### Description

I still remember getting the notice that my first grant had been approved. Years of blood, sweat, and tears had finally paid off— I was going to launch my very own lab. While I had a fairly impressive resume by the time I finished my PhD, I had been nervous about winning grant funding. I was familiar with the statistics that as a woman I was less likely to get as much funding as my male colleagues. So the notice came as confirmation that my hard work, my awards, and my successful dissertation were earning me the recognition I deserved. However, grant funding was only the first of many hurdles I was about to face.

## Women in STEM Still Disadvantaged

I had certainly experienced or heard about the challenges of women in my own field—epidemiology—as well as STEM as a whole.  It was a strange experience as I moved from undergrad to graduate school to notice fewer and fewer women in my classes. I was the only woman in my first lab. Conferences frequently featured all-male panels. We read papers by men, and took classes taught by men. I had approached a young female professor in my department when I began my PhD hoping she would be able to mentor me. But she left to have a baby and never returned, citing childcare difficulties. Fortunately, my PhD advisor had been a very encouraging male professor who worked to make his female students comfortable. Despite increasingly finding myself one of the only women in the room, I made it through.

## Fighting an Uphill Battle

My excitement over winning a grant faded quickly. While the amount wasn't low, it wasn't that high. It limited the number of staff I could hire. My plan of hiring eight Research Assistants (RAs) vanished as I realized I could afford only three. I thought this was normal for a junior PI, until one day I overheard another junior male PI who had started at the same time as me in the breakroom. "It's so great," he gushed. "With ten RAs, I can publish my paper this month." It turned out I, one of two women, had gotten the lowest amount of grant funding of anyone in my cohort.

I felt increasingly trapped as the semester wore on. Papers I planned to write were pushed to the side. This was because I took on much of the work in my lab on my own to make up for the lack of staff. While the other PIs had large, well-equipped labs, our lab was deep in a corner of the department. I



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found myself isolated. I couldn't attend conferences or events because of my workload. My male colleagues, on the other hand, wandered through the halls smiling at each other, drinking coffee. Two of them had published papers by the end of the year. In fact, graduate students were competing to join their lab. Their work caught the attention of senior professors in the department. Meanwhile, I grew more and more depressed.

While I felt alone in my dark corner lab, I wasn't. A survey of early-career principal investigators (PIs) who started labs in Britain between 2012 and 2018 found that many lacked support and mentorship. 20% were dissatisfied with their environments and access to facilities. Another study of NIH grantees found that only ? of grants went to women.

## In a Better World

Against the odds, I made it through and gained a second round of funding. I can think of several things that would have given me—and other women—a better chance. Having assigned mentors from the beginning would have been a godsend. I needed time and support to pursue my own papers while running a lab. It would have allowed me to finish my first year in a better position. Additional funding to attend conferences and networking would also have helped. As the system is now, most institutions leave it up to PIs to do these things themselves, which disadvantages women in practice. I can only hope that gender disparities will continue to be addressed as more women like myself rise up in STEM.

Are you a young woman facing difficulties in starting your first lab? Have you felt disadvantaged as your career progresses? Please let us know your thoughts in the comments section below.

**Category**

1. Career Corner
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3. PhDs & Postdocs

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