

#BlackAndFemaleAndSTEM†

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ABSTRACT The #MeToo movement heightened awareness of sexism in science. More recently, nationwide protests against police brutality and other expressions of systemic anti-Black racism triggered new attention to racism in science. But without an intersectional approach, the realities for Black women can be overlooked. Using my own experience as a Black female PhD student, I argue that institutional attitudes and policies can reinforce historical inequities, rather than supporting Black women who face discrimination, and I challenge scientific leaders to create equitable environments for Black women scientists.

Monitoring Editor

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My experience earning a PhD from a top-ranked biomedical sciences program has been, in many ways, a nightmare. My projects, like almost all scientific investigations, proceeded in fits and starts, but are leading to a manuscript that I believe will make a significant contribution to my field. I've earned a prestigious fellowship. I've led a campus organization. I've spoken at national conferences. My CV is bursting with accomplishments.

But I probably spent a third of my time in graduate school fending off a bully in my research group. He called me incompetent. Often, he pointedly ignored me in conversations, and when he did acknowledge me, he revealed a thinly veiled hostility that eventually became impossible to ignore. He called me sexist slurs. I learned that he made derogatory remarks about my appearance. I heard him express stereotypical ideas about Black people and crime, and multiple colleagues heard him make remarks that they considered racist.

I have since regretted not reporting these problems from the very first incident, but it didn't make sense to do so at the time. At first, I was simply caught off guard and didn't know how to respond. There were often no witnesses, so I worried about damaging my own reputation with claims he might simply deny. Even when other people were present, they all seemed to tacitly agree to ignore his behavior, although if asked, everyone admitted that it was inappropriate. Some people seemed to subtly blame me, focusing more on my response than on his behavior. I concluded that if I complained, I would be on my own. So I convinced myself that I could just work around him—minimize interactions with him (although this slowed down my work), ignore small things, and document anything

egregious—but the hypervigilance and emotional masking this strategy demanded left me resentful. After several months—perhaps a year—I started mentioning problems to the principal investigator (PI) of the lab. By then, I recognized a clear pattern of offensive behavior, but it seemed too late to retroactively report the most offensive behavior. Not having witnessed any problems and hearing no one else complain, the PI seemed to think that there were cultural differences or misunderstandings underlying our disagreements. A baseline of anger at not feeling seen or heard or valued, punctuated by sporadic encounters with the bully, defined my graduate training. I occasionally mentioned problems to various people on campus, even high-ranking administrators, but I always came away from these conversations feeling that I should just tough it out. I struggled with the fear that he was right—that I was incompetent, that I did not belong in science, and that he and all of the other people who failed to support me knew it. *No one*, I thought, *would stand by while a valued colleague was treated so badly*. By inference I concluded, *they must not value me*.

I think anyone would agree that this sounds stressful, but a third of my time dealing with this harassment? Perhaps that sounds like an overstatement, but it's not. Responding directly to the bullying was only a tiny part of it. Scouring all of the university policies on harassment and workplace expectations. Desperately attending workshops on conflict resolution and leaving each one disappointed that I hadn't found a solution. Joining countless university committees and focus groups to discuss the climate. Occasionally considering switching labs but worrying that I might just walk into another abusive environment. Composing furious emails at 3 a.m. that I later decided not to send. Composing more measured emails that I did send, but still wondering whether I had been appropriately deferential. Finally, after an escalation of the incivility several years into my training, filing a formal complaint. Then, months later, lashing out angrily at the compliance officer as he told me that the behavior wasn't sufficiently "pervasive" or "egregious" to violate federal workplace guidelines. Far from denying the behavior, the person who harassed me admitted virtually all of it, offering a justification (short version: he didn't like the way I looked) that conveniently lodged my complaint under the threshold of a gender- or race-based violation. Despite the fact

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†I derived the title from #BlackAndSTEM, a hashtag used in the Black science community on social media.

Abbreviation used: PI, principal investigator.

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that women are routinely criticized for their physical appearance in ways that men rarely are (Rhode, 2016), this was judged to be a human resources issue that would be managed by our department. This was even worse than being disbelieved. *Everyone* believed me, but after years of mistreatment, I still had no protections. The cumulative emotional weight of all this, over a period of years, was massive. I felt completely abandoned.

The person who bullied me eventually left the university, but this experience is likely to stay with me for some time. I will earn the degree, but *I didn't get the training I wanted or deserved*. I lost valuable research time. I was isolated from my peers. I lost the opportunity to immerse myself for six years in experiments, literature, techniques, and ideas. As Toni Morrison said of racism, bullying was the ultimate distraction (Morrison *et al.*, 1975).

For these losses, I'm bitter, and I'm angry. Many people have advised me to stop being angry, as if our emotions can be regulated by our wishing them away. This is usually couched in terms of what's best for me, but honestly, I think it's rather what would be more comfortable for *them*. They want to believe that since the behavior has ended and the bully is gone, it's all in the past. But I'll never recover the training experience I lost, and the emotional damage is lasting. Seeing professional women demeaned because of their physical appearance (as the president of the United States does routinely) or listening to Black female scientists share their experiences of being mistreated—and I've heard a *lot* of them—can send me into a tailspin. But I am reaching the point where this anger is more useful than debilitating, and where it doesn't stand in the way of my goals and my happiness. So other people's preferences aside, for now, my anger is just fine.

If you think you recognize a trainee or colleague or friend in this story, please don't ask her whether she wrote it. My anonymity is deliberate, and if I want you to know who I am, I will tell you. Rather, if you want to support us, begin by recognizing that Black women are often treated very, very badly in science. If you doubt this, read or listen to our stories. Experiences like mine are everywhere (Williams *et al.*, 2014; Baxter, 2020; Bumpus, 2020; Marlin, 2020; Woods, 2020). So when you evaluate our work, instead of applying some race-blind, gender-neutral standard of what we should have accomplished, ask yourself whether we were treated fairly, *especially* if our productivity does not seem commensurate with our abilities and goals. This does not mean assuming that we are less capable than any other scientist at our level of training, but rather, considering the possibility that the climate might have supported, but also could have hindered, our progress. If a woman of color in your workplace strikes you as "angry," rather than judging her for being too sensitive, first ask yourself how she might have been treated, and whether her anger might be legitimate. If a Black woman seems insecure or frightened, consider whether she's just left an abusive environment. Given the pervasiveness and depth of incivility in biomedical science training programs, these

are not unreasonable questions to ask of anyone who seems to be struggling.

Crucially, if you believe in your institution's commitment to respect for all individuals—if these are, as so many scientists have publicly professed in recent months, your own personal values—then act like it. When a woman comes to you in anger, or in tears, or in fear, because she's being harassed, don't excuse it, or look the other way, or tell her to toughen up, or normalize it because you were bullied too. If you lead a research group, insist on civility and equity in your lab, and hold people who violate these policies accountable. If you are an administrator, survey alumnae about their experience at your institution and create workplace professionalism policies that don't allow bullies to hide behind federal law. Enlist diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals from your university and the broader scientific community as resources. And if you are a woman scientist in a position of any authority, don't overlook the way you are treated or take pride in your toughness. The environment you tolerate for yourself is the one that other women, including some whose personal circumstances might be far more challenging than your own, will have to live with.

No one has to wait for an invitation to improve the climate in science. Each of us has the autonomy—and, I believe, the moral obligation—to act. So, when you witness sexist or racist behavior, don't remain silent. Speak out against it. Report it. Penalize it. End it.

Black women scientists deserve this.

MEET THE AUTHOR

I am a PhD candidate in the biomedical sciences. To protect my privacy, I have chosen to remain anonymous.

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