

# What Women & Minorities Are Afraid to Speak Up About

NEURAL INTERFACES 2021:  
The NANS-NIC Joint Meeting

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**Introduction:** Before the COVID-19 pandemic, we were invited to host the 'Power Hour™' at a scheduled Gordon Conference on Neuroelectronic Interfaces in March 2020 which has subsequently been postponed to 2022. The Power Hour™ is a discussion/workshop with the goal of promoting women and underrepresented minorities (URMs) in our field.

**Methods:** Since many people don't feel comfortable speaking up at these workshops, prior to the anticipated conference, we set up a website to collect anonymous anecdotes about the challenges women and URMs face as well as suggestions for improvement as a way to jumpstart the discussion (<https://www.inequalitystoriesinstem.org>). The web link was shared with all the registered conference attendees by the organizers and forwarded to the greater Neural Engineering research community by an NIH program officer associated with the conference. Recipients were encouraged to forward the link to additional colleagues worldwide of any gender.

**Results:** To date, we have received ~140 anonymous anecdotes, and the results have been both *enlightening and heartbreaking!* As anticipated, we received numerous anecdotes about implicit bias as well as overt racism, sexism, and hate speech. We also received numerous stories about conflicting attitudes about family leave and women's parental roles. What we didn't anticipate, but probably should have, was the alarming number of anecdotes reporting sexual misconduct or sexual assaults in the workplace many ending in statements like—'*I never told anyone about this before*'.

**Conclusions:** Although we seldom hear about it, sexual abuse is prevalent in our field.

*We want to thank the people who submitted their stories and agreed to let us share them. You are not alone, and we are working to bring awareness and change to the community.*

**As anticipated, we received numerous anecdotes about implicit bias as well as overt racism, sexism and hate speech:**

One of my labmates would repeatedly call me a **terrorist, ISIS, and other horrible names**. The other one would tell me **I was a b\*tch and how I needed to shut the f\*\*\* up** .... My advisor even witnessed one of my labmates say these things, and when I looked at him for help, **he walked away and locked his office door**.

After graduating top of my class, my Department chair told my Dad that **it was a "shame" because he expected I'd be chained to the ironing board with kids around my ankles within 3 years**.

I have been repeatedly told **...I don't look smart** or that **I don't look like a scientist**.

...myself and another black female engineering student asked our white peers about us joining their study group. We were told they were not going to form a group and that everyone was studying on their own. That evening, myself and the other black student went to the engineering school study lounge and who should be see? The group of white peers studying! **...More than 30 years later. I still remember the incident.**

I told my mentor I was concerned I was only getting programming experience and not enough experience with hardware or instrumentation. His response was, **"You have two boys. Can't you pick it up from them?"**. My boys were in middle school at the time. I was shocked that he thought my kids should be able to teach me graduate level instrumentation and device engineering simply because they are male. **I did not stay in his lab.**

A white male labmate expected a reagent to change from clear to dark blue within a few minutes and was getting impatient. He held it up to my face and said "nope, I guess it's not dark enough", clearly gesturing to my dark brown skin. I was the only black person in the lab and **no one else around (white or brown) called him out for being inappropriate**. I felt ostracized and 'othered'

I was asked to sit at the opposite end of the table than the invited speaker (who was directly in my field) as I would **"probably get bored with all the science talk"**.

...Every day people in my lab would leave the lab together to eat lunch...they made comments like: **"sorry we are not inviting you, we don't like to eat with women"** or **"we don't like diversity"**. ...When the new lab member was asked to join them for lunch, that person turned to me and said: "aren't you joining us?" I said: **"no, I have already had lunch" and went downstairs, found an empty conference room and cried.**

Two of the first people that I told about my new faculty job said: 1) **"How'd \*you\* manage that?"** and 2) **"But you're not really an engineer..."**. These comments were so clearly aimed to undermine my accomplishment that I stopped telling anyone unless they needed to know. I now feel like I was robbed of an opportunity to celebrate a major achievement.

...when my exam had been mis-graded, I went to the professor's office hours to show him. He wouldn't even look at my exam and told me my grade didn't matter **because women would just end up as housewives anyway...**I never did anything about it... **Because I feared greater retaliation from the professor, I took a low grade I did not deserve.**

Male PI undermines the work of a female student who graduated. Another female grad student called out this PI's unfair treatment. **She was later not given a letter of recommendation and switched to a non-science career.**

We also received an alarming number of anecdotes reporting **sexual misconduct or sexual assaults** in the workplace many ending in the statements like, **'I never told anyone about this before'**.

A professor... started grabbing my thigh under the able at TA meetings. He would see me in the hallway and demand hugs. ...Each and every single time, **I froze. I just gave in and walked away feeling so ashamed and stupid I couldn't say or do anything**. What can I do? He is a full, tenured professor. My fellow students like him, because they find him funny. **If I report him, I will be ostracized. I just feel like I have to take it, because otherwise I will tank my career.**

When I got my new position, the head of my department wanted to meet me for coffee ..., he told me **"you know there is plenty of nudist places around, if you want this weekend we can go in one of those."**

...then I found out there were 3 more trainees, 2 of them his direct mentees, who had had much more inappropriate interactions. ....the five us, spent almost two years wading through Ombudsmen, Dean's offices, and the university's Title IX and sexual harassment bodies trying to figure out how to stop these behaviors from happening again to other women. We're still working on it. We needed to seek legal council. **It's been an incredible time and energy sink and it's appalling how hard we've had to fight to try and make things better. We're all a lot more jaded now.**

During a dinner, a famous lecturer was sitting beside me. He discretely touched my leg, so I moved back. The next day he (the professor) did not say hi or talk to me anymore...**I was punished for my lack of availability.**

A senior professor joined me and my male colleagues for a drink after a workshop...he sat next to me...and swiftly **put his hand far down the back of my skirt and, Trump-like, grabbed my p\*\*\*y**. I sat in utter shock for one heartbeat, two, socialized to be polite and non-confrontational (even though I am quite direct and outspoken in most situations--no one would have guessed I would freeze). ...I quietly scooted away. He started to move to follow me and I moved further. I sat, stunned, for another 30 minutes before we all walked home, me quietly positioning myself away from him. I fumed all night long, including at myself and my lack of response.

The next morning, I told my male friends what happened...one said "well, he is known for that." That pissed me off more. Later on a shuttle bus to the airport, a male researcher struck up a conversation with me. **"I heard what happened. It is so weird. He visited my lab last week and my female postdoc took him around. Nothing happened."**...later on I got an email from the researcher on the shuttle after he had talked to his postdoc. The dude had actually propositioned the postdoc and told **her if she didn't sleep with him he would ruin any chance for her to have a career**. She put him off, but was so distraught **she kept silent**.

My boss told me the Center was going to offer me a second contract. Next day he invited me out for dinner and **told me he would like to spend some nights (in private) with me**.

I was not sure if I was offered a second contract because they liked my work, or because of him. It was extremely difficult to decide if I was coming back or not, as well as being able **to handle the consequences of refusing a sexual proposal from the boss**.

I had to stop attending meetings with a particular PI because he would stare at my chest and send me inappropriate emails. My PhD advisor advised me not to report it because I did not want to be labelled as the **"trouble maker"** .... I am sure she had her fair share of harassment and was just as **scared to speak up**.

... The next thing I knew, **he put his hands around my neck and started shaking me**. He said, "When you wear that skirt it drives me crazy!" .... I never complained to human resources (or anyone else) about it. The most disappointing thing about the incident is that I felt like I needed to continue to behave as though nothing had happened and **I thought that if I spoke up it would've been interpreted as an over-reaction**.

The first year of my PhD, one of the senior PhD students wanted a relationship with me. He told everyone we were in love. **When I rejected him he started stalking me and told everyone in the lab what a horrible person I was**. After a year of persistent harassment, we were about to have a big team event. He went to our supervisor and told him that it was either him or me in this event, since he could not mentally cope with me being there. My supervisor told me I couldn't join, because I was much less important for the group. **That was the day I almost left science behind forever**.

I was invited to another country ... the professor was someone I really wanted to collaborate with.... Immediately he started hitting on me. He insisted that we hold hands while he showed me around the university. At lunch he just talked about "how pretty I was" and "how young I looked" **and tried to caress my leg under the table**. I repeatedly pushed him away. **I did not want to cause a scene in front of his colleagues... I felt so uncomfortable**.

**Who is most vulnerable? ...people with the something to lose by speaking up...e.g. people whose graduation, promotion, recommendation letters, immigration status etc. are at stake...those financially dependent on their job often with a family to support... people with no local support network or who are not fluent in the local language.**

**...She [PI] paid me well below the regulated amount for a graduate student, but I was stuck because my finances and career relied on her**. Things got worse. She agreed to schedule my thesis defense but told my committee that I didn't do the work and was trying to cheat my way through. She told them **"you know how those Chinese and Indians are."** This is despite being the only one she relied on to do every project in the lab, manage the lab, its members, and train other students. This is despite me getting rave reviews after my thesis proposal. When the time came to publish my work, she said that I would need to stay on until after I defended to work on other projects and then we could discuss submitting my manuscripts. This is despite my thesis chapters being completed on work that would be published later without changes or additional experiments. **I was making a salary that did not afford me a living-wage and was not able to move on. I still needed to maintain a good relationship with my PI for recommendations, so I didn't resist her demands.**

...He had been doing this kind of abuse for years...**he picked on women who were not tenured, had less stature...People are not used to discussing these things, so women he abused were caught unprepared**. I was already in my 30s and a professor, **and I froze**. We need to talk and confront and not blame ourselves.

While a post-doc, one of my (male) letter writers for faculty job applications **kissed me without invitation**. The next day, I consulted my (male) PI about how to handle the situation. His advice was to explain to this man that it would be a conflict of interest for me to sleep with him. **Apparently, just genuinely not being interested in a male colleague is not a legitimate enough reason to turn someone down if you're a woman of a lower-rank academic position**.