

# Harassment case opens dialogue

Researchers in India say high-profile sacking should encourage women to report sexual harassment, and lead academic institutions to deal with cases fairly and fearlessly.

BY T. V. PADMA

Female scientists in India hope that more academics will be able to report sexual harassment without fear of jeopardizing their career or reputation, after a prominent biologist was sacked for allegedly harassing a staff member.

Immunologist Kanury Rao was dismissed in January from his post as national head of the Translational Health Science and Technology Institute (THSTI) at Faridabad near New Delhi. The move followed an investigation by the institute's internal complaints committee (ICC) in mid-2017, which found that Rao "used unwelcome sexually determined behaviour" towards a junior female staff member at the institute, harassing her and interfering with her work in incidents between late 2014 and 2017. The ICC said that Rao's behaviour violated several Indian Central Civil Services Rules, which cover public research institutes such as the THSTI.

Rao denies the allegations, and told *Nature* that he filed an appeal last week with the institute's appellate authority to dispute the sexual-harassment allegation and the termination of his employment. "The allegations of sexual harassment against me were entirely fabricated and simply represent a case where professional disgruntlement evolved into a larger conspiracy to malign and defame me, in order to eventually effect my removal," Rao says. "Unfortunately, the inquiry committee also solely went by empirical impressions, relying for its findings only on weak circumstantial

criteria rather than any real evidence." The THSTI did not respond to a request for comment about Rao's assertions.

The complainant, who wishes to remain anonymous, denies Rao's allegations. After a thorough investigation, the ICC determined that the senior scientist's behaviour was unacceptable, she says.

"What professional disgruntlement could be so big that a young girl would challenge a senior and highly influential scientist?" she says. "It is not easy for a young woman to come forward and open up about these kind of issues."

Some scientists who spoke to *Nature* say there have been few cases in which a scientist in India has been sacked for sexual harassment. "I am not aware of a previous case of any Indian scientist, let alone a high-profile one, being dismissed on sexual-harassment charges," says Rahul Siddharthan, a computational biologist at the Institute of Mathematical Sciences in Chennai.

Beyond Rao's case, says immunologist Vineeta Bal of the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research in Pune, sexual harassment of women in science in India is not uncommon. "What is uncommon is somebody coming forward to report it and seek justice," she says. Several Indian scientists have told *Nature* that female researchers who have experienced sexual harassment still seem to be reluctant to speak out. "Most women fear putting their jobs, career and reputation in jeopardy by going public," says Bal.

Evidence suggests that sexual harassment is pervasive in India. A 2017 survey commissioned

by the Indian National Bar Association found that of 6,047 respondents, 47% had experienced unwelcome sexual comments, jokes or gestures at work (see 'Workplace harassment').

Many workplaces, including scientific institutions, have mechanisms for investigating allegations of sexual assault or harassment, such as internal complaints committees. But Siddharthan says that, in practice, some of these committees have not been very proactive. The Bar Association's report included an in-depth survey of 45 people who had been sexually harassed; only one-third felt that complaints committees had dealt with their cases fairly. "One can hope that this [Rao] case will change things, and ICCs are encouraged to deal with such cases fairly and fearlessly," says Siddharthan.

Biologist Vidita Vaidya at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR) in Mumbai says another problem that makes some women reluctant to report workplace harassment is the expectation that they will have to endure a difficult and intrusive inquiry. "There is a real fear for many that rather than their work and scientific merit defining their trajectory and career, this complaint will become a focal point for all discussions regarding them," says Vaidya, a former member of a TIFR support group called the women's cell.

Vaidya says that some women prefer to keep their harassment quiet because they feel they can cope by removing themselves from the situation. "Cases where complaints have been made are simply the tip of the iceberg," she says.

Vaidya worries that some women might be walking away from science to avoid workplace harassment. More people might be inclined to report sexual harassment if research institutions explained what happens when a complaint is made, she says. "Clearly indicating that their confidentiality will be protected will go a long way [to improve] their faith in the system," she says.

Other scientists sense that change is already on the way. Bal says that more women in academia might be encouraged to come forward with complaints and expect justice as a result of the publicity generated by high-profile cases, such as the many women in the entertainment industry who say they have been assaulted or harassed. "When institutions send a clear message that complaints will be heard and acted upon, this should give courage to people who face harassment to approach the [women's] cell and speak out," says biologist Sandhya Koushika, chair of the TIFR women's cell. ■

## WORKPLACE HARASSMENT

A 2017 survey commissioned by the Indian National Bar Association received responses from 6,047 men and women about sexual harassment at work. It found that many had experienced some form of harassment.

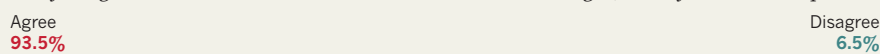
### Received unwelcome sexual comments, gestures or jokes



### Been touched in an unwelcome sexual way



### Do you agree that sexual harassment occurs in schools or colleges, society and the workplace?



SOURCE: INDIAN NATL BAR ASSOC (2017); [HTTP://GO.NATURE.COM/2F14I3I](http://go.nature.com/2f14i3i)