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WE NEED TO DO MORE FOR WOMEN IN SCIENCE

By H. Ahmed

The scene: The flagship event of the campus's Women in Science group—an informal coffee hour with female seminar speakers, intended to give participants a chance to ask questions about science and gender.

I slink into the room about 10 minutes late, thanks to a never-ending experiment, and whisper apologies past the 20 or so attendees—mostly women, three men—to the last empty seat at the far end of the table.

The event seems to be going well. The speaker's talk earlier had been engaging, and it is clear from her answers to even the standard questions posed by the moderators that she is invested in her students, advocates for her women colleagues, and is generally a badass. The room is collectively swooning.

Too soon, the hour comes to a close and it's time for questions from the audience. It's my first time at one of these coffee hours, and I'm excited to get a sense of the feminist concerns of the room. What candid questions will be raised? What stories will be shared? What secrets to success will come out?

The first hand, which shoots up immediately and waves in enthusiasm, belongs to a man. "I have a question about collaborating with other labs," he says. His one question turns into multiple queries, all entirely unrelated to gender.

About 5 minutes pass before someone else is able to ask a question. This time, it's a woman who wants to know about maternity leave and tenure. The speaker gives a compelling answer.

Then, a man and a woman both put their hands up at the same time. The woman turns to the man and graciously says, "You go ahead." And he does, taking advantage of the opening to ask a multi-part question—again unrelated to gender—that drags on until the end of the allotted time.

The final count: three audience questions, two from the three men in the room—both unrelated to the purpose of these coffee hours.

When I bring this observation up to one of the organizers, the response is disheartening: "Oh. I didn't really notice. Wasn't she great though?"

She was, and by all measures the event seems to have been a success, but I am livid—about the gender dynamics, and that the organizers, who are supposedly carving out spaces for women in science, seem oblivious to those dynamics. These feel like small concerns—what poet and playwright Joan Larkin calls "only a fishbone / in the throat of the revolution"—but I find myself wondering what else passes unnoticed in gender-based organizing and advocacy in science.

Women in science groups have been drawing attention to sexism and the underrepresentation of women since the 1970s, but I didn't really take notice until 2005, when Lawrence Summers—the president of Harvard University at the time—postulated that women lack "intrinsic aptitude" in science and engineering. I was a sophomore at Harvard that year: 19 years old and steeped enough in science culture to laugh off his comments at first. After all, they felt like a voicing of the tacit undercurrent of all my classes and lab experiences, just a few more in a series of insensitive comments to be borne and silently proved wrong by working harder.

So I was surprised, and then cautiously excited, at the outrage his comments generated and the think pieces and statistics that were published in response. Change felt possible, and when Tim Hunt made misogynistic remarks last year about women working in labs, there was immediate response and immediate outcry.

But, just a few months ago, my lab mate told a group of us that he was not invested in teaching his female summer student about how bonds between atoms exist in physical space. He said that she's having trouble grasping the concept because women have inferior spatiotemporal skills. Everyone nodded along, and I, the only woman in the room, waited a little for someone to say something about this pronouncement—until the silence became unbearable. I mounted an angry, indignant response and found myself wondering what the past decade of women in science advocacy has really changed.

Labs remain deeply misogynistic spaces. Not all labs, and not all to the same extent, but it only takes a quick poll of my friends for the stories of everyday sexism to come out: the lab that employs women, but only as administrative staff members and technicians who are expected to clean up after everyone else; my former lab mate, who is often the only woman at a meeting and is volunteered to take notes every time; the friend in my program whose adviser asks her to work on a poster's color scheme. This is the kind of undervalued work women find themselves having to do, leaving others time to do more experiments, engage during meetings, and think critically about their science.

I have plenty of my own stories as well. My male lab mate overhears my conversations and later sends me emails "mansplaining" my own research to me. A seminar speaker puts up a slide showing the molecular structures of different kinds of phospholipids and snickers at the ones with tails that are upside-down "V"s. "Those are the ones I call women," he says. "Don't they look like their legs are splayed?" The room guffaws. When I incredulously bring it up to a friend, I am told that I'm being too sensitive and that "it was only a joke." That time I'm eating lunch in the conference room with my lab mates when the statistic that 1 in 4 college women experience sexual assault comes up. The men at the table immediately erupt into disbelief. "There's no way that statistic is true. What does the study define as rape? There are four of us at this table right now—are you saying that one of us is a rapist?" My lab mate turns casually to my female summer student and says, "Hey, you're in college. Have you ever been raped?"

I am constantly livid.

It may be too much to ask women in science organizations to change misogynist culture in a world that remains misogynistic. But as groups such as the Association for Women in Science and campus initiatives have shifted from addressing tangible problems such as misogynistic photos in textbooks and participating in antidiscrimination lawsuits to prioritizing networking, awareness, and mentoring, I find myself wondering if the current model is working at all. What would an alternate model look like, in which these groups worked on immediate strategies for dealing with daily sexism as well as long-term solutions for the issues facing women working in the sciences?

Lab culture won't change overnight, but women in science groups could help combat rampant sexism by arming women with tools and spaces to deal with everyday misogyny. In the 1960s, the feminist movement employed consciousness-raising groups, consisting of discussions to help women recognize sexism and brainstorm creative ways to combat it. Similar consciousness-raising discussion circles at science institutions could provide spaces for women to mutually support each other, offer direct assistance for sexual harassment, and come up with ideas about how to make campuses safer for women. These could be spaces where women turn to one another for advice, for example, on how to deal with gender-related "microaggressions." When my lab mate mansplained my research to me and spoke disparagingly about his female student, I would have welcomed a place to talk to other women about these experiences and brainstorm ways to respond. Behavior—especially other people's—is very hard to change, but calling out these types of comments and situations could immediately create better working environments and ultimately might even help push scientific culture to be more inclusive.

Women in science groups are also perfectly poised to take on the structural problems of working under systems that entrench inequality and make it difficult for women to persist in science. Studies show, for example, that the sharpest drop in women scientists happens at the postdoctoral level. Collaborating with groups like the National Postdoctoral Association, which works on establishing living wages and paid maternity and paternity leave for postdocs, among other issues, could help make child rearing both financially possible and more gender equitable. Advocating for subsidized child care, ensuring that institutions are compliant with laws about breastfeeding, and pushing for fellowships to accommodate time taken off for pregnancies could have similar benefits. Women in science groups could also hold their institutions accountable to gender representation by publishing statistics tracking rates of attrition at every stage of science education, hiring, and tenure-granting processes, as well as establishing paid awards to facilitate women staying in science. Such concrete changes to help women pursue their career goals would hopefully lead to more gender balance at all levels over the long run.

Because, in the end, the underrepresentation of women in science cannot be solved only by networking and events, and just because there is outrage when leading scientists make publicly sexist statements doesn't mean that it is going away. It must be actively solved by creating work environments that meet the needs of women in demanding jobs and equipping women to combat misogyny in the present. In the end, it is a problem that we cannot afford not to notice.