

Gender-sensitization in Indian science: attitudes and action items*

At the recent 10th Young Investigator's Meeting 2018 (YIM-2018), the last day of which fell on International Womens' Day, i.e. 8 March 2018, one of the talks was about sensitization regarding gender diversity in the workplace. This was triggered in part by comments made during the break-out discussions that revealed that many well-meaning people may not be comfortable with dealing with women in the professional workspace. Since they do not know how to deal with women trainees/colleagues, they have interactions that are difficult for both sides, and often end up excluding or alienating women. Some accomplished scientists at top-tier institutions have been known to say that women students 'start crying for everything' and women postdocs 'come only for breeding and child-rearing'.

We believe the attitudes described above reflect a deep lacuna in the availability of examples as to what language/social interaction/workspace dialogue is appropriate in a mixed gender group. For example, it is socially acceptable to compliment the attire or appearance of one's friends, and such appreciation is more often directed at women than men. Likewise, compliments about a good meal are more often directed at a woman host, regardless of who did the cooking. Unfortunately, these attitudes get carried over into professional interactions, such that well-meaning men find themselves using such compliments to convey positive sentiments to women trainees or colleagues, instead of focusing on the only issue that is actually relevant – the quality of their work.

Scientific pursuit requires the highest levels of honesty, integrity and ethics, without which we cannot pursue evidence-based knowledge production. This necessitates that we inform and educate ourselves about social prejudices, im-

plicit bias, discriminatory practices, and consciously examine our professional interactions and administrative actions for such elements. It is time we recognized that it is not enough to be a good person with good intentions, which we assume describes most people. A good person with good intentions in a position of authority is obliged to do more.

The sheer number of stories from women who feel uncomfortable when their male supervisors express 'collegiality' by patting them, or complimenting their looks or dress, all indicate that more needs to be done to making professional workspaces congenial, collegial, and comfortable for women so that they work with peace of mind and give their best. If a woman objects, these men may excuse themselves by saying it was unintentional, and some turn around and remark that women are being 'oversensitive'. This is not to say that all contact is bad and has to be avoided – but any contact that makes the recipient uncomfortable, regardless of gender, must be avoided. We need to cognize that we are responsible for our actions regardless of whether we intended to offend or not, and that we have a responsibility to educate ourselves so that our actions do not offend others. Gender sensitivity to achieve gender parity at all levels in the society is not just about treating men and women equally. It is about understanding the gender differences rationally and making the working atmosphere as comfortable to women as it is for men, while being conscientious of these biological differences. It is time we accept that pregnancy and child care requirements are not shortcomings of women trainees, but rather, not knowing how to actively support and mentor women trainees in this period is a shortcoming on part of the supervisors. It is important to enable women trainees to produce good science and achieve good career progression while juggling the needs of pregnancy, childbirth and infant care.

An atmosphere of trust and collegiality is the hallmark of a healthy institution. Among Indian meetings, the YIM is unique in that it has set a 'conference code of conduct' for all participants and

the same is communicated to them in advance. Like YIMs of the past, YIM-2018 quickly generated a positive, supportive environment in the interactions; new friendships and collaborations were forged in the four days of the meeting. This environment also enabled some remarkable women to talk freely regarding their experiences with their abusive superiors and their fight against them. How widespread is the problem of sexual harassment? We did a quick poll of the approximately 100 attendees of the session, evenly divided between both sexes. We asked for a show of hands among the women, if they had ever experienced sexual harassment. At least 30 hands were raised. Then we asked the men the same question, and only a couple of hands were raised. This suggests that people of either gender, in a position of power, may misuse it, and if so, they must have support, validation and recourse. In the current scenario in India, most senior scientists are male, and therefore the concerns of women trainees and colleagues need to be addressed urgently all over our country.

We found common themes in the stories of all women who spoke. Here we present how seemingly innocuous interactions make the junior scientist progressively more and more uncomfortable, and then may evolve into abusive behaviour included in the definition of 'sexual harassment' under the Vishakha guidelines. We would like to list examples of such behaviour for the benefit of innocent young scientists. While we are aware that not all of the first few interactions listed below morph into unpleasant situations, it is important for young minds to understand how such behaviour may unfold.

1. You may be called into your superior's office for long periods and the conversation is not about work, but about himself, he is trying to portray himself as likeable.

2. He may compliment your clothes, your looks, but not your work. This makes you uncomfortable, because typically male peers do not receive such compliments. However, you may hesitate to protest because he is your superior, and it is

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difficult to explain why apparently positive statements make you uncomfortable.

3. There may be inappropriate terms used in messages to you: My dear, Sweetheart, Baby, Pretty girl, etc. In professional discussions, he may touch you on your back or knee, may shake your hand for an uncomfortably long period of time. Such harassment is couched as friendship, and you may decide to tolerate it because protesting may upset him.

4. He may tell you he is estranged from his wife or may reveal similar personal information, and may say he finds that you understand him better.

5. He may ask you to do 'special' jobs that require you to be away from your work. Sometimes these involve you going outside the institute with him, because he says he trusts you over all your colleagues to do this job well. There may be invitations to go outside the campus for coffee, lunch or dinner, in the pretext of discussions on work. When there is travel involved, you may find your seat is right next to his in the airplane, but others in your group are seated far away.

6. Subtle threats may begin. At first, these may be couched as helpful advice: 'it's a tough world out there, but don't worry I will guide you'. Then, it takes on other tones 'not everyone can succeed without some help'. These evolve into outright threats, pointing out that your position is contractual, and his goodwill is important.

7. There may be an insinuation that there is a reciprocation of his interest in you: 'you also like me, it's pretty clear'. Or 'Everyone knows you like me and that's why I'm partial to you' ...somehow implying that you are complicit in this situation. He does not accept your denial of this.

8. His behaviour may oscillate: sometimes he is unhappy with you and you wonder what is wrong, and try to figure out what you did wrong. Now he has put you in a situation of trying to earn back his goodwill. Or, he will try to tell you at every step that you are doing something wrong, you are good for nothing, and make you feel low on self-esteem. Then you may be asked to 'make up to him' for your shortcomings.

9. Finally, there may be a demand which you just cannot accept or agree to. When you draw a line and say you do not want to do this or that, at that point he may turn angry, threatening, denigrating you, accusing you of having loose morals

and may say your reputation rests on keeping everything quiet.

10. In public, he may now be cruel or insulting to you. He may instruct your colleagues to avoid interactions with you – seeking to isolate you so that you feel alone and do not have the courage to report him. He may use his influence and the 'old boys network' to discredit you further among the senior scientists, or to try to plant his supporters in the committee you complain to.

What can a woman do in this situation? At the very first instance of any suspicion or encountering an uncomfortable experience, start documenting everything. Write notes with dates in a diary. Build a paper/e-mail trail of everything he has written or messaged to you. Build a history of your written experiences, even when you think they may not be serious enough. If there is a history and a trajectory of harassment, it will show up in your records over time. Second, tell a friend/peer in your working group and ask for feedback as to whether your concerns may be misplaced. You may discover that you are not the first/only person to feel this way. Third, tell a senior colleague with whom you are comfortable, irrespective of his/her academic background, or informally talk to the chairperson of the committee appointed to look into such matters. If this does not help, approach the Internal Complaints Committee/Women's Cell/Director/Vice-Chancellor of your institution, or meet a lawyer for an opinion about your case. Become knowledgeable about what the law says, what the responsibilities of the heads of departments/institutions and the committees are, so that you know whom to approach and how to get justice. It is understandable that you may want to avoid conflict, and may be concerned that filing a complaint may adversely affect your evaluations. However, do consider that your actions have the potential to make a better workplace for you and others who come after you. Harassment of any kind has no place in a working atmosphere.

What should a friend/senior colleague/committee chairperson do if someone approaches them? First, recognize that it takes a lot of courage for someone to speak up and talk about having been harassed or abused. Do not try to diminish or invalidate what the person is saying. If directly requesting the person to stop the offensive behaviour does not work, a

formal complaint is the next step. So, encourage him/her to file an official complaint. It is important that senior scientists in institutions be receptive and objective about these issues. The complainants should have the confidence that their complaints will be addressed without any biases or unnecessary influence. Therefore, one should try to ensure that the committee members appointed are objective and impartial.

An important point is that committee members and chairpersons are bound by a code of conduct that prevents them from discussing the case, the evidence, or the validity of the claims; therefore the information seen by the committee is not available to the community. Unfortunately others unrelated to the case form their own opinions, often based on the scientific stature of the person, 'he is such a good scientist, he couldn't have done such a thing', because of the pervading assumption that being a good scientist and being a decent human being are necessarily linked. The corollary to this assumption is that the complainant must have unfairly accused the senior scientist, and to justify this interpretation, some people spread rumour-based narratives, invariably maligning the reputation of the complainant. The local community is often callous and judgemental, noting the dress, behaviour, etc. of the complainant, and if she appears happy in any social situation, they conclude she must have fabricated the case, and spread this opinion. Rarely does she get support or an open mind among her colleagues, effectively penalizing her by isolation, because people worry their own reputations may suffer by association with the complainant. It is therefore important that all faculty, particularly seniors, of the organization should understand their responsibilities and set examples. Spreading their personal opinions against the complainant without knowing the facts would be irresponsible of them and would make it difficult for the committee members at times to maintain an objective frame of mind. Often the complainant gets 'hints and signals' from senior colleagues who suggest that she should leave the institute and move elsewhere – again, penalizing the complainant rather than dealing with the senior scientist who caused the problem. This creates an extremely vitiated atmosphere and adds to the harassment. Such behaviour is unethical, damaging to the

complainant, resulting in many women suffering silently. In the light of recent studies demonstrating that fake news is 70% more likely to spread than real news¹ we, as members of the community, should be extremely careful before we believe or spread a story about any ongoing sexual harassment case – ideally keeping an open mind until there is a verdict. This is the least we can do to support survivors of such an experience.

What should a Director/Vice-Chancellor/Head of an institution do? First, he/she should appoint a responsible, fair and objective committee. This committee should not consist of members related to the person being accused of inappropriate behaviour. One participant at the YIM-2018, who was not comfortable identifying herself, said the relevant committee in her institute has people on it who are married to, or good friends of, the person she wishes to complain about. Second, people in authority (Chairpersons, Directors, Vice-Chancellors) should refrain from trying to get the complainant shifted to a new lab/different department. Why should the person being harassed be punished by being transferred, while the person she is complaining about gets to continue to work?

Institutes should also create gender-sensitizing workshop modules that will serve to educate, build awareness, and sensitize. Third, going beyond ‘corrective’ actions such as dealing with harassment, and beyond sensitizing and educating people so that these situations do not arise, the workspaces should be made women-friendly. Are there enough toilets so women do not have to run around for a vacant one before a seminar? Are the toilets clean enough and maintained well? Are there rooms for expressing breast milk and storing it if a nursing mother wants to come to work?

Does your institution have the required child-care facilities on campus and does this actually suit the needs of working mothers in terms of timing and on-site nursing facilities? Do you hold important meetings in the late evenings or on weekends when child-care facilities are closed, making it hard for parents of young children to participate? Do you ensure that women faculty are supported in terms of lab personnel, travel funds, and flexibility of job requirements when they are pregnant or have young children? Does your institution support couple hirings where it is appropriate, or are there unstated ‘policies’ against hiring married couples in the same department? This, more often than not, works against women scientists.

What should the academies do? Indian National Science Academy (INSA), the Indian Academy of Sciences (IASc) and the National Academy of Sciences, India (NASI) consist of eminent scientists from all over the country. We believe it is the responsibility of such well-regarded and well-respected people to lead the way in triggering a self-examination by all institutions as to whether their workspaces are accepting and supportive of women colleagues. Second, the Fellows of the academies should also make a commitment to running gender-sensitizing workshops at their institutions. Finally, any age cut-off for prestigious awards/fellowships should be extended for women who have had children. The Associate fellowship of the IASc (35 years), the upper limit for a DST Swarnajayanti fellowship (40 years) and the Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar award (45 years) should all be increased to attempt to level the playing field for women and compensate for their time away from the lab. In several institutions abroad, the ‘tenure clock’ is extended by

one year for every child a woman candidate has in the pre-tenure period. India should not be left behind in long-overdue modernization of approach towards women professionals that is now sweeping the international scientific forum³.

Although the IndiaBioscience organization is not an academy, it is a platform that nucleates discussions among a diverse groups of people associated with biosciences in India. The IndiaBioscience platform arose as a result of ideas generated at the very first YIM in 2009 (ref. 2). IndiaBioscience is ideally positioned to host a virtual space where people can discuss, generate support and get advice from senior scientists. Discussions are ongoing as to whether a group of such mentors could make themselves available for advice on such situations. This would give people who do not know whom to turn to a starting point for support and suggestion.

The YIM-2018 session on this topic ended with a standing ovation from all 100+ attendees to applaud the women who spoke up in the face of such extreme harassment and successfully fought for justice.

1. Vosoughi, S., Roy, D. and Aral, S., *Science*, 2018, **359**(6380), 1146–1151.
2. Tole, S. and Vale, R. D., *Science*, 2010, **329**(5998), 1441.
3. Calisi *et al.*, *PNAS*, 2018, **115**(2), 2845–2849.

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