

By a postdoc who persisted

Academia needs to confront sexism

A few years ago, I started my postdoc in a prominent biology lab at a top U.S. university, supported by a prestigious fellowship. I thought I was on track to become a professor. Instead, I am one of a number of female postdocs to leave the lab prematurely in recent years because of my supervisor's sexist behavior and the toxic lab environment she created. (Yes, she—women can be sexist, too, though I initially thought there would be little chance of facing sexism in a female professor's lab.) I am still committed to pursuing a scientific career and am transitioning to another lab. But I am driven to share my story because tolerating or fighting sexism should not be a rite of passage for female scientists.

I write under a pseudonym because I fear repercussions from my supervisor and institution, and future employers do not view whistleblowers favorably. However, my identity and those of my supervisor and institution are unimportant. My experience is not unique. Many women in academia experience discrimination ranging from casual sexism to outright harassment. Many leave silently because academia lacks effective measures to counter sexism. The only way forward is to acknowledge and address sexism as the systemic problem that it is.

The abuses that female researchers in my lab experienced ran the gamut. My supervisor disproportionately castigated us during lab meetings. When I was assigned to give talks at conferences, my supervisor told me—in front of my peers—that I was the token woman. She frequently assigned the women secretarial and janitorial duties, such as cleaning common areas, organizing activities, and running her personal errands. When I discovered that my male colleagues were getting raises, I asked my supervisor for fair treatment, but she denied giving the raises and rejected my request. She later published a high-impact review about my work without including me as an author, and she told a collaborator that he could replace me as the first author on another paper. When I raised my concerns, she told me to be quiet and get back to work.

My male co-workers excused my supervisor's sexist behavior, and their own, as normal and unintentional. They gave me advice about what they would do in my position and attributed their own success to hard work and good judgment in picking collaborators—who were coincidentally all male. One asked why he should be concerned about sexism when it did not affect his career. Some said, to me



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and behind my back, that I am aggressive and complain too much.

When I sought institutional help, I found that my university's resources to combat abusive supervisors are laughably ineffective. Postdocs are especially vulnerable because we make up an invisible, transient population. For example, departmental administrators and students can warn incoming students against joining problematic labs, but such warnings do not reach postdocs during our brief interviews with potential supervisors. I approached the university ombuds office for help, but the staff said the strongest actions they could take were to “keep an eye on my supervisor” and send her a warning letter if the office received multiple complaints. They advised—not unkindly—that lodging an official complaint with the human resources (HR) department would result in a prolonged, ugly battle with my supervisor. Finally, I turned to the postdoc office, but it does not have the power to deal with abusive supervisors.

I am now taking action to address sexism at the institutional level. I am working with my postdoc office, the dean's office, and HR to collect data about postdocs—including gender, race, pay, hires, and terminations—with the aim of obtaining hard evidence of discrimination. Such data can empower postdocs and postdoc offices to compel their institutions to correct unfair practices, and I hope other postdocs will join me in these efforts. Together, we can push research institutes and funding agencies to mandate the collection of similar data and, ultimately, to establish and enforce disciplinary and financial consequences for discrimination. ■

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