

Make It Everyone's Problem

Sexual harassment in scientific and technical fields isolates survivors, and legal compliance practices alienate some even further. Collective bargaining could engage the whole academic community in creating a better workplace.

It doesn't take a visionary to imagine a world where scientists are not subjected to sexual harassment, but making that vision a reality remains a challenge. There is at last recognition that sexual harassment is prevalent in science, technology, engineering, math, and medicine, but acknowledgement has not removed the circumstances that allow it to persist. What is needed now are roles for survivors, as active agents, to change how harassment is redressed.

That is not to say that past efforts by survivors and activists have been in vain. They have propelled the discourse in important ways. For example, in 2013, anthropologist Kate Clancy and colleagues raised awareness with a survey of field scientists that found 60% had faced inappropriate sexual comments and 20% experienced sexual assault or touching. Subsequent surveys across academic science in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States found that roughly one third to half of respondents have experienced intrusive, demeaning, or suggestive comments, repeated propositions, leering, or worse. A sizable fraction of that included unwanted touching and assault. In 2017, two prominent polar scientists described their own experiences in an editorial in *Science* titled "Harassment in Science is Real." Five years later, such proclamations remain valuable and necessary, but now seem to state the obvious. Harms to health, happiness, productivity, and scientific careers are well documented.

Despite the attention the subject has gotten, the costs of reporting remain devastating and could prove to be career-ending for those few who feel capable of filing complaints. Scholars and even institutional compliance officers conclude that harassment is drastically underreported: survivors fear reprisal, blame, humiliation, and disbelief and do not trust the process. When I was a junior researcher at Dartmouth

College, I feared that speaking up about my experience of sexual harassment would harm my department, university, and science in general; so did other survivors I have spoken with. At the same time, we felt it was up to us, alone and unsupported, to reform the system by preventing further harassment. What emboldened us was the belief that even if our actions appeared to harm the institution's reputation in the short term, they would yield improvements for academic workers in the long term.

Unfortunately, individuals with first-hand experience have too few avenues at their disposal to achieve the broad cultural change necessary to eliminate harassment from workplaces. In part, this is because sexual harassment and abuse are cast as special hazards with their own set of rules. But harassment functions alongside sexism, racism, ableism, casteism, and other systemic forms of discrimination and requires a systemic response. Efforts to quell harassment should be incorporated into broader demands for acceptable working conditions such as fair wages, access to health care, and appropriate safety equipment. Most of all, the academic research enterprise should view a workplace free of sexual harassment not as a visionary dream of targets and survivors, but as a goal for everyone.

How the current system fails students

In 2018, frustrated by Dartmouth's excuses that tenured faculty who were perpetrators of sexual violence might sue the college if it brought formal accusations against them, I joined a group of women who filed a class action lawsuit against the school. We presented evidence and testimony that three tenured professors in the school's Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences had engaged in far-ranging sexual misconduct, including assault. My own report was from 2017, but some allegations went back to

2002. In 2020, a federal judge approved a \$14.4 million settlement along with a plan for programmatic reform. But one often overlooked mark of progress was that we settled the lawsuit as a class, which is not the norm and represented a collective challenge to the status quo. After many years of wrongdoing in the department, it was survivors taking power into our own hands that made change and accountability possible.

Although we were a group and standing for something greater than ourselves, the experience was grueling and alienating. In speaking with survivors within the United States and beyond, I have learned that they too find civil litigation to be insufficient. The process of reporting is profoundly isolating; it duplicates and intensifies the effects of being targeted. As a result, I have tried to envision better, more nuanced forms of justice—approaches that mitigate the shame and isolation that come with both experiencing and reporting harassment.

The dominant antiharassment system at US research institutes centers on legal compliance, particularly with the civil rights law Title IX, which requires universities to have designated processes to handle reports and investigations. While federal antidiscrimination legislation is important, this effectively siloes sexual harassment away from other kinds of discrimination and prioritizes investigations over redressing harm. Furthermore, this separation frames incidents of sexual harassment as one-off scandals, putting an extra burden on survivors without tackling what are clearly systematic issues.

My own and others' direct experiences with Title IX offices show that what is couched as a set of resources can discombobulate an already overwhelmed person. Although there are a range of harassment categories and response options, the actual fact-finding process is generally one-size-fits-all. Even in the best circumstances, Title IX cannot factor in complex individual situations or the potential for retaliation: international students rely on their advisors for their visas; lab members may need a dean's endorsement to build their career. The focus on investigating individuals and incidents also fails to acknowledge the humanity of the complainants by disregarding not only their trauma, but also what justice they hope reporting can achieve.

Power imbalances amplified

Today's reporting systems have the potential to reinforce the power structures that fuel abuse in the first place. Investigations often pit powerful individuals against a lab's most junior members. Survivors must choose between staying anonymous to try to avoid retaliation, or using their names, faces, and voices to try to make their claims less easy to dismiss. Complainants are forced to make critically important decisions in the immediate aftermath of an experience that is, by definition, a denial of personal

agency. For example, junior researchers, who are at the most vulnerable stage in their careers, must decide whether to come forward immediately after an incident or whether to wait until they are in a more stable position. As the 2018 National Academies report *Sexual Harassment of Women* observed: "The general perception that institutions are unable or fail to prevent or respond supportively to wrongdoings by individuals (institutional betrayal) leads to a climate of distrust." In this atmosphere, those who are already disadvantaged are even more vulnerable, and young scientists who have been trained to accept a "shut up and calculate" dictum to achieve academic success find themselves tasked with making decisions far outside their skill set, often under the guise of confidentiality and due process.

As the 2018 Academies' report summary states, "An increased focus on symbolic compliance with Title IX and Title VII has resulted in policies and procedures that protect the liability of the institution but are not effective in preventing sexual harassment." From what I've seen, universities have a formal process to handle complaints—but no process to make things easier for complainants, to reduce incidents of harassment, to draw lessons for improvement, or to share better practices.

In my opinion, survivors who file reports are typically not seeking retribution but redress. The legal focus, and the climate it engenders, ignores what survivors hope to achieve by coming forward, which is to receive support and prevent abuse in the future. The reporting process requires complainants to examine their experiences in terms of what can be counted as evidence, but it provides no opportunity to engage with what they think is just or right, or what would improve the workplace going forward. Having struggled with the potential for retaliation, complainants soon realize that there are few avenues to translate their personal experience into lasting reform.

The path forward

Some of us who have come forward after sexual assault have been hailed as heroes, but I know I'm not alone in saying that I would gladly give up the accolade to have more people standing with us. In my own experience and what I know of other survivors' experiences, what's been helpful has been support—provided not from the administration down but from the rank-and-file up. I have come to believe that the most promising approach to achieving lasting change is to claim the power and solidarity that should belong to us as workers.

To end the culture of harassment, survivors and allies should emphasize collective bargaining between unions and employers, which has a long track record of improving workplace conditions. This approach can prevent future harms while also tacitly acknowledging the toll that

harassment (and its aftermath) takes on an individual's well-being. Multiple academic workers I have spoken with told me that their experiences with sexual harassment and other forms of discrimination were what drove them or their colleagues to seek solidarity with peers in the labor movement. Situating harassment alongside other workplace issues, including safety, childcare, tuition waivers, and working hours, leaves survivors feeling more like members of a community and less like victims. It also encourages a holistic treatment of harassment. The entire community can engage in the imaginative process of reforming workplace culture. That would allow survivors to work together, side by side with others in the community, on interconnected reforms toward a better future.

Already, some graduate student unions have made a difference. In the United Kingdom, the 1752 Group, a lobby organization that aims to end sexual harassment in higher education, and the National Union of Students have carried out the United Kingdom's first national study to assess staff-on-student harassment and to focus calls for action. Among the demands of graduate students who are involved in collective bargaining are provision of support groups for

Of course, there will be difficulties with logistics and fairness. The fact that change will be challenging and imperfect is not a reason to dispense with the process. Collective bargaining should be enshrined in policy at the institutional level, and it should be fostered by major science funders such as the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health. In parallel, graduate worker bargaining rights should be explicitly and consistently recognized by agencies like the National Labor Relations Board.

Ultimately, sexual harassment cannot be solved by institutional administrators alone because harassment inherently deals with the question of power—and institutions are uncomfortable sharing power. As influential, long-term members of a university community, administrators and faculty are represented in the adjudication of sexual harassment in a way that survivors are not. An entity like a union can bring survivors' concerns to the table and defend the interests of those on the lower rungs of the power structure. In just the last few years, some universities have expanded efforts against sexual harassment beyond mere compliance and into cultural change by updating hiring practices and implementing intense

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survivors of sexual harassment and third-party independent investigations of complaints. The graduate student union at the University of Connecticut has provided alternate grievance and legal procedures that specify what interim measures and remedies should be made available and elect to have a union official act as a support person in an investigation. New York University's union for graduate employees has put forward a contract that eliminates standard timelines for filing grievances about discrimination and allows some grievances to be taken up by the union itself.

Lasting structural change requires a long-term group of allies—broader than individual early-career researchers or ombuds who may not be at an institution long enough to see changes through. Collective bargaining could elevate and stabilize demands to treat complaints of sexual harassment fairly and keep the topic on administrators' agendas after any one complainant or advocate has moved on.

Whereas the process of filing a sexual harassment complaint is extremely isolating, unions embody the idea that fighting for better workplace conditions for oneself is a necessary part of fighting for better treatment of all workers. Allies made through collective bargaining can transcend hierarchies within academia.

training. These efforts are laudable and could synergize well with unions' efforts if collective action on campus were to be appreciated and not merely tolerated.

Most difficult of all may be learning to share power fairly. Even unions run the risk of replicating historical imbalances that exist in other parts of society; indeed, unions may lack clear processes for handling complaints of harassment by one member against another. And it is both important and difficult to ensure investigations and disciplinary action treat respondents and complainants fairly.

The inclusion of sexual harassment into workplace demands would help expand understanding of the issue beyond the people directly involved. Survivors will no longer feel that they are the only ones stuck fighting harassment. Instead of being alienated and isolated, those researchers who dream of a workplace free of harassment can labor together to achieve that vision. It is with the validation of survivors' experiences, recognition of harassment's prevalence, and solidarity with others who have faced similar treatment that true restoration is possible.

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