

How long 'til we get there?

Holly J Stein

AIRIE Program-Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO, USA and CEED-University of Oslo, Norway
(holly.stein@colostate.edu)

Late last year we were shocked and overwhelmed with the barrage from women coming out of the Hollywood acting scene to tell their story. A trickle ramped quickly into a flood as stories with an eerily repetitive theme were told. There was an unspoken safety in exercising a collective voice with unity of message. Endurance of personal abuse to advance careers, even if the advancement came at an incremental rate, was key to survival. The alternative was marginalization if not all out failure in the career field of choice.

In the world of science, bully behavior is rampart, and largely directed at women. Bully tactics are designed to belittle, break morale, and create superiority through dominance. The root issue for persons employing these tactics can be attributed to insecurity and jealousy, and the uncanny need to take credit where credit is not due. Few associate the role of the enabler with glamor. In the academic world, it seems especially challenging to take joy in the achievements of others. We equate science with discovery, and the very definition of that word evokes the need to be first. Bullying is a maneuver for assuming that lead role, regardless of the creative source of ideas leading to that discovery. Women too often allow credit to be taken, fearful of retribution should they protest.

The long silence has been broken, but the real outcome, changes for women beyond Hollywood, from all walks of life, remains to be seen. As female scientists, we must speak up when abuse is inflicted in the work environment – but do so without losing our momentum as scientists. That's a tall order. Simply put, it means overtime, beyond already packed overtime schedules. Speaking up does not mean we wait until we've cleared the fence, and inched our way forward in frustration that we dared not to show. Action must be immediate, with follow-up if human resource departments are sleepy in responding. As scientists, we test hypotheses and reproduce analytical results and trends to affirm interpretations, for example, by testing at another locality. We must use this scientific approach to document the occurrence and impact of bullying, compiling not just the stories, but also the quantifiable impacts of active subjugation. Only when the swift ousting of abusers exposed at Hollywood takes on the same pace and vigor in the science community will we arrive at equality. That's how long 'til we get there.