

Commentary

Sexual misconduct in academia

My decision to become an astrophysicist was the right one for me. I am doing something I love, I get to work with many intelligent and inspiring people, I attend conferences in exotic locations, and my flexible work schedule enables me to have a healthy family life. On the best days, I can't believe someone is paying me to look at the stars and be the first in the world to discover something, however small.

We academics love what we do, and we care about our students and our research. But this way of life doesn't come for free. Academics work long hours. We serve on committees to improve our departments, and we engage the public by speaking at pubs, festivals, and schools in our spare time. Academia can be challenging for many reasons: relocation every few years, untenured positions, endless grant proposals. Gender inequalities present women with additional challenges, one of which is sexual misconduct.

I am a member of the UK-based 1752 Group, a research and lobbying organization that campaigns for evidence-based reform of sexual-misconduct culture and policy. I have campaigned on this issue for many years because I think it is the right thing to do and, selfishly, because personal experience has meant I have to either fight or walk away from academia altogether. Research by the 1752 Group,¹ the Association of American Universities,² and the Australian Human Rights Commission³ has shown that sexual misconduct in higher education is



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rife and that sexual misconduct involving a clear power imbalance, most easily recognized between faculty member and student, has previously been ignored.

Approximately one in six, or 16%, of postgraduate women in the US reported sexual misconduct from a lecturer or adviser; in Australia it was 10% of postgraduates and 6% of undergraduates in a sample also including men. Victims chronically underreport misconduct because they fear retaliation, question whether the behavior was serious enough (it was), or doubt that they would be believed. According to the 1752 Group study, only 10% of those experiencing misconduct reported it. Instead, they avoided lectures, changed supervisors, or left the field—to their own detriment.

PHYSICS TODAY's readership is around 80% men, but the problem is everyone's. Sexual misconduct in higher education, or anywhere in society, is not a "women's issue," it is a power issue. It disproportionately affects women because society in general harbors serious gender inequality and the majority of positions of power are held by men. Women

can be perpetrators too; sexual misconduct crosses boundaries of sexuality, gender, disability, and race. Thus correcting it can seem like an insurmountable challenge.

The #MeToo movement has brought the effects of sexual misconduct—on the victims and on society at large—into sharp focus. We can all easily feel defensive, throw out phrases such as "not all men," or abandon a rational understanding of the issue in favor of denial. I have felt that way, especially recently when a well-known feminist was accused of sexual misconduct. I found myself searching for reasons not to believe the accusations because it was easier.

Admitting that the issue is serious and systemic forces us into the deeply unpleasant task of questioning our past and present behavior. The embedded nature of the problem results not only because of the perpetrators, from whom we can hopefully easily distance ourselves morally, but also because of the enabling culture of academia, for which we are all responsible.

Should we have said something?

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Should we have asked if they were okay? Did we make them uncomfortable? I admit I have not acted ideally in the past when it comes to sexual misconduct. As a student, I watched a PhD supervisor corner a first-year PhD student at a departmental social event and begin a longer effort to pressure her into a date. I joked about it out of earshot to defuse my own discomfort and told the supervisor later, too gently, that he would get into trouble behaving that way. The student is still living with the consequences of that misconduct, as am I. No one stepped in when, a few months later, I was the one being cornered and pressured. Taking responsibility for past behavior is not about paying an unending penance; it's about learning from the past, reevaluating your actions, and figuring out why the misconduct happened, what should have happened, and how to create a different result in the future.

In this new era, it can seem as if there is a new set of rules, as if the goalposts are moving. We all know, though, that it has never been okay to exploit your power for any form of advantage, especially sexual, at the expense of another human being. It has never been acceptable for PhD students to have to choose between objecting to intrusive questioning about their private life or getting their degree. Few people would argue that coercing a vulnerable student into having sex is a perk of the job. And yet those are day-to-day examples of sexual misconduct in academia. In none of them were the academics involved dismissed or even strongly sanctioned.

In the UK and the US, rules governing appropriate behavior are codified in laws against discrimination, rape, and sexual harassment. Rules in institutions of learning also sanction how we as academics enable such behavior and how institutions silence victims and deal with perpetrators. Those institutional expectations and rules desperately need to change.

When someone takes advantage of a weakness in the rules, it affects the whole system. Insurance fraud doesn't affect only the company, it affects every insured person, through higher premiums and a raising of the benefit-of-doubt threshold even for fair claims. Refusing to curb sexual misconduct in academia results in a system in which every relationship and anyone in a position of rel-

ative power can be treated with suspicion. Every conversation at a conference dinner can feel stilted for fear of saying the wrong thing.

This sense of restriction is not actually new; it stems from the mistrust that has become a part of the culture due to a failure to act in even the most serious cases. In my opinion, our academic culture has undoubtedly leaned too far toward "what happens at the conference stays at the conference" and there does

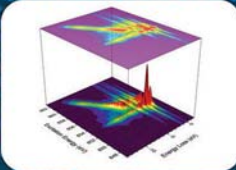
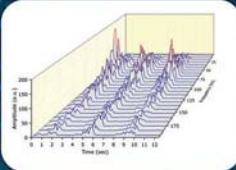
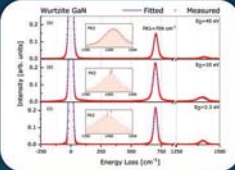
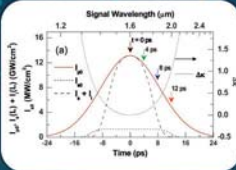
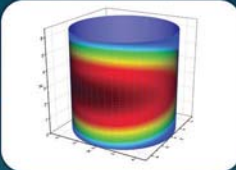
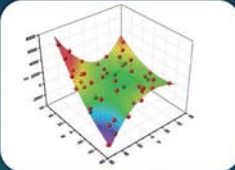
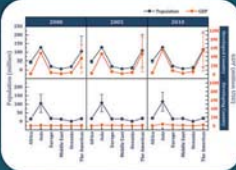
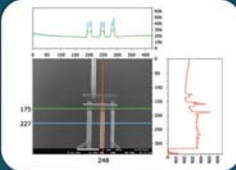
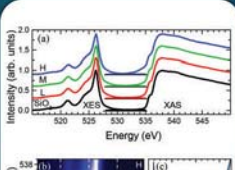
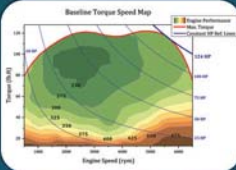
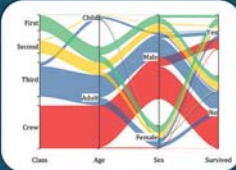
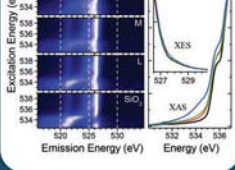
need to be a readjustment of the standard for how we act professionally. As we learn to more effectively prevent and deal with cases of sexual misconduct though, this suspicion, this stilted discomfort, will decrease. We have to close the regulatory loopholes that allow sexual misconduct and strengthen the protections against it so that we regain trust and no longer need to justify our every action. It's time for us to insist that the rules apply to all.

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I've spoken publicly about how my experience of sexual misconduct by a senior faculty member during my early career changed my life. I developed post-traumatic stress disorder, had security cameras installed all around my house, endured a 21-month battle for justice within the institution, and then brought a lawsuit against the university for its mishandling of the case. I won the legal battle and achieved a precedent-setting confidentiality waiver that enabled me to break the silence on everything that happened to me and on how institutional policy enabled a horrific experience. My case resulted in real reform, and the institution committed to not using nondisclosure agreements in future sexual harassment settlements.⁴

My ordeal, though, is not over. I still experience bullying, harassment, and intimidation as my career is attacked regularly via emails and well-placed gossip to senior figures at universities and events I attend. I still occasionally wake up at 3am terrified my harasser is in my house, and I regret that my two young children have often only known a mother

who is stressed, sad, scared, distracted, or angry.

I campaign on this issue to prevent my experience being continually repeated with new junior scientists. But I also do it because if I had not fought so hard at great emotional and financial expense, I would not have won the simple freedom to speak out, protect myself, and stay in a job that I love. I could go into detail about what happened to me and convince you why I cannot simply put on a stiff upper lip and walk into a conference where my harasser—still in an academic position—is present, but I won't. It costs too much personally, and with all the exposure of the issue in the media, if you aren't convinced by now of the moral arguments for change, one more story probably will not make the difference.

Sexual misconduct in academia is one of many battles in the fight against the abuse of power. It is a tiny skirmish in the battles our world faces against sexism, racism, poverty, and more. This particular battle may not be your fight. You will have your own challenges, your own

worthwhile victories to pursue. Still, I hope that when you can, you will show open support to victims, reflect on any contribution you have made to the problem, even as a bystander, and take action, however small, when you can. It will make a massive difference to those of us who have no choice but to confront it head-on every day, just so we can do some science.

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