



**LETTERS**

UCI decided to remove Francisco Ayala's name from the science library after he resigned amid sexual harassment allegations.

Edited by **Jennifer Sills**

## Harassment charges: Enough himpathy

We are well into the #Metoo era, yet journalists and editors are still fixated on the harasser's fall from grace rather than the detrimental effect of sexual harassment on the victims and our society as a whole. The News story "Prominent geneticist out at UC Irvine after harassment finding" (M. Wadman, 29 June, <https://scim.ag/AyalaResignation>) reinforces a familiar toxic narrative: The accomplishments of the harasser hold more value to science than women's right to a safe workplace. This is now so commonplace that it has been dubbed "himpathy" (1).

In the News story, Wadman tells us all about the "eminent" professor, from his scientific accomplishments to his personal hobbies. He did "pioneering" and "ground-breaking" work, he donated money to the university, and he was president of AAAS (the publisher of *Science*). However, we do not hear about the pioneering work of the women he harassed at University of California, Irvine (UCI). From a graduate student to a tenured professor to an assistant dean, the News story reduced the women who demanded an end to his misconduct to complainers. We are told that Ayala was just being "European" and his actions were misunderstood; instead, the narrative should focus on the many women and careers that suffered from Ayala's actions. Wadman then chose to end the article by quoting an Ayala supporter who diminished the investigation.

The same himpathy sentiments return in the follow-up News In Depth story "Report details harassment by famed biologist" (M. Wadman, 27 July, p. 316). Words matter, and *Science* should wield its words and influence carefully. It is time to recognize that harassers have taken a substantial toll on the advancement of science. It is time to acknowledge that sexual harassment in all its nefarious forms puts an unquantifiable burden on the victims (many of whom are our colleagues). It's time to believe women.

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### REFERENCE

1. K. Manne, *Down Girl* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2017).

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## Harassment charges: Journalists' role

As a woman in science, I find the reporting of allegations against Francisco Ayala ("#Metoo complaints fell noted geneticist," M. Wadman, News In Brief, 6 July, p. 8) deeply troubling. The title implicates the "complaints" or "complainers" as responsible for the resignation, as opposed to the actions of the accused or the impartial sexual harassment investigation. The term "complaint" gives the impression that the alleged victims have minor grievances as opposed to serious reports of scientific misconduct. Not only is this title biased

against whistleblowers, it is also factually incorrect, as the first allegations of harassment were allegedly made 3 years before the resignation. I assert that the investigation, not the allegations, caused the accused to resign.

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## Harassment charges: Injustice done?

We are deeply concerned by the way in which our friend and colleague Professor Francisco Ayala has been forced to resign from the University of California, Irvine (UCI), after being accused of sexual harassment ("Prominent geneticist out at UC Irvine after harassment finding," M. Wadman, News, 29 June, <https://scim.ag/AyalaResignation>). The charges that have been raised against him have had appalling consequences.

Those of us who are well acquainted with Professor Ayala know that he is an honorable person, who throughout his career has treated his friends, co-workers, and students in a respectful, egalitarian way. His lifelong commitment to teaching, research, and outreach on biological evolution has won him worldwide recognition. He has been a generous benefactor to the University of California and throughout his fruitful career has opened new fields of biological research, promoted mutual respect and independence

PHOTO: IAN PARKER

between evolutionary studies and religious perspectives, played a key role in several major scientific organizations, and helped many Spanish-speaking female scholars and Hispanic students, in particular, both in the United States and throughout the world.

From the available information, it appears that the inquiry conducted by UCI lacked genuine due process, fairness, and full transparency. We urge UCI to acknowledge the possibility that its sanctions against Professor Ayala were enacted in haste and to reopen the case and investigate the matter more thoroughly. We understand the wish of both the institution and Professor Ayala not to unduly prolong this whole unhappy episode. It is equally important, however, that justice be done and be seen to be done. If carried out properly, UCI could help devise a more successful model for how institutions should deal with such situations in the future. Devising an improved procedure for these cases would earn everyone's gratitude.

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**SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS**

Full list of authors

[www.sciencemag.org/content/361/6403/655.3/suppl/DC1](http://www.sciencemag.org/content/361/6403/655.3/suppl/DC1)

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## ***Harassment charges: Metoo but due process***

The resignation of eminent biologist Francisco J. Ayala amid charges of sexual harassment (“Prominent geneticist out at UC Irvine after harassment finding,” M. Wadman, *News*, 29 June, <https://scim.ag/AyalaResignation>) has left Ayala's home campus deeply divided. The controversy highlights problems in the way universities currently address charges of sexual harassment. Because the University of California, Irvine (UCI), failed to post easily accessible guidelines on how the Ayala case was handled, especially how and by whom final decisions were made, many UCI faculty are concerned that the university overreached, imposing a punishment not commensurate with the specific charges of wrongdoing. A zero-tolerance policy for sexual harassment should include clearly stated procedures to protect due process and ensure proportional responses to wrongdoing.

I will not engage in the ugly nastiness of “he said, she said” as we debate the

veracity of accusations described in salacious detail (“Report details harassment by famed biologist,” M. Wadman, *News In Depth*, 27 July, p. 316). These are human tragedies evolving in front of us. Victims strive to regain lost self-esteem, along with justice. The accused wrestle with shock, forced to confront their own cluelessness at shifting mores, and everyone realizes how vulnerable we all are, including administrators struggling to figure out how best to fairly confront sexual harassment and gender equality. We are all at risk when goodwill and communications break down.

To fairly and equitably strike a balance between complacency and overreaction, I recommend three procedures to help achieve the notoriously difficult goal of changing attitudes toward gender. First, we must do more to foster a university climate that takes seriously and protects potential targets, be they male or female. Part of that is recognizing that even subtle forms of verbal behavior—i.e., jokes or comments about appearance—make some women and minorities uncomfortable. Yet resulting deferential treatment can contribute to a climate in which women or minorities are treated differently. Eventually, this subtle, differential treatment can foster continuing inequality. Second, we must insist that legally correct policies and procedures are followed when charges of sexual harassment are made. These procedures need to be transparent and the same for all faculty. Policies should be written in prose that even nonlawyers can understand and posted in obvious places, with regularly scheduled discussion forums designed to help educate all members of the university community. Third, the punishment must fit the crime. If tasteless, off-color jokes and the kind of ambiguous “unwanted touching” of which Ayala was accused warrant his public humiliation, what do we do with more serious charges of sexual harassment? And why is Hana Ayala punished for her husband's acts by having her name removed from gifts to UCI?

The #Metoo movement has done a great service in opening up an area too long taboo. But the failure to follow clearly established, fairly administered, and transparent procedures can too easily produce witch hunts that cast doubts on legitimate charges of sexual harassment. This will set back the move toward gender equality, in the academy and in society at large.

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