

By Yarrow Axford

Thanks to the glass ceiling breakers

The night that Hillary Clinton was nominated as a candidate for president, my Facebook feed lit up with cries of historic triumph. But my own celebration was bittersweet. I was thrilled to see Hillary crack that glass ceiling, but I couldn't stop thinking about the spine of steel it took for her to reach that milestone. Sexism has stalked her relentlessly on her climb up the ladder, taking forms including mocking references to "cankles" and cackling, a "Bern the Witch" debate viewing party, and "Trump that Bitch" buttons. For me, she has long personified both the progress that women have made and the challenges we still face as we climb the rungs of our professions.

As a high school student in 1992, when Bill Clinton ran for president, I was delighted to see a prospective first lady (a law partner!) use her maiden name and get political. That same year, I silently fumed when my geometry teacher repeatedly told my class that girls were doomed to struggle with math because their brains are washed with corrosive chemicals in the womb. The next year, though, a different math teacher suggested that I consider a career in science. Things seemed to be moving in a positive direction—and indeed they were.

Today, I'm living my dream of a tenure-track job at a great university with progressive family leave policies and supportive, inspiring co-workers. I am a grateful beneficiary of decades of hard work by others to make science more inclusive. The prevalent "no girls allowed" attitudes that female scientists encountered in decades past have dwindled. Science even has its own recent breakers of glass ceilings, such as geophysicist Marcia McNutt, who this year became the first female president of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS).

And yet, despite how far science has come, I still hear frequent echoes of those comments from my geometry teacher. I have an androgynous name, and have lost track of how many times I've met a colleague for the first time and been told, "I've read your papers. I thought you were a man!" While conducting fieldwork, my much younger male student has repeatedly been mistaken for the professor. (And me for what? His graying apprentice? His mom?)

I try to laugh off such encounters to hide how they make me cringe. They generally reveal unconscious biases held by well-meaning people. Such incidents seem trivial compared with, say, the sexual harassment that 70% of women



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reported experiencing during fieldwork in a 2014 survey of anthropologists. But all experiences of bias or sexism, from the almost comical to the clearly criminal, combine to form a discouraging drumbeat that only the affected can hear: You still don't belong. Well-documented biases in metrics such as supervisors' evaluations and students' course ratings amplify that drumbeat.

Some of the remaining challenges for women in science are either so personal (as with sexual harassment) or superficially innocuous (as with "I thought you'd be a man") that we don't often share them beyond close friends. Examples of sexism occasionally reach the public spotlight, as when a Nobel laureate opined last year about his "trouble with girls" in the lab, but more often they are

a quiet part of day-to-day working life. My own stories are unremarkable, but that in itself is a reason to share them.

Two decades into my scientific career, the drumbeat continues but is easier to disregard. I have been fortunate to work with a long list of supportive mentors and colleagues. Every line that I add to my CV reminds me that I belong at the table. Every woman scientist I see at the head of a table helps, although they remain too rare. (NAS and *Science* have each had just one woman at the helm, and they are the same woman.) My parents always insisted that I could grow up to be anything, and thanks to breakers of glass ceilings that is increasingly true. But true equality won't be achieved until our daughters can march through their careers to the same drumbeat their brothers hear. ■

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