

Sexual and gendered harassment of female scientists at [REDACTED]

A generation of Australian scientists is missing. This missing generation is female.

Women are driven out of Australia's research sector by a complex array of structural and cultural forces that make the sector a hostile and unsafe environment for anyone who is not a cis-gendered, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class, white man. Sexual and gendered harassment fester at the centre of this hostile environment.

I worked in the Australian science and academic sector for sixteen years [REDACTED], predominately at [REDACTED] [REDACTED] I had a successful career and a coveted, well-funded, tenured senior research scientist role. I loved my job. I devoted twenty years of my life to training and working in science. But one day I walked out. The misogynist, sexist and sexual harassment, bullying and discrimination that I and my female colleagues had suffered throughout our careers had chipped away at me until I broke.

Once, I was a confident, competent, ambitious scientist with a bright career ahead of me. Now I have post-traumatic stress, depression and anxiety. I don't have a shred of confidence or ambition left. I am not in regular work and on many days just leaving the house is beyond me. I avoid public spaces and events in fear of encountering one of my persecutors. I am a limited and diminished version of what I once was. The health and financial cost for myself and my family has been enormous. I will never regain the career I lost and I will never again be the person I was before I worked at [REDACTED].

This isn't just my story. It is the story of far, far too many female scientists in Australia.

Women have earned at least forty percent of Australian PhDs in the natural and physical sciences for decades. In many scientific fields, women also hold fifty percent of entry-level scientist roles. Yet, across Australia, less than twenty percent of senior research and academic roles are held by women. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

The women who earned their PhDs in science over the last thirty years aren't just hanging around in junior roles, waiting for their children to grow up so they can pursue career advancement. They aren't '*in the pipeline*'. They are gone. They have left the sector and will never come back. Some have left the workforce entirely. In my private coaching practice, I work with women leaving science and academia in Australia. I help them identify their skills and strengths, identify potential new career paths and employers, prepare Curriculum Vitae, job applications, prepare for interviews and then help them adjust to new roles and workplaces. These women have multiple university degrees and many years of experience as researchers. Many of them have truly extraordinary Curriculum Vitae, with significant international experience and demonstrable leadership skills. In many cases much of their training was funded by the Australian taxpayer, yet the majority of them will never work in the research and academic sector again. All of them take significant pay-cuts when they transition out of the sector. Many of them are psychologically damaged by their experiences of harassment and bullying. Many, like myself, are not just damaged, but fundamentally broken.

On behalf of myself, and on behalf of the many extraordinary women who have been lost to Australian research and academia, I provide below an account of the sexual and gendered harassment and bullying I encountered during twelve years employment at [REDACTED]. Although my story focuses on [REDACTED] the same cultural and structural hostility to women and other marginalised and under-represented groups is endemic across the Australian science and research sector. I also make some suggestions for structural and regulatory changes that could prevent the loss of yet another generation of talented scientists from [REDACTED] the Australian research sector more broadly.

The workplace culture at [REDACTED]

The workplace culture I encountered during my twelve years at [REDACTED] was sexist, racist, homophobic, transphobic and ableist. Hyper-masculinized cultural norms were set and reinforced by the predominately white, male leadership. Women, people of colour, people with LGBTQI identities and people with disabilities were excluded, disrespected, degraded and humiliated. Occupational segregation, in which white men dominated senior and leadership roles and everyone else clustered in lower-status, lower-paid roles, made it impossible for women or other marginalised groups to change this culture. Many of us did try and were punished for doing so. I will describe the gendered and sexual harassment I observed at [REDACTED] under the following headings:

1. Sexualised, sexist and offensively gendered expectations, remarks, insults and jokes.
2. Pregnancy and mothering-related harassment.
3. Lack of an effective complaints process, which led to complainants leaving the organisation while perpetrators remained in influential senior positions.

1. Sexualised, sexist and offensively gendered expectations, remarks, insults and jokes.

Senior male scientists at [REDACTED] commonly made sexualised, sexist and racist jokes and used disparaging, belittling or inappropriately intimate nicknames for female colleagues. Male scientists would snigger and whisper amongst themselves while female scientists were speaking in meetings, interrupt female scientists, talk over the top of them and speak to them condescendingly, as if they were children or servants. Female scientists, particularly junior ones, were often subjected to challenging, degrading and undermining questions during presentations and seminars. The jokes and nicknames used by senior male scientists were typically based on the physical characteristics of female staff members, such as their breasts, weight and clothes. Jokes about male genitalia, sexual positions, sexuality and disability were also common. Male colleagues commented on my clothes, weight, hair and shoes many more times than they commented on my work. Some senior male scientists were also 'handsy'; touching female staff in socially inappropriate and belittling ways. This behaviour often occurred in public situations, in front of customers, collaborators and colleagues, intensifying the humiliation of the victim and increasing the cost of speaking out.

I will never forget a very senior male [REDACTED] giving a speech [REDACTED] for a long-serving female staff member. He dwelt at length on how he had positioned himself in a room with large windows for the interviews at which this woman had been hired. He described how he and his colleague had used these windows to evaluate the physical characteristics of the interviewees, and that as soon as they had seen this particular woman '*in her miniskirt*', they knew she would be hired. This speech was given to a packed room full of the woman's colleagues and family members. When I spoke to my line manager about this inappropriate speech he brushed me away like an annoying fly.

In addition to sexualised language and 'jokes', pejoratively gendered language was used by male scientists to describe the personal approach and personalities of their female colleagues. For example, women who proposed ideas or attempted to lead positive change were labelled as '*opinionated*', '*difficult*', '*relentless*' and '*bossy*', and women who advocated for gender balance and pay equity were described as '*problematic*', '*unhelpful*', '*hysterical*', '*extreme*', and '*distracted*'. The value of women's contributions was also minimised through gendered language. For example, women were more often described as '*supporting*', '*co-ordinating*',

'helping' or *'playing a role'* in situations where men were commonly described as *'leading'*, *'running'* or *'owning'*.

There were heavily gendered expectations of contributions to work teams. For example, I was often asked to *'book a room'*, *'order the catering'* or *'find out when the coffee is arriving'* in situations where my male teammates were asked to *'read the report'* or *'write a plan'*. Male scientists at an equivalent salary level would ask me to perform administrative tasks for them, such as booking meeting rooms, sending emails or taking notes and would berate me if I protested this treatment. Senior male scientists were not expected to keep their workplace skills current and many could not use modern word processing or spreadsheeting software, could not use internal budgeting, recruitment or project management software and were unable to manage their time, meet deadlines or communicate with customers. Junior female scientists were expected to cover for the inadequacies of these senior men by taking on these tasks for them and were criticized and penalised for not doing so. When a senior male scientist made a mistake or generated poor quality work, junior female scientists were often blamed for the outcome. I found the knowledge that I would likely be blamed for the behaviour of people so completely outside of my control extremely stressful.

Not only did the gendered and sexualised language used by senior male scientists help reinforce cultural norms that devalued and disadvantaged women, it also undermined women's individual confidence in themselves and their work. I believe that constant repetition of the idea that women are just *'helping out'* rather than contributing equally to scientific work is a significant factor in women being reticent to claim their right to authorship of scientific papers and reports, awards and other forms of recognition for collaborative work.

Overall, the gendered language and expectations, sexualised and racialized slurs and jokes and denigrating comments used by senior male leaders at [REDACTED] served to dehumanise and humiliate women and other marginalised people, reducing us to nothing but sexual or servile objects and constantly reminding us of our place at the bottom of a male-centric, white, heterosexual hierarchy.

Anyone who wanted to pursue a career at [REDACTED] had to 'play along' with the dominant culture. I myself did so for many, many years, believing that if the male scientists could see me as 'one of the boys' I would have a future working alongside them. I foolishly thought that if I could work my way into a senior role, I would be able to change the culture myself, from the top down. Within my own small team, I tried desperately to do this, employing women with young children and supporting flexible and collaborative working arrangements, but I was forced to face the fact that I could not keep my own staff safe, that their employment would always be more precarious than that of staff reporting to powerful men and that I could not insulate them from the environment around us. Another senior female research scientist cited the same concerns on her resignation from [REDACTED]; not only could she not advance her own career, but she could not provide career pathways for the students or junior researchers working for her. Junior male scientists commented to me that they would never want their wives or daughters to work at [REDACTED] and expressed misgivings about hiring female staff, due to the sexist environment they would be exposed to. The gateways to employment, retention and promotion were guarded by white men. For female or other marginalised scientists our identity was a liability not just to our own careers, but to the careers of anyone associated with us.

I was very young and naïve when I joined [REDACTED]. As the years went by, and as I matured, it became harder and harder to play along with the dominant oppressive culture. I observed the same developmental process in other female colleagues. The jokes and slurs that seemed harmless fun when we were junior researchers lodged under our skins like barbs and festered, and we were slowly poisoned by them, and by our own participation in a culture that devalued us. Each time I laughed along with my own humiliation or kept quiet about the humiliation of another woman or marginalised person, I died a little bit more on the inside. When I finally gained the age, perspective and courage to begin calling out the negative behaviour and asking for better treatment, it was like a trapdoor opened underneath me. The moment I started to challenge the

dominant culture, my career began to wither. The opportunities and responsibilities that had been previously offered to me disappeared. 'You are so not a scientist', remarked my line manager, 'more of a glorified secretary than a real scientist', opined a colleague, 'good with people but no scientific credibility' commented another manager. 'You are making the men uncomfortable', explained my supervisor, 'You are making the men look bad', chided another. Once a 'rising star', I quickly became a liability and eventually was formally advised to seek a job elsewhere.

Within a few years of trying to take a stand for myself and for other women and marginalised people, my career was over and I left research [REDACTED] never to return. By the time I left, my hope, optimism and self-esteem had been extinguished. I was dead inside. In many ways I still am. Looking back, I can see that many other female and marginalised scientists had gone through the same destructive process before me. Since leaving [REDACTED], I have met many other women who left for similar reasons. We were in different scientific disciplines, [REDACTED] at different times, but our stories are almost identical. We were tolerated as long as we occupied powerless junior positions and played along with a culture that oppressed and degraded us and were ostracised and driven out when we tried to stand up for ourselves or for others. We were punished for being female, and that punishment increased in severity for women who were not white, not heterosexual, were disabled, were mothers or carers, or deviated in any other way from the white, male 'norm'. [REDACTED]

Other recent media reports and articles have described the prevalence of gendered and sexual harassment throughout the Australia research and academic sector:

Background Briefing, 25 March 2018, *A standard deviation: Sexual harassment in Australian Science*. <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/backgroundbriefing/harassment-in-science/9566122>

The Conversation, 2 July 2018, *Sexual abuse, harassment and discrimination 'rife' among Australian academics*. <https://theconversation.com/sexual-abuse-harassment-and-discrimination-rife-among-australian-academics-97856>

2. Pregnancy and mothering-related harassment.

Female scientists who had children were excluded, side-lined, denigrated and under-valued. Becoming a mother was the worst crime any aspiring scientist could commit. Oddly, becoming a father seemed only to enhance the career prospects of male scientists. Both male and female science leaders openly looked down on women who became mothers. When I nervously announced my second pregnancy to my supervisor she stared stonily across her desk at me and her only response was 'What about the project?'. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] While I was pregnant, a male supervisor said, in front of our colleagues, that he wouldn't work in the same laboratory as me, 'in case I went into labour'. I felt humiliated and dirty, as if I was some kind of ticking uterine-bomb, about to shower my colleagues with amniotic fluid and blood. Another male colleague complained publicly about the inconvenience caused to his research program by the absence of a female staff member who was on leave after suffering [REDACTED] a late-term miscarriage. Pregnant female researchers were often pressured into working with biological, chemical or radiological hazards or into performing heavy manual labour during their

pregnancies. The opinion of our managers and supervisors was clear: pregnancy and motherhood were dirty, inconvenient things that had no place in their workplace.

Female scientists returning from maternity leave were often given no support in their return to the workplace and many were bullied into returning before their babies were old enough or before they were ready. Although women were often expected to continue to attend meetings and seminars and supervise projects while on maternity leave, there were no breast-feeding or child-care facilities available. I still carry the feelings of humiliation and shame resulting from clumsily breastfeeding my babies in front of male colleagues in order to meet my work commitments. Women who wanted to work part-time after their return to work were told that they still had to carry a full-time workload and punished if they resisted this request. When my children were very small and the demands of parenting at their highest, I was told that if I couldn't get my workload done in my working hours I would have to work in the evenings and weekend to catch up, despite the fact that this was clearly physically impossible for me to do. My supervisors made no effort to improve my work situation, even when I broke down in tears in front of colleagues and was clearly suffering extreme distress. On one occasion when I had taken two weeks medical leave due to stress, overwork and exhaustion, one of my line managers scheduled me to give an unnecessary and difficult presentation a few days after my return to work, to punish me for what he saw as my insubordinate attitude, even though he knew this would mean I had to prepare the presentation during my medical leave. When I told another line manager that I felt bullied by this request he dismissed my complaint and told me I had brought the situation on myself by being a rebellious trouble-maker. The same line manager would hold meetings that I needed to attend outside of my normal work hours and dismiss my requests that scheduling be changed to allow me to attend as '*self-centred*'.

After having children, my career at [REDACTED] became a sort of crab-like, side-ways scuttle, as I moved from role to role, desperately trying to find a safe role, work team and supervisor where I could sustainably balance work and family responsibilities. As each year passed, my sense of exhaustion, exclusion, fear and humiliation grew. My increasingly frantic attempts to find some kind of workable situation was seen by my line managers as a sort of insubordination. I was accused of being a trouble-maker and encouraged to leave science and find a more suitable job. The clearly stated cultural expectation was that anyone wanting to pursue a career at [REDACTED] needed to work full-time, and typically more than full-time, and that family responsibilities could not be allowed to interfere with work. Many senior male scientists were open about their belief that having '*a wife to take care of things at home*' was essential to a successful science career. A very senior leader was known for saying '*If you are awake then you should be working*'. During my time at [REDACTED] female colleagues became victims of domestic abuse, and consequently became single parents. Although these women all displayed incredible resilience, perseverance and commitment to their work in the face of horrific situations, when it came time for contract renewals and promotions they were all penalised for their inability to travel at short notice and their need to take personal leave to care for ill children and attend the family court. Not surprisingly, the point at which the majority of female scientists left [REDACTED] or moved into lower-paid, non-research roles was when they became mothers.

3. Lack of an effective complaints process, which led to complainants leaving [REDACTED] while perpetrators remained in influential senior positions

The complaints process at [REDACTED] was opaque, ineffective and traumatic for victims. Complainants were punished for challenging the status quo and perpetrators seldom received any real penalty. I witnessed woman after woman being sidelined and denigrated after they had made complaints or had simply made requests to be moved away from harassing or bullying supervisors. Senior male scientists who had been subject to harassment and bullying claims were typically not removed from positions of authority and were allowed to continue supervising junior female staff.

In my own case, I asked repeatedly to be transferred away from a group of male scientists whose harassment and bullying of women and other marginalised staff made the workplace unsafe. I made it clear that I was suffering mental health and wellbeing issues as a result of working with these men. I explained to my line manager that I could no longer enter certain buildings due to the panic and fear that overwhelmed me. I withdrew from meetings and interactions with customers and no longer attended conferences. I begged multiple senior managers to transfer me. I offered to give up my own research career entirely and take any role, in any area, at any salary level, to get away, but was told that the only solution was for me to look for a job elsewhere. My [REDACTED] Director laughed and said *'well you won't find it any less sexist elsewhere'*, and my line manager told me that my fear of a notorious senior male scientist was *'funny'*. I was also told by senior managers and by Human Resources that the only way they could take any action, including approving a transfer, was if I made a formal complaint. However, I knew several women who had recently made formal complaints and understood from them that the process was difficult and traumatic and that their complaints had not been satisfactorily resolved. None of these women had remained in their roles after going through the complaints process, whilst all of the alleged perpetrators had remained in theirs [REDACTED]

Without the strength or support to make a formal complaint and knowing that it was extremely unlikely that any complaint I made would be appropriately addressed, I took what seemed like the only option open to me and resigned. I was given no farewell. No goodbye card or present. Not even a post-it note with *'bye'* scrawled on it. On my last day at [REDACTED], after twelve years of service, I simply switched off my computer and walked out. Every single idea, every single piece of data, every single line of research and research project that I had created now belongs to the men who harassed and bullied me and other women.

Looking back, I can see that this sort of silent, humiliating departure had been made by other female scientists before me. I had watched them leave and I didn't understand why or where they were going or why no farewell was organised for them. Now I can guess that they too were leaving after complaining about harassment and bullying and that nobody wanted to draw attention to what was going on. I wish I could find each and every one of those women now and tell them *'I believe you. What happened to you was wrong. It wasn't your fault. I hope you are OK'*. But I can't. Together with other ex-[REDACTED] scientists, I have tried to compile a list of women who left under dubious circumstances and find out where they are now. Most of them have disappeared from the internet. It's hard not to leave a digital footprint these days, so my guess is that they never worked again. How many were broken beyond repair? It is likely we will never know. How many scientific discoveries and breakthroughs didn't happen because these women weren't there to make them? Again, we will never know. It's so hard to quantify what isn't there. So hard to see the shape made by absence.

Below are three things I believe would improve the situation for women and other marginalised scientists at [REDACTED] and throughout the Australian science and research sector.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

The recruitment and promotion procedures I participated in at [REDACTED] were decades behind the recruitment and promotion processes that were standard [REDACTED] at that time. At [REDACTED], senior scientists were typically allowed to hire, fire and promote at their own discretion, with very little oversight or accountability. I witnessed recruitment panels sorting through piles of applications and discarding the ones with non-English names, recruitment panels ignoring merit to favour candidates they knew or who fitted their idea of what a scientist should look like and non-white applicants being shortlisted for 'diversity', without any intent of actually hiring them. The people to be appointed to rare and coveted [REDACTED] Research Scientist roles were often decided before the job was even advertised and job descriptions were written to perfectly fit the chosen appointee. One senior manager told me ahead of a bulk recruitment round, without a trace of self-awareness or irony, that he '*already knew who he wanted in all the roles, unless he was forced to appoint a woman*'. There were no formal requirements for diversity among candidate pools, and if pools contained no female or other underrepresented applicants, nothing was done to examine the processes that had led to this situation or to seek additional candidates. There were no targets or quotas for gender balance or other forms of representation in any recruitment or promotion rounds and very little consciousness of these concepts among senior leadership. All the senior leaders I spoke with were, unsurprisingly, convinced that every single cis-gendered, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class, white man ever appointed to a job at [REDACTED] had got there because of '*merit*'.

[REDACTED]

Solution 2. Transparent, independent processes for handling bullying and harassment complaints and reporting related data.

One of the most traumatising aspects of my experience at [REDACTED] was the utter lack of interest and support provided by Human Resources staff. Other women and marginalised people reported that they also received insufficient assistance and support from Human Resources teams, who dismissed their problems and complaints and supported known serial perpetrators of harassment and bullying to remain in their positions of power. I was not provided with any suitable information about workplace harassment and bullying or any referrals to appropriate external support services or guidance about my options for resolving my own situation. The counselling available through [REDACTED] was woefully inadequate. The counsellor I saw to discuss my situation seemed to be on the verge of falling asleep during our counselling sessions. She saw me for only two sessions and then dismissed me, saying that I would be fine as soon as I found another job, despite the fact that I was exhibiting classic symptoms of traumatic stress, anxiety and depression. Another woman saw a counsellor who smelled of alcohol and appeared drunk during counselling sessions.

There needs to be a simple, transparent, independent process for handling all harassment and bullying complaints for all Australian employees. The process must be handled entirely by an external, independent body, and not by internal Human Resources staff or any other body internal to the organisation in question. Access to this process and surrounding supports should be clearly advertised within all workplaces. The number and nature of complaints made, including the gender and other characteristics of complainants and

alleged perpetrators, and the outcomes achieved (anonymised of course) should be detailed annually in publicly available organisational Annual Reports.

Complainants also need to be able to access good quality, affordable and accessible counselling and career support. I have met many female ex-scientists who, like myself, suffer ongoing mental health problems as a result of workplace harassment and bullying and as a result of ongoing job and financial insecurity. The bitter irony is that, just when we need it most, women who have suffered workplace harassment and its consequences are often unable to afford good quality psychological and medical support, as we often end up outside of regular or well-paid employment. I believe we need a quality, free national telephone counselling service, designed specifically to support victims of workplace harassment and bullying and gender or identity-based workplace discrimination. This service would need to be able to provide appropriate information and referral, but also to listen to victim's stories and support them to overcome trauma, depression and anxiety and other mental health problems and regain their health and confidence and get back into regular work.

Many of the problems people like myself face are very specific to our situations and we need support and advice that is relevant and applicable. For example, a common problem the women I work with in my private coaching practice face is a lack of referees to use in job applications. Supervisors and line managers can be hostile to women departing research and academia, both when formal complaints have been made, and when the reason for leaving has not been the subject of a formal complaint but is an unacknowledged and uncomfortable fact between them. I am not able to use any of my former line managers as referees, as they know that they were the reason I left science and were openly hostile to me. It has thus taken me two years of volunteer work to build up new referees, so that I can start applying for paid jobs in another sector. Having spent twenty years gaining three university degrees and working in quite senior research and research management roles, I am now overqualified for entry-level roles in non-research sectors, but do not have the transferable skills and experience needed to apply for mid-level roles. Many women who leave research and academia face the same problem and many spend years in insecure, low-paid, casual and contract work before re-establishing a career trajectory. Many will need to re-train completely, something that is very costly and difficult to do in mid-life, especially for women with family caring responsibilities. Falling out of a career in mid-life has a disproportionate impact on Superannuation savings for these women, as they often lose up to ten years of regular income at a point when regular contributions are essential. These are the sorts of very specific problems that women fleeing harassment and bullying face, and these women need well-informed, specific advice and support to overcome the issues and return to the workforce.

Solution 3. [REDACTED], should implement representation targets or quotas for all salary levels and in all leadership groups and be held accountable for achieving these.

Much of the problematic culture I encountered at [REDACTED] derived from the monochromatic nature of the culture-setting leadership teams. [REDACTED] was a very hierarchical, top-down, command and control-style organisation, where the key decisions that shaped workplace structure and culture were made behind closed doors by teams composed entirely or almost entirely of cis-gendered, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class, middle-aged white men. As I worked with one of [REDACTED] most important customers, in the course of my work I often had access to such rooms. The degree of 'group-think' I observed among these decision-making teams was extraordinary. All analysis and decision making occurred through the very narrow lens of experience and understanding that these men brought with them. As any women or people from other marginalised group were almost always in auxiliary or junior roles, even when we were present we struggled to have any impact on the discussion or decisions. Although not all of the senior male leaders were themselves harassers and bullies, almost all of them struggled to understand women and other marginalised people as being as fully human; possessing the same complexity and depth of intelligence, thought, desire, interest and skills as they did, and this view (mostly unconscious) coloured everything they said and did.

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] has clearly failed to address its problematic culture and failed to fix the appalling gender and racial imbalance among research staff and research leadership. There has been time enough for [REDACTED] to solve this problem on their own, through 'soft' measures and they simply haven't. It is now time [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] to set and achieve representation targets or quotas for women and other marginalised groups at all salary levels and in all leadership groups. Implementing such targets or quotas will bring a critical mass of previously marginalised people into senior leadership teams and into decision-making groups, which will produce a different style and approach to workplace culture and practice.

The critical problems facing our nation, such as climate change, population pressure, biosecurity and cyber security, will not wait for dinosaurs like [REDACTED] to change slowly and incrementally over decades. Australia needs the best, the most talented, the most innovative and most fearless scientists and researchers in action
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] It is past time for Australian governments to take action to stem the tide of women leaving the sector, close the sector's massive gender gaps, and ensure a better future for all Australian scientists and researchers.