If You Experience Sexual Harassment You Must Report It... Right?

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Cover Page Footnote
Acknowledgements: This is for my mother, father, and little brother, who have provided me with their endless love and support.
If You Experience Sexual Harassment, You Must Report It... Right?

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I can pinpoint the exact moment the harassment began, but I still cannot understand why I did not speak up sooner. It happened during my first week in the biomedical research lab. I was taken off guard when my perpetrator walked up to me, glanced at the experiment that I had been working on, and said, “That looks like shit.” Not only did he deride my work, but he also commented on my physical appearance. “You could easily be a trophy wife to a doctor instead of trying to get into medical school,” he told me matter-of-factly one day. I tried to convince myself that the harassment would stop and that my worth as a woman and as a scientist would no longer be questioned. But when my perpetrator and I were alone in the lab, and he brought up the topic of pornography, I knew that I was not only being naïve in shrugging off his derogatory remarks, but also undermining my own self-worth. How could this have happened? I asked myself. How could this have happened to me?

I belonged in that lab just as much as he did. Still, he was a graduate student, while I had just finished my undergraduate career; in the workplace hierarchy of the research lab, he outranked me. Taking advantage of his status, he oversaw every aspect of my 40-hour work week. Meanwhile, my mentor—a female research scientist whom I greatly admired—was busy trying to secure more funding to keep the new lab afloat. I rarely saw her since she was either writing grants or attending meetings. If I wanted to talk to her, I had to schedule an appointment with the lab technician, the only other person that was working in the lab besides my perpetrator. The female lab technician and my perpetrator were a strange pair with a twisted sense of humor. Together, the two would jokingly insinuate that my good grades were the result of sleeping with my professors. Needless to say, I found no humor in their remarks and soon became emotionally drained.

At the National Scientific Conference for underrepresented students in STEM, I finally reached a breaking point. Listening to the stories of various accomplished female scientists who received support from male colleagues throughout their careers, my eyes welled up with tears. I did not have to put up with the harassment that I was experiencing. I would not allow myself to be humiliated any longer. I had to speak up.

“Hija, you know this is not right,” my mother said to me over the phone, as I confided the details of the past months in the lab. I missed her and my father dearly. My parents lived in another state, and my separation from them had never felt so acute. “You have to speak up, but know that we support whatever decision you make,” my mother continued. “We love you and we are here for you.”

Encouraged by my parents’ words, I met with my mentor to share the harassment I was experiencing in her lab. But all I could do was sob as I struggled to put words together. I
noticed, however, that she appeared surprised by my revelations, and eventually she began to cry, too. We had had a conversation about sexual harassment in research earlier that year, so she looked horrified as she learned of the incidents that had occurred under her own supervision. Later, I would recall this exchange as the only genuine moment we shared.

Initially, I did not question the events that followed. I was transferred to another lab temporarily, at my mentor’s suggestion, and my perpetrator remained in her lab. I was also given a few days of personal leave. Upon my return, my mentor asked to meet with me because she had information that was “off the record.” That information, which I will not divulge, led me to believe that maybe I was not the first to hear demeaning comments from my perpetrator. I was also reassigned to data analysis.

Once a week, my mentor met with me to review the progress of my work. During these meetings, she would bring up the name of my perpetrator, mentioning that he appeared apologetic. She also pointed out that his father was a professor emeritus at the university. I couldn’t understand why she was telling me these things. Then, suddenly, two weeks passed without any contact between us; she wouldn’t respond to any of my e-mails. Confused at first, my choice became clear: I needed to find a new lab to join permanently.

I sent my mentor an email, informing her of this decision and expressing my appreciation for everything that she had done for me; despite all that had transpired between us, I had been raised to be kind and grateful. To my surprise, my mentor quickly replied, noting that she understood and supported my decision to leave her lab. Her silence the past two weeks, it appeared, was calculated. She no longer wanted me as a mentee, but rather than tell me this directly, she withdrew, leaving me with no other option than to find a position elsewhere. Colleagues in the department also informed me that the reason circulating as to why I was no longer working in the lab was “it just didn’t work out with her.”

Determined to re-claim my voice and my dignity, I filed a sexual harassment charge against my perpetrator. Although I was a young Hispanic woman with no institutional ties and my perpetrator was a white male and the son of an esteemed professor at the university, I remained confident that justice would be served. The investigation process lasted a grueling nine months—at which point, it was determined that my perpetrator was not guilty because there was “not enough evidence.” In response, I wrote a letter detailing my fears about my perpetrator who, left unaccountable for his actions, was now given free rein to continue to harass other young women like myself. I also wondered about whether or not I should have pursued justice. It’s not surprising that women stay silent; it was traumatic for me to re-live these events and then, at the end of the day, to realize I went through all of it for nothing.

The reality is that there are many young women like myself in the scientific field who are experiencing sexual harassment from white men who believe they are entitled to say and do anything they want. I remember the “uplifting” words that I received during this process: “Well, this is the first of many cases of sexual harassment that you’ll experience, so you just have to learn to deal with it.” Really? Should we just “deal” with it? Should we just play dead? It isn’t easy to rise above difficult circumstances and speak out against sexual harassment, but we cannot remain silent.
Eventually, I found a new lab, a lab full of wonderful women who literally picked up my broken pieces and slowly put me back together. It took a while, but I began to trust again. I discovered that a true mentor works relentlessly to earn that title by supporting you both personally and professionally. My current mentor has done just that. I am not sure if she knows the extent of how damaged I was when I first started, but she selflessly took me under her wing and made me believe in myself. My mentor helped me see that I did nothing wrong and that I couldn’t let what happened define me. She helped me to channel my rage and sadness into something positive: my work and my future goals.

Having spoken to numerous women in STEM who have experienced sexual harassment, I see that the greater problem is the lack of women supporting each other in this male-dominated field. Had my previous mentor, and maybe even the lab technician, taken a moment to reflect and truly understand what I went through, things might have turned out differently for me. But by pretending that nothing had happened and dismissing the emotional and psychological pain that I had experienced, they attempted to silence me. My case took place long before the #MeToo Movement, but I am a firm believer that the more women that come forward, the more likely that sexual harassment in academia will no longer be normalized. The young, brilliant female scientists in STEM need you—me, all of us—to step forward and demand that our voices be heard.

Acknowledgement

I dedicate this to my mother, father, and little brother, who have provided me with their endless love and support.

Author

Alejandra Mabel Rosales holds a B.S. in biology and a B.A. in French with a minor in biochemistry from the University of Nevada, Reno. She recently completed an NIH-funded post-baccalaureate program, FlyBase PREP at the University of New Mexico where she conducted research on epithelial ovarian cancer. She looks forward to moving to Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico, where she will begin medical school in the fall. Alejandra believes that by sharing her story, more women will empower one another, and she hopes that more Hispanic women will pursue careers in STEM-related fields.