Myrick, E.P.

09/10/2022

Working Life

Untitled (for now)

“This is the project from hell, ain’t it? Well, at least you’re getting paid to stand around, man,” the excavation supervisor said as he looked at my colleague. He glanced down at me and stated, “You’re not as lucky, though, are ya?” The men continued discussing politics, sports, women and their weekend plans as I collected soil samples from the contaminated excavation area. What was he implying? Was he suggesting I was volunteering? Or getting paid less? Did he make the comment because I was working while the rest of them were standing around chatting? I wish I had argued, but I just ignored him. Feeling like an outsider in conversations was a common aspect of my job as a field technician for an environmental consulting firm. This role was my first professional position in the geosciences outside of my research in academia. As a small firm, we were accompanied by a myriad of subcontracted companies on any given day in the field. This includes members of the Department of Transportation, soil core drillers, excavation teams, archaeologists, and other consultants. Unfortunately, I can count on one hand the number of women I worked alongside in my three years at the firm.

When I was hired, I knew I would be one of few women in the field, but I felt well prepared. This confidence was developed not only through my training in geology, but my experience in outdoor recreation. Some of my earliest memories in life are spending time in the mountains of North Carolina. Although this may raise questions about my professionalism, as a camp counselor in my early twenties, I won a contest among staff to determine who could wait the longest before a shower. I am no stranger to the discomfort of recreation or work in the rain, heat, and snow. Additionally, my involvement in academia as a female undergraduate student in geoscience was positive. To the credit of my academic institution, women were well represented throughout the faculty and student body. The faculty in our program made strong efforts to ensure students conducted ample field work in addition to our classroom education. Further, the owner of our firm, a father to two daughters my age, reiterated the importance of my safety and comfort at work. Despite a supportive community and a strong background in science, working as a woman in consulting was challenging. At times I felt unsafe, diminished, uncomfortable and angry.

Whether it was my company issued hard hat that was three sizes too large, or an inappropriate comment by a subcontractor, I encountered situations at work which I was confident my male colleagues had not. I stopped wearing what was comfortable while working outdoors in the southern summer heat and began substituting my shorts for heavy long pants with trepidation that I would be objectified or that I would not be treated professionally. I mapped the nearest gas stations to our field sites because scurrying into the woods suddenly felt much less comfortable than it always had. I knew that when we traveled and stayed in unfamiliar towns, I would have to take extra measures to feel safe. I was reassured that my supervisors would always have my best interest if I was placed in a truly dangerous position, but I didn’t always feel comfortable confiding in them. I feared that transparency would be perceived as a lack of professionalism. However, with the help of other women in parallel positions, I was able to translate my experience into a rewarding one.

I acknowledge my privilege that this role was ultimately empowering for me. I recognize that not all women can say they left a job feeling valued and respected. My experience is not unique. Nor do I perceive myself as a victim. I internalize this part of my career as a reminder to encourage myself and others to initiate uncomfortable conversations in the workplace surrounding inclusivity. This extends beyond gender inclusivity into all underrepresented communities in science. It is also crucial that marginalized members of the science community do not bear the burden of always starting this discourse. It is the responsibility of everyone to ensure that everyone has an equitable seat at the table, and I look forward to continuing the conversation for younger women entering the work force.