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News stories must account for gender bias

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norms to support better global responses to newly emerging variants.

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News stories must account for gender bias

The *ScienceInsider* piece "Max Planck director loses post after probe of misconduct" (A. Curry, 5 November, p. 671) is the latest in a series of reports

of dismissals, demotions, and conflicts involving prominent women in academic research. This story and previous reports have highlighted leadership issues and bullying by women not only at the Max Planck Institute (1) but also in top academic positions at ETH Zurich (2) and the University of London (3). We urge caution

PAST AS PROLOGUE

A uranium miner's daughter

After serving in Vietnam, my dad moved to Grants, New Mexico, to mine uranium. Every day, he drilled out uranium in deep, poorly ventilated, confined, hot, and dangerous underground tunnels. After work, my mom washed his overalls and lunch bucket, soiled with radioactive dirt. One day, when I was in fourth grade, my dad came home early from the graveyard shift and said he was not going back. At the time, I did not understand the circumstances, but I later learned that the industry had collapsed due to declining uranium prices, leaving the local economy in shambles.

Uranium mining has always been controversial. Uranium fuels non-carbon-emitting nuclear energy, but uranium and its radioactive decay progeny may pose health concerns. Even so, my family is proud of my dad's work in the mines because it afforded my parents a livelihood and the means to send their three kids to col-

lege, a luxury not given to them. With that opportunity, I pursued degrees in environmental engineering. For my PhD, I moved to Michigan to study iron sulfide-based media for use in cleanup of arsenic-contaminated groundwater. It was a difficult transition moving from sunny New Mexico to the cold, snowy upper Midwest, devoid of blue skies, New Mexico green chile sustenance, and, most importantly, my family. I began to question why I had started down this road, so far away from home without a clear vision of my destination.

Fortunately, a series of events allowed me to see the horizon. While on a summer research fellowship in Korea in 2006, I stumbled upon one of the only books in English in the institute's library. It was about the Grants mineral belt. I was amazed to see a book about my hometown halfway around the world. Soon after, I began seeing articles in



The author's father, shown here, mined uranium in Grants, New Mexico.

the Grants newspaper about contamination from former uranium extraction operations, more than three decades after their closure.

I realized that I could apply my expertise to research uranium! The following year, I accepted a Mendenhall postdoc position at the US Geological Survey to study the environmental impacts of uranium mining. Now, with over 14 years of uranium research stimulating my curiosity, I have returned to New Mexico seeking new insights for managing mine waste. It is fitting that my passion for science brought me home again, where it was nurtured from the beginning by a humble, hard-working uranium miner and his wife.

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Call for Submissions Past as Prologue is an occasional feature highlighting the role of family history in the life of scientists. What role did your family background play in your decision to pursue science, your field, or your career? Submit your story to www.submit2science.org.

in reporting such stories given that women face more obstacles to attaining leadership positions and are often held to a different standard than men when it comes to how their behavior is interpreted.

Professional women face many biases that disproportionately delay their advancement along the career track and compromise their effectiveness and even their tenure in positions of power and authority (4, 5). The same biases may result in greater and more detrimental visibility for conflicts involving women. Although gender bias in individual institutions can be difficult to assess because of the small numbers of women in leading scientific positions, the Max Planck Society has a large number of directors. It would be useful to know how many Max Planck Institute directors have left their positions before retirement, whether women are disproportionately represented in this group, and whether the publicity accompanying the departures differed between men and women.

To provide fair coverage, news stories should always pursue the question of possible gender bias, both in the

treatment of women in positions of academic leadership and in the reporting on cases of leadership conflicts.

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The authors are members of *Science's* Board of Reviewing Editors.

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Editor's Note

We thank J. G. Hering and colleagues for raising important questions about gender bias in cases of alleged bullying at the Max Planck Society and elsewhere. We agree that those issues need to be explored. In our coverage of Nicole Boivin, including a follow-up article published on 6 December (1), we note accusations of institutional misogyny at Max Planck and the small proportion of women directors. Our piece on the case at ETH Zurich devoted several paragraphs to the scarcity of women on the physics faculty and possible double standards for judging the behavior of women and men. Because bullying can impact the well-being and careers of young researchers, we believe serious cases should be covered regardless of who is accused—as our stories over the years have shown.

Tim Appenzeller
News Editor

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