The harassment tax

A senior faculty member asked me into his office. I assumed it was to talk about agricultural data. It was the fall of 1991 and I was untenured, 32 years old, and 7 months pregnant. He was in his 60s and one of many men who were going to vote on my tenure. He showed me the recent issue of Vanity Fair with Demi Moore on the cover, pregnant and nude. “She reminds me of you,” he said as he tried to catch my eye. I looked at the floor, stunned. I mumbled something and backed out of his office, wondering whether I would ever feel clean again.

This was just one example of the sexual harassment I experienced during my career as a professor. It happened to me; it happens to other female faculty members; and it happens to female staff, graduate students, and undergraduates. It wasn’t all men and it didn’t happen all the time, but it happened, and it was part of my life in academia: grant writing, teaching, publishing in peer-reviewed journals—oh, and dealing with creeps and the messes they made.

Sexual harassment is draining. It takes up time and energy, and it does not result in anything for one’s CV or annual review. It is a productivity tax on women. In my case, it meant I avoided co-authoring or having joint grants with male colleagues, things that would likely have increased my funding and publications.

The costs also spill over to others. By taking up women’s energy and lowering productivity, harassment wastes valuable grant money and taxpayer funding. It is also a key reason women leave academia, which ultimately hurts the entire scientific enterprise in the form of lost investment, potential, and diversity of ideas. In my case, even though I was productive and loved research, teaching, and advising students, ubiquitous harassment was one of the reasons why I retired early.

Here are just a few examples of the sexual harassment I experienced that affected my productivity. A married colleague bragged to me about his sexual conquests. A junior colleague told me he wanted to date me. (I am married!) While I was interviewing for a full professor job, a department head in his 40s inquired how many children I had and, staring at my body, insisted that I “should get pregnant many more times.” After I got tenure, the burden of harassment only increased. That’s because I experienced it not just directly, but also secondhand, as other victims—students, staff members, colleagues, mentees—sought my help and time.

Recently, a graduate student confided in me that a renowned researcher had hit on her and touched her inappropriately during a postdoc interview. I advised her not to take the job because if he did that during the interview, in all likelihood it would escalate later. She would not be dissuaded. “It is just too good a job,” she said. She decided to take a calculated risk because, she said, “what else are you going to do? It’s everywhere.” So, along with doing first-class research, she has to figure out how to keep her boss’s hands off her.

Sexual harassment even affected my free time, interfering with my efforts to recharge and sustain my productivity. Earlier in my career, I played basketball with faculty and staff members on campus. I was usually the only woman. One day, a man guarding me couldn’t get the ball from me and punched me in the breast. It was hard enough to knock me to the floor and leave a bruise. When I demanded to know why he punched me, he yelled, “Women have no business here!” I wondered, did he mean playing basketball or being at the university?

I stopped playing basketball; dealing with harassment at work took enough energy and time. While I was angry at the man who assaulted me, I was angrier at the eight other men on the court. They all saw and heard what happened, yet they said and did nothing. They literally looked away. They may not have meant it, but to me their silence spoke volumes: approval.

It is time to speak up. We can start by having meaningful and transparent Title IX investigations that support, not attack or shame, victims. Speak up every time harassment happens. Men, call out other men. Every time. Show that you do not condone sexual harassment. Enough is enough.

Lydia Zepeda is a professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and a AAAS fellow. Send your career story to SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.
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