor made sexual advances towards a younger early-career researcher previously under their mentorship, the formal complaint did not help. During the 18-month-long investigative process, the young researcher's career was on hold. She was expected to respond to pages of denials and counter-complaints, felt unable to attend conferences or a field expedition in her chosen area of science for fear of running into the harasser and even found herself dropped from grant proposals and author lists. The outcome of the investigation confirmed the allegations but the victim was told the verdict must remain confidential, making it difficult to explain the gaps in her academic record to funding bodies and potential employers. It is easy to see why a talented female researcher might leave academia in a situation like this.

In contrast, when a harasser is found to be at fault by the employing institute, the consequences are often mild. They may be given a warning and removed from mentoring duties, but rarely are there



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Lady Justice, Lausanne, Switzerland.

more severe implications⁷. A tendency towards discretion and confidentiality by the employer, the security of a permanent position and a reputation as a good scientist go a long way towards protecting the career of those who overstep the boundary to harassment.

A number of open letters, petitions and demonstrations calling for reforms to existing university policies on sexual harassment have received support from those working across the academic spectrum. However, if the demographic distribution of a town hall session on harassment issues⁸ at the 2015 Fall Meeting of the American Geophysical Union is

at all representative, it is largely women who take a more active interest in issues of gender and harassment. The panel of speakers at the event was all female, the audience was composed mostly (though not entirely) of women and few established male professors attended. With the prevailing underrepresentation of women in positions of power, it is difficult to change the current system to achieve equal opportunities for all scientists, in terms of comfort and security as well as pay in the workplace.

Societies like the American and European Geophysical Unions have a key role to play in helping to regulate scientific conduct and recommending best practice for how to respond to misconduct⁵. On the highly sensitive, sometimes ambiguous and always very emotional question of sexual harassment, it is important to keep a cool head and follow established guidelines. But existing procedures have proven inadequate and the feeling of helplessness when faced with the futility of a formal complaints procedure has pushed victims of harassment towards the media.

Allegations of harassment need a swift yet thorough investigation, along with all the established principles of a civilised society — including the principle of innocence until guilt is proven. But once guilt is established, harassers must be removed from situations that give them the opportunity to repeat their actions, and the harassed must be empowered to proceed with their lives and careers. □

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