Science’s Sexual Assault Problem

AS, Norway

I AM a scientist who studies plants. I like plants. I think about plants almost every hour of the day, and several hours of the night as well. I respect plants and I know there’s more to them than meets the eye, because I’ve been measuring their responses for 20 years. But it is rocks that were my first love and that continue to hold my heart captive. I love rocks with the unconditional love that you lavish upon a newborn baby.

I was a promising graduate student. I landed a position as a professor before I even started to write my dissertation. While I prepared to start my new job, I decided that I would begin by studying the brine that bleeds sideways within the rocks that underlie the inner Aegean region of Turkey. I dreamed of an ocean of hot water underneath Denizli Province, an ocean that occasionally sloshes out onto the surface to form ice-blue thermal springs. I had seen photographs, but I wanted to be there, to take samples and make measurements, to make it “my” field site. I was trying to find an intellectual home.

I was careful to do everything right. I started out modestly and cautiously, in the summer of 1996, with simple reconnaissance. I booked a spot within a chaperoned group tour and stayed in prearranged hotel rooms and ate bland meals with the 10 or so elderly Australian tourists who were my travel companions. We rode in an air-conditioned bus for days while I stared out the window and scribbled notes about the roads and cataloged photos of the landscape. I covered my head with a scarf and averted my eyes toward the sidewalk.

And then, one day in the Mediterranean resort town of Antalya, instead of going to the marketplace with the group, I sat in a cafe to study some maps. It was broad daylight when I began walking back to the hotel, and a stranger pulled me into a stairwell — and then did some other things. Perhaps
an hour later I staggered out with his blood under my fingernails. I cannot describe what happened in a way you will understand, because I still do not understand it myself. I have been trying to understand it for almost 20 years.

My story is not unique. In July, Kathryn B. H. Clancy and her co-authors Robin G. Nelson, Julienne N. Rutherford and Katie Hinde published a survey of 666 field-based scientists in the journal PLoS One and reported that 26 percent of the female scientists surveyed had been sexually assaulted during fieldwork. Most of these women encountered this abuse very early in their careers, as trainees. The travel inherent to scientific fieldwork increases vulnerability as one struggles to work within unfamiliar and unpredictable conditions, but male respondents reported significantly less assault (6 percent).

I know several women with stories like mine, but more often it is the men of one’s own field team, one’s co-workers, who violate their female colleagues. The women surveyed by Dr. Clancy’s team stated that their “perpetrators were predominantly senior to them professionally within the research team.”

I suppose that I am writing this because I am still looking for someone to tell. It was no one’s job at my university to hear or care what had happened to me and I did not conceptualize it as a workplace issue, but rather as a personal one cloaked in fear, shame and silence. Dr. Clancy’s study also considers the availability of mechanisms by which to report incidents. The study found that only 18 percent of respondents who experienced assault said that they were aware of a way to report the assault.

I took my chances with the local police, and to be honest, I don’t know if it made matters better or worse. Each scientific field excursion needs an authority figure who has been clearly designated as someone whom women can tell.

COMMENTS
I still love rocks and I still dream of the ancient Aegean seas, but for the better part of my career I’ve sealed myself into a locked laboratory, a small well-lit world that I can control. I still do fieldwork, but I do it in “safe” countries like Canada and Ireland — where similar things still happen. Where would I have ended up had I been the first person to report the isotope chemistry of the aquifers that underlie the ancient city of Hierapolis? I’ll never know, because I’ll never go back. I’ll take my chances elsewhere and let my male colleagues study the travertine deposits of the Menderes
River Valley. I will continue to do everything right, and it will continue to keep me inadequately safe.

There is a fundamental and culturally learned power imbalance between men and women, and it follows us into the workplace. The violence born of this imbalance follows us also. We would like to believe that it stops short of following us into the laboratory and into the field — but it does not. I listen to my colleagues talk endlessly about recruiting more women into STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) disciplines, and postulate what the barriers might be. Sexual assault is a pernicious and formidable barrier to women in science, partly because we have consistently gifted to it our silence. I have given it 18 years of my silence and I will not give it one day more.

In August, Lego began selling a set called “Research Institute” that features three female scientist minifigures: a paleontologist, an astronomer and a chemist. I am well qualified in two of those fields, and I am here to say that playing with a different set of dolls will not adequately prepare your daughters for a career in science. You must teach them, rather, to manage their dreams. They need to know that daring to act upon their dreams of science can be both a beautiful and a dangerous thing.

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