

Climate for men

1. Before I close, I'd like to take a moment to talk about one other ethical issue in tech right now that centers on beliefs and also how we understand the world. This is an area in which I have special expertise. And one that is occupying much of my time at NeurIPS as people reach out. So I think it's important to use some of my time to discuss it publicly.
2. I know people are aware of sexual harassment, retaliation, and gender equity issues at many of the companies and universities present in this room.
3. I was formerly in the Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences at the University of Rochester. A professor there named Florian Jaeger abused his power over me and at least 15 other women to engage in sexual misconduct that damaged our educations. The university whitewashed our complaints and retaliated against us. This led to an ongoing lawsuit from 9 former faculty and students.
4. At Rochester, women students lost crucial training and professional opportunities **because** of that professor's behavior and the university's defensive response. These unethical and illegal actions cost women students their careers.
5. By now, the MeToo movement has made clear that women face an uphill battle in STEM. If you are interested, you could look at the 2018 report by the National Academy which is an incredible resource for learning more.
6. But I want to impress upon you one key point that I think most people don't understand and which continues to shape these debates.
7. I want to talk about the climate for men.
8. It may seem like a scary time to be a man in tech right now. I talk to my male colleagues. And I know there is anxiety about how to talk about gender and interact with women post-MeToo.
9. There's a sense that a career could be destroyed over awkward passes or misunderstandings. People believe that men are being fired for subtle comments or minor jokes, or just plain kindness or cordial behavior. This perception makes people very nervous.
10. What I want to say today to all of the men in the room is that you have been misled.
11. The truth is this: it takes an incredible--truly immense--amount of mistreatment before women complain. No woman in tech wants to file a complaint because they know the consequences of doing so. The most likely outcome---by far---is that they will be retaliated against. And *nothing* will happen to the perpetrator.
12. Retaliation might involve being overlooked for a promotion, removed from a project, or outright fired. Complainants face retaliation in 75% of cases across all sectors, according

to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

13. Beyond *that*, almost no one can afford to file a lawsuit. They are incredibly costly. The amount of work and energy involved is comparable to a PhD dissertation, but far more expensive---on the order of millions of dollars in many cases.
14. What this means is that when YOU hear about a case---like something in the news or at your institution--your priors should tell you that it's very likely that some unusually bad behavior happened.
15. Where people get misled is that often when misconduct becomes public, offenders almost universally apologize for a minor infraction, while omitting the many more serious and severe behaviors they should be remorseful for but never are. They lie by omission.
16. These apologies for minor things mislead people into believing that the accused person is being unfairly persecuted for the minor misstep, and makes those reporting seem unreasonable or even unethical. That happened in our case, and it happens in almost every case I've ever seen that becomes public.
17. But apologies for minor things, these are smokescreens. They are intended to suggest that the offenders are confused instead of abusive. They allow the accused to move on to the next place by painting the abuse complaints as exaggerated or overblown. Perhaps worst of all, minor apologies lead people to falsely believe that their own careers could be ended for a similarly minor infraction. **This is not true. It is unfair to other men.** It harms the climate for everyone. For men, who are afraid to interact with women colleagues and train women students. And for women, who miss out on those professional interactions.
18. I hope you take three lessons from my comments:
19. The first is that when you hear about a woman in your field or lab or university having problems, she invariably has faced much, much more than you are aware of. If you know about seemingly minor problems, chances are, she really needs your help.
20. Second, when you hear men apologize for "misunderstandings", you should be aware that this is standard. It's completely predictable. No matter what actually happened---from sexual harassment to sexual assault, that's the universal response.
21. Third, you should know that unless you are deeply doing wrong by those women around you, you are, with very rare exceptions, incredibly safe. You don't need to fear being attacked for minor comments and misunderstandings, because that's not what's happening. That is a myth that those who have genuinely abused people and had their behavior reported would like you to believe.
22. You deserve to benefit from the innovations and ideas of the women at your institutions. We deserve to be interacted with as equal colleagues. We need each other to innovate and thrive.

23. I hope what I've said can help us start to understand the complexities of how institutions and individuals try to manipulate what we know and, in so doing, help us all move towards an equitable future.