

How To Stop Meeting Harassment

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<p><i>"I hate presenting posters, especially at crowded poster sessions. Being stuck at my poster makes me an easy target. I've been groped, I've been hit on, I've had men tell me obscene jokes. It's so nerve-wracking."</i></p>	<p><i>"There are some meetings that I will never go to again. The anti-woman hostility I've experienced is overwhelming."</i></p>	<p>"Why do they have dances and booze at these meetings?" These are supposed to be professional conferences," one said. "It's like the organizers are giving all the creeps permission and the perfect place to be creepy."</p>
<p><i>"I was at a social event and this guy refused to leave me alone. I'm sure he was drunk. He kept insisting he would 'escort' me to my room. I was afraid he was going to follow me, so I tracked down someone from her lab and asked him to walk me to my room."</i></p>	<p><i>"I tried telling a security guard what happened, and he just laughed at me and told me to just take it as a compliment and get over it."</i></p>	
<p><i>"It was my first scientific meeting as a graduate student. I was the only person from the lab other than my advisor at the meeting. On the first day I was sitting at breakfast with another woman I had just met, and this guy sat at our table and chimed in to our conversation. He continued to follow me for the next couple of days. He went to all the same sessions I did, sat at my table at meals, said he didn't believe I was married because my wedding ring didn't look real, and stood and watched as I was presenting my poster. The poster session was very crowded, and while I was presenting my work to an influential scientist in my field, I felt someone grab my buttocks. When I spun around, I saw him walking away. After that, I found my advisor and told him what had happened. He found the guy and had a pretty intense conversation with him, and told him to leave me alone and not talk to or come near me again. As far as I know, there was no policy or reporting mechanism, and I wouldn't have said anything to the organizers out of fear of being labeled a complainer or a troublemaker."</i></p>		



These are just a handful of the stories I've collected in the past year — all but one of them from women who were the targets of unwanted comments, harassment, and predatory behavior on the part of men at scientific meetings.

At the same time, I've had scientific society executives and meeting directors tell me that they don't think this is such a big problem, because they've never had anyone complain to them about it. I'm pretty sure I know why.

Why Now?

The issue of sexual and gender-based harassment emerged initially from women's experiences at "geek" conferences (open source, hackathons, cosplay events, etc.). Two women formed a small but influential nonprofit organization, the Ada Initiative, and developed model anti-harassment policies and procedures that have since been adopted by several hundred of these largely volunteer-run "cons." In the meantime, stories of harassment at scientific meetings began emerging in blogs and on

social media. Women were finally talking publicly about what had been a dirty little secret: women are harassed at meetings. A lot of women. At every meeting. Women were getting tired of having to warn each other about known harassers, tired of putting up with behavior that undermined their confidence and eroded the belief that they belonged in science.

What Is Meeting Harassment?

Like workplace harassment, the experience of harassment at meetings has a direct and real impact on women's careers. Unlike workplace harassment, it takes place in a context where contact with the harasser is time-limited, there is a feeling of anonymity (despite the fact that everyone is wearing nametags), there is no explicit policy stating that this behavior is not permitted, and there is no effective or confidential way for targets to report it. "What happens at the annual meeting stays at the annual meeting" seems to be the guiding ethic for meeting harassers.

Harassment at meetings is much more akin to street harassment. "Street harassment" is harassment that occurs in public places, generally by someone unknown to the target, and includes any unwelcome words and actions that invade the physical and emotional spaces of others in a disrespectful, frightening, or insulting way.

In her groundbreaking book, *Back Off: How to Confront and Stop Sexual Harassment and Harassers*, Martha Langelan identifies three broad categories of harassment. All three types of harassment, and combinations of these, occur at meetings.

Dominance Harassers use harassment to assert and affirm their social status. This is the most common, and seemingly constant, form of harassment – from catcalling on the street to comments and jokes in the office. The harasser's motive is to bolster his ego, assert his status, and reassure himself that he commands attention, respect and deference from women. It is not a demand for sexual services, and the harassment is not necessarily a turn-on. It is about power, not sex. Dominance harassment in groups is a form of male bonding, a way to establish or maintain prestige within a social structure of male dominance. It is a way of keeping women in line and subordinate to men.

Strategic and Territorial Harassers use sexual and gender-based harassment as a deliberate intimidation device to maintain their social, economic, and political privilege. This is planned, self-aware behavior with clear objective: to keep women out of a workplace, a course of study, or organizational leadership. The treatment of women in the military, and the widespread sexual harassment of women students at field research sites revealed by the SAFE 13 study are recent examples. These harassers seek to protect male privilege, including access to jobs, educational opportunities, community facilities, or economic resources. As Langelan puts it, "Strategic harassment is a way to fight dirty when a woman is too effective."

Harassment is...

Visual:

- Staring or leering
- Suggestive gestures or looks
- Kissing noises, lip smacking or licking
- Hand gestures
- "Elevator eyes"

Verbal:

- Catcalls, whistles, and overly familiar forms of address (honey, babe, mamacita, etc.)
- Telling women to smile or cheer up
- Innuendos and off-color remarks
- Sexual jokes, teasing, off-color humor
- Pressure for dates or other future contact

Physical:

- Unwelcome hugging, touching, or kissing
- Excessively lengthy handshakes
- Pinching, grabbing, or patting
- Standing too close
- Brushing against another person
- Cornering, trapping, or blocking a person's pathway

Predatory Harassers get a charge out of the act of harassment itself. They get a thrill out of the fear and anxiety they see in their victims' responses to the harassment. Predatory harassers exhibit a wide range of behavior, including verbal harassment, groping, flashing or public masturbation, use of physical intimidation, threats of economic reprisal or promise of reward (quid pro quo), physical violence, and rape. The harasser's motive is sexual conquest, and harassment is a tool used to exert power and compel capitulation. One particular form of predatory harassment is resistance testing, when the harasser gradually escalates his behavior if he is met with little or no direct resistance, possibly culminating in sexual assault.

Three Steps for Stopping Meeting Harassment

Harassment can be significantly reduced, if not stopped entirely, when scientific societies, associations, and other meeting sponsors and producers take these three steps:

- 1. Prepare** – Societies must adopt, publicize, and implement a harassment policy that specifically addresses meeting harassment. Meeting staff must be trained in procedures for taking reports of harassment incidents and working to ensure targets are safe.
- 2. Take care** – Procedures for handling harassment incidents must put the needs and the desires of the targets first. Reports must be kept strictly confidential.

3. Do It There – Harassment at meetings poses a threat to the safety and comfort of all other meeting attendees and must be addressed quickly and decisively. Harassers must be held accountable for their behavior as soon as possible, preferably at the meeting. The consequences of harassing behavior can be tailored to the seriousness of the incident, and can range from simply telling the harasser to stop the behavior and avoid further contact with the target, to asking the harasser to leave the meeting immediately. Egregious or repeated incidents may require banning the harasser from future meetings and even rescinding society membership.

This approach to stopping harassment is based on two assumptions:

1. In every professional setting, including meetings and conferences, all participants have the right to be free from unwelcome or unwanted attention and behavior. This includes behavior that makes them uncomfortable or that implies or indicates that they do not belong where they are, based on any personal characteristic: gender, race, age, religion, sexual orientation, and so on. This includes any unwanted attention, any unwanted sexual advances, comments about your appearance, verbal or visual insults, harassment, bullying, and assault.
2. Attendance at meetings, just like membership in a scientific society, is a privilege, not a right. Meeting attendees pay for that privilege, sometimes a significant amount. The other cost of that privilege is the kind of respectful, professional, civil behavior that we expect in the workplace. Harassers don't just abuse their targets. They abuse the privilege of being part of a valuable professional event, and the trust of their colleagues.

What Can You Do?

There are several ways you can help stop meeting harassment.

First, as a scientific society member, demand that your society take the steps outlined above. Contact the meeting staff or the executive director and ask if they have an anti-harassment policy that specifically covers meetings. If they don't have one, ask them why not (and then send them this article). Societies are predisposed to provide what members want, and if enough members make enough noise about an issue, the staff will begin to pay attention.

If they do have a policy, ask them where you can find it, and determine if it fits the following criteria:

- The policy clearly states that harassment is unacceptable, clearly defines harassment, and gives examples of unacceptable behavior
- The policy clearly states the potential consequences of the behavior, including the possibility of being asked to leave the meeting.
- The policy is easily accessible and widely publicized (given prominence on the meeting website, printed in the meeting book, appears on slides between presentations, is prominently posted throughout the meeting venue)

- The policy includes a clear, simple, and strictly confidential reporting process for targets and for those who witness harassment. Preferably one name, one cell phone number.

Ask about their procedures and staff training for handling incident reports.

Second, learn how to confront harassers safely and effectively in the moment, when the harassment occurs. Langelan's book talks about how to do this, and her methods are covered in most good self-defense courses.

Third, talk about this issue with men who aren't, and definitely never want to be, "that guy" and recruit them as allies.

And finally (because the plural of "anecdote" is not "data"), go to www.smartsconsulting.com and click on the link to take the Survey of Meeting Experiences 2015, which is collecting information on the frequency and characteristics of meeting harassment, and its impact on targets and witnesses of harassment. 📍

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Sherry received her B.Sc. in Applied Biology from the University of Hertfordshire, and her Ph.D. in Physiology from Duke University.

Resources

S*Marts Consulting website: www.smartsconsulting.com/stopharassment

Includes model policies and procedures, link to the Survey of Meeting Experiences, and other information on meeting harassment.

"Ada Initiative Anti-Harassment Work." <http://adainitiative.org/what-we-do/conference-policies/> (accessed August 26, 2014).

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Holly Kearl. *Stop Street Harassment: Making Public Places Safe and Welcoming for Women*. Stop Street Harassment: Making Public Places Safe and Welcoming for Women, 2012.

Martha Langelan. *Back Off: How to Confront and Stop Sexual Harassment and Harassers*. Touchstone, 1993.