



## Navigating Toxic Work and School Environments

### Why do we face harassment at work and school?

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#### Introduction:

After several years of persistent harassment from colleagues and coworkers, I started the important and essential task of asking questions to understand more about harassment. Why am I facing this harassment? Are other people harassed? Looking back, I now realize that asking questions was the beginning of my own empowerment.

At the time I began asking questions, the majority of the answers I found related to my harassment as a woman in STEM were through mainstream media. There are likely thousands of articles discussing women in STEM and hypotheses for why there are so few women in specific STEM fields. I'll say this directly: most of that discussion is nonsense at best and harmful at worst as it perpetuates rhetoric that women need to be inspired in order to decide to pursue a career in STEM. The actual answers to my questions often were found by looking outside of the "women in STEM" label, and looking into discussions and theories behind oppression and colonization.

I am forever thankful for the ever-accessible internet, scholars and activists who have risked their lives (and have been murdered) to share their truth and knowledge, as well as many friends who have shared their experiences, resources, and wisdom with me. These people not only helped me achieve my own empowerment, but also inspired me to dare greatly in sharing my own experiences and wisdom.

Herein I've listed a few resources to help you get started in asking questions about the harassment and discrimination you face. Many of these topics are controversial and political, and my hope is that you approach them with an open mind and curiosity. While some of these topics may resonate with you, others may cause discomfort. Remember that feeling uncomfortable is a sign that you're learning and growing as you are moving outside of your comfort zone. Also, while some of these topics may seem unrelated to harassment and discrimination, they, in fact, do relate to achieving new perspectives that challenge current status quo that perpetuates behavior like harassment and discrimination. Understanding the context in which harassment and discrimination exists is essential for learning how to navigate it.



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The goal of sharing these resources with you is to encourage you to start asking questions about the harassment and discrimination you face. Of course, if you signed up to take this course, you've already begun asking these questions! There are plenty of other resources and people outside of this list, so please keep seeking and learning beyond this!

### Tall Poppy Syndrome

Have you ever been belittled by a coworker or classmate because you're a top performer? If so, you may be a "tall poppy". There are many resources and studies that explore "tall poppy syndrome". Below are a few to look into if you are interested in learning more about this common dynamic:

#### Definitions of "Tall Poppy":

"The tall poppy, according to the 1997 edition of the Oxford Dictionary of New Zealand English, is "a conspicuously successful person." The term is of Australian origin and was first recorded in the Australian National Dictionary in 1902. The 1982 supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary in Australia defines a "tall poppy" in Australia as "an especially well paid, privileged or distinguished person." The 1988 edition of the Australian National Dictionary defines a "tall poppy" as a "person who is conspicuously successful and (frequently) as one whose distinction, rank or wealth attracts envious notice or hostility" (Ramson, 1988). To tall poppy is to cut (an apparently successful person) down to size. The tall poppy syndrome (TPS) refers to the tall poppying of tall poppies."

<https://minds.wisconsin.edu/bitstream/handle/1793/7222/Of%20Crabs%20and%20Tall%20Poppies%20Thesis%20by%20Anne%20C%20Mancl.PDF?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>



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#### Tall Poppy Syndrome:

“...Do you experience envious hostility because of your success? Do your best employees experience it?

Suchitra Mouly studied the case of a highly successful professor who applied for a double increment in her university's promotion system. The facts suggest that her application was appropriate, but doing so aroused envious hostility in her peers. They acted on this hostility and manipulated the promotion process to deny her application. They "tall poppyed" her, and in response, she left and went to a different university.

Mouly wanted to know how they had done it and why the university was unable to stop it. We can apply what she learned in our own settings so our best people won't be hurt by envious peers cutting them down to size.

The most critical factor Mouly found was the management of meaning. Like the fifth grader who faced censure for doing well, employees are able to transform reasons for commendation into reasons to criticize. They are also able to create the impression that these criticisms are valid, impartial, and widely agreed upon by other employees.

This transformation is encouraged by incentives for performance, appraisal practices that identify individuals with outstanding performance, and uncertainty in the evaluation criteria.

In the case Mouly studied, peers misrepresented facts and slanted facts that led them to two false criticisms of the professor:

1. She felt superior to her coworkers and acted like it.
2. She refused to help coworkers and acted selfishly.

These false criticisms led to two incorrect conclusions:



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1. Her high achievement wasn't so high after all.
2. Her high achievement came at too great a cost.

Managers in this university could have corrected this obvious mistake, but they didn't. They accepted the conclusion that she wasn't a high performer and she left. They shot themselves in the foot. Mouly found these factors hampering them:

1. They didn't check facts or sources of information.
2. Their evaluation procedure was rigid without an ability to step outside of it.
3. Some of their evaluation criteria were vague allowing others to supply a meaning that suited their purposes.
4. They accepted the assumption of wide agreement concerning criticisms of the professor.
5. They assumed their procedures for evaluation were fair and refused to consider any criticism.
6. They failed to request further information.

We often hear employees comment about each other, but it can be difficult to recognize envy: the underlying anger that another person possesses and enjoys something desirable, and the desire to take it away or spoil it. Envy attacks the very qualities we value, and if it succeeds, it ruins hope.

Managers need to help envious employees recognize their destructive feelings and replace them with gratitude. Outstanding performers bring benefits to everyone. With understanding, managers can help their employees recognize envy and replace it with gratitude."

Source:

Mouly, V. Suchitra and Jayaram K. Sankaran (2002) The Enactment of Envy Within Organizations. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 38 (1), 36-56.



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<http://www.businesspsych.org/articles/244.html>

### Tall Poppy Syndrome: The office trend killing morale

“A ground-breaking 2018 study shows the extent to which women’s psychological health and workplace productivity is being negatively affected by interactions with superiors and colleagues.

The Tallest Poppy, a study led by myself in partnership with Thomson Reuters and Women of Influence explored Tall Poppy Syndrome and its impact on Canadian women in the workplace. Tall Poppy Syndrome (TPS) is a term commonly used in Australia, referring to the expectation that poppies should grow together, and if one grows too tall, it is cut down to size. In the workplace, the study explored whether women were, like poppies, cut down due to their success and achievements...”

Source: <https://www.hcamag.com/au/news/general/tall-poppy-syndrome-the-office-trend-killing-morale/168793>

### The tall poppy syndrome in New Zealand: An exploratory investigation

#### Abstract:

“This paper represents an exploratory investigation into the often cited but under-researched ‘tall poppy syndrome’ (TPS), which is an Australasian reference to the politics of envy, jealousy, and covetousness. Through an inductive analysis of references to the TPS in the popular press, we uncover a conceptual categorisation of the TPS.

Manifestations of the TPS can be classified along two dimensions: the level of the tall poppy (i.e., individual/organisation); and the level of the detractor (i.e., peer/societal). We clarify the resulting 2x2 framework with recourse to several vignettes of the TPS.”



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Source:

[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ashly\\_Pinnington/publication/43484011\\_The\\_evidence\\_for\\_high\\_performance\\_HRM\\_systems\\_in\\_professional\\_service\\_firms/links/54196abd0cf2218008bf761c/The-evidence-for-high-performance-HRM-systems-in-professional-service-firms.pdf#page=303](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ashly_Pinnington/publication/43484011_The_evidence_for_high_performance_HRM_systems_in_professional_service_firms/links/54196abd0cf2218008bf761c/The-evidence-for-high-performance-HRM-systems-in-professional-service-firms.pdf#page=303)

### Joey Soloway on The Female Gaze

In this keynote address, Joey Soloway takes on the critical feminist concept of the female gaze and asks what it would take to bring it the forefront of film, art, and culture. By making space for women to take the lead in shaping female protagonism, can we get one step closer to igniting a revolution to overthrow the patriarchy?

Joey Soloway was born in Chicago. They are a writer, producer, and director. Their directorial work includes the short *Una Hora Por Favora* (12) and the feature *Afternoon Delight* (13). Their television series *Transparent* (14— ), has won two Golden Globes and five Emmys, including one for directing.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnBvppooD9I>



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### Authors, Scholars, and Activists & Their Select Work:

The following list includes a few of many authors, scholars, and activists who write on topics related to bias, harassment, and discrimination. I strongly encourage you to continue reading and learning about these topics, perhaps by using these as a starting point.

#### Nicole Telfer

- A Black Woman's Guide to Earning a Ph.D.: Surviving the First Two Years
  - More Black women are needed in the academy. More Black women may want to join the academy, but the academy has not always been accepting of us. Black women who are currently in academia or in doctoral programs face a wide array of social challenges, from racial discrimination to sexism to anti-Black women experiences. Many Black women have hesitated on applying to or starting their doctoral programs to avoid such social challenges. A Black Woman's Guide to Earning a Ph.D. provides Black women with tips and resources on how to navigate and survive as a doctoral student at a predominantly white university or program. This book focuses primarily on the first two years of graduate school as years 1 and 2 are typically the most challenging. In this book, Black women will read personal stories related to mental health, the impostor syndrome, racial discrimination experiences, and much more. Lastly, this book was written to encourage more Black women to write about their experiences in their doctoral program for others who will come after them. We are all we've got.
  - <https://www.nicoleatelfer.com/>

#### Dr. Malika Grayson

- Hooded: A Black Girl's Guide to the Ph.D.
  - *Hooded: A Black Girl's Guide to the Ph.D.* explores the unexamined experiences of Black women in higher education. From racism and navigating feelings of

self-doubt to confronting microaggressions, Black women face an uphill battle as they earn advanced degrees in majority-white institutions and departments. Having a voice means facing retaliation or dismissal while staying silent becomes a heavy burden all its own.

- <https://www.malikagrayson.com/products>

**Susan Fowler:**

- [Whistle Blower: My Journey to Silicon Valley and Fight for Justice at Uber](#)
  - Susan Fowler was just twenty-five years old when her blog post describing the sexual harassment and retaliation she'd experienced at Uber riveted the nation. Her post would eventually lead to the ousting of Uber's powerful CEO, but its ripples extended far beyond that, as her courageous choice to attach her name to the post inspired other women to speak publicly about their experiences. In the year that followed, an unprecedented number of women came forward, and Fowler was recognized by *Time* as one of the "Silence Breakers" who ignited the #MeToo movement. Now, she tells her full story for the first time: a story of extraordinary determination and resilience that reveals what it takes—and what it means—to be a whistleblower.
  - <https://www.susanjfowler.com/writing>

**Elissa Shevinsky:**

- [Lean Out: The Struggle for Gender Equity in Tech and Start-up Culture](#)
  - Why aren't the great, qualified women already in tech being hired or promoted? Should people who don't fit in seek to join an institution that is actively hostile to them?  
Does the tech industry deserve women leaders?  
The split between the stated ideals of the corporate elite and the reality of



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working life for women in the tech industry—whether in large public tech companies or VC-backed start-ups, in anonymous gaming forums, or in Silicon Valley or Alley—seems designed to crush women's spirits. Corporate manifestos by women who already fit in (or who are able to convincingly fake it) aren't helping.

There is a high cost for the generation of young women and transgender people currently navigating the harsh realities of the tech industry, who gave themselves to their careers only to be ignored, harassed and disrespected. Not everyone can be a CEO; not everyone is able to embrace a workplace culture that diminishes the contributions of women and ignores real complaints. The very culture of high tech, where foosball tables and endless supplies of beer are de facto perks, but maternity leave and breast-feeding stations are controversial, is designed to appeal to young men. Lean Out collects 25 stories from the modern tech industry, from people who fought GamerGate and from women and transgender artists who have made their own games, from women who have started their own companies and who have worked for some of the most successful corporations in America, from LGBTQ women, from women of color, from transgender people and people who do not ascribe to a gender. All are fed up with the glacial pace of cultural change in America's tech industry. Lean Out sees a possible way forward that uses tech and creative disengagement to jettison 20th century corporate culture: "I've figured out a way to create safe space for myself in tech," writes Shevinsky. "I've left Silicon Valley, and now work remotely from home. I adore everyone on my team, because I hired them myself."

- <https://www.orbooks.com/catalog/lean-out/>

#### **bell hooks**

- All About Love: New Visions
  - The acclaimed first volume in feminist icon bell hooks' "Love Song to the Nation," All About Love is a revelation about what causes a polarized society and how to heal the divisions that cause suffering. Here is the truth about love, and inspiration to help us instill caring, compassion, and strength in our homes,

schools, and workplaces. "The word 'love' is most often defined as a noun, yet we would all love better if we used it as a verb," writes bell hooks as she comes out fighting and on fire in *All About Love*. Here, at her most provocative and intensely personal, renowned scholar, cultural critic and feminist bell hooks offers a proactive new ethic for a society bereft with lovelessness--not the lack of romance, but the lack of care, compassion, and unity. People are divided, she declares, by society's failure to provide a model for learning to love.

As bell hooks uses her incisive mind to explore the question "What is love?" her answers strike at both the mind and heart. Razing the cultural paradigm that the ideal love is infused with sex and desire, she provides a new path to love that is sacred, redemptive, and healing for individuals and for a nation.

The Utne Reader declared bell hooks one of the "100 Visionaries Who Can Change Your Life." *All About Love* is a powerful, timely affirmation of just how profoundly her revelations can change hearts and minds for the better.

- [https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/17607.All\\_About\\_Love](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/17607.All_About_Love)
- Killing Rage: Ending Racism
  - One of our country's premier cultural and social critics, bell hooks has always maintained that eradicating racism and eradicating sexism must go hand in hand. But whereas many women have been recognized for their writing on gender politics, the female voice has been all but locked out of the public discourse on race. *Killing Rage* speaks to this imbalance. These twenty-three essays are written from a black and feminist perspective, and they tackle the bitter difficulties of racism by envisioning a world without it. They address a spectrum of topics having to do with race and racism in the United States: psychological trauma among African Americans; friendship between black women and white women; anti-Semitism and racism; and internalized racism in movies and the media. And in the title essay, hooks writes about the "killing rage"—the fierce anger of black people stung by repeated instances of everyday racism—finding in that rage a healing source of love and strength and a catalyst for positive change.
  - <https://us.macmillan.com/books/9780805050271>



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- Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism
  - A classic work of feminist scholarship, Ain't I a Woman has become a must for all those interested in the nature of black womanhood. Examining the impact of sexism on black women during slavery, the devaluation of black womanhood, black male sexism, racism among feminists, and the black woman's involvement with feminism, hooks attempts to move us beyond racist and sexist assumptions. The result is nothing short of groundbreaking, giving this work a critical place in every feminist scholar's library.
  - [https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/250792.Ain\\_t\\_I\\_a\\_Woman](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/250792.Ain_t_I_a_Woman)
- Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom
  - In Teaching to Transgress, Bell Hooks - writer, teacher, and insurgent black intellectual - writes about a new kind of education, education as the practice of freedom. Teaching students to "transgress" against racial, sexual, and class boundaries in order to achieve the gift of freedom is, for Hooks, the teacher's most important goal.  
  
Bell Hooks speaks to the heart of education today: how can we rethink teaching practices in the age of multiculturalism? What do we do about teachers who do not want to teach, and students who do not want to learn? How should we deal with racism and sexism in the classroom?  
  
Full of passion and politics, Teaching to Transgress combines a practical knowledge of the classroom with a deeply felt connection to the world of emotions and feelings. This is the rare book about teachers and students that dares to raise questions about eros and rage, grief and reconciliation, and the future of teaching itself.  
  
"To educate is the practice of freedom," writes Bell Hooks, "is a way of teaching anyone can learn." Teaching to Transgress is the record of one gifted teacher's struggle to make classrooms work.
  - [https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/250792.Ain\\_t\\_I\\_a\\_Woman](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/250792.Ain_t_I_a_Woman)

#### Aph Ko & Syl Ko:

- Aphro-ism: Essays on Pop Culture, Feminism, and Black Veganism from Two Sisters



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- In this lively, accessible, and provocative collection, Aph and Syl Ko provide new theoretical frameworks on race, advocacy for nonhuman animals, and feminism. Using popular culture as a point of reference for their critiques, the Ko sisters engage in groundbreaking analysis of the compartmentalized nature of contemporary social movements, present new ways of understanding interconnected oppressions, and offer conceptual ways of moving forward, expressive of Afrofuturism and black veganism.
- <https://aphro-ism.com/>
- Racism as Zoological Witchcraft: A Guide to Getting Out
  - In this scintillating combination of critical race theory, social commentary, veganism, and gender analysis, media studies scholar Aph Ko offers a compelling vision of a reimagined social justice movement marked by a deconstruction of the conceptual framework that keeps activists silo-ed fighting their various oppressions - and one another. Through a subtle and extended examination of Jordan Peele's hit 2017 movie Get Out, Ko shows the many ways that white supremacist notions of animality and race exist through the consumption and exploitation of flesh. She demonstrates how a critical historical and social understanding of anti-blackness can provide the pathway to genuine liberation. Highly listenable and full of startling insights, Racism as Zoological Witchcraft is a brilliant example of the emerging discipline of black veganism by one of its leading voices.
  - <https://lanternbooks.presswarehouse.com/books/BookDetail.aspx?productID=726318>

#### Dr. Angela Davis:

- Freedom is a Constant Struggle
  - In these newly collected essays, interviews, and speeches, world-renowned activist and scholar Angela Y. Davis illuminates the connections between struggles against state violence and oppression throughout history and around the world. Reflecting on the importance of black feminism, intersectionality, and prison abolitionism for today's struggles, Davis discusses the legacies of



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previous liberation struggles - from the black freedom movement to the South African antiapartheid movement. She highlights connections and analyzes today's struggles against state terror, from Ferguson to Palestine. Facing a world of outrageous injustice, Davis challenges us to imagine and build the movement for human liberation. And in doing so, she reminds us that "freedom is a constant struggle."

- [https://www.amazon.com/dp/B011H51334?linkCode=ogi&tag=oprah-auto-20&ascsubtag=\[artid\]10072.g.32803115\[src\]\[ch\]\[lt\]](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B011H51334?linkCode=ogi&tag=oprah-auto-20&ascsubtag=[artid]10072.g.32803115[src][ch][lt])
- The Meaning of Freedom
  - What is the meaning of freedom? Angela Y. Davis' life and work have been dedicated to examining this fundamental question and to ending all forms of oppression that deny people their political, cultural, and sexual freedom. In this collection of twelve searing, previously unpublished speeches, Davis confronts the interconnected issues of power, race, gender, class, incarceration, conservatism, and the ongoing need for social change in the United States. With her characteristic brilliance, historical insight, and penetrating analysis, Davis addresses examples of institutional injustice and explores the radical notion of freedom as a collective striving for real democracy - not something granted or guaranteed through laws, proclamations, or policies, but something that grows from a participatory social process that demands new ways of thinking and being. "The speeches gathered together here are timely and timeless," writes Robin D.G. Kelley in the foreword, "they embody Angela Davis' uniquely radical vision of the society we need to build, and the path to get there."
  - [https://www.amazon.com/dp/B008HRM5VU?linkCode=ogi&tag=oprah-auto-20&ascsubtag=\[artid\]10072.g.32803115\[src\]\[ch\]\[lt\]](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B008HRM5VU?linkCode=ogi&tag=oprah-auto-20&ascsubtag=[artid]10072.g.32803115[src][ch][lt])

#### Dr. Charlotte Brammer:

- Communicating as Women in STEM
  - Communicating as Women in STEM discusses various communication styles, also demonstrating how principles can be applied during interpersonal interactions in day-to-day environments. It provides women



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and other underrepresented groups, faculty and administrators with the tools they need to break barriers raised by different communication styles within the STEM fields. Sections cover tactics on how to become more aware of communication patterns and how to cope with, and improve, communication. This practical resource for women in the STEM fields is also ideal for mentors, educators, advisers and organizations interested in encouraging women to choose and remain in these fields.

- <https://www.sciencedirect.com/book/9780128025796/communicating-as-women-in-stem>