

Opinion: No such thing as harmless gropings

By Jennifer Ferro

An open letter of apology to my daughters and all the women coming up after me:

I want to start by saying I'm sorry. I have failed you in a way that only now do I shamefully and truly understand.

I am a 48-year-old woman. A mother. A boss. But because of actions I didn't take, you're still getting sexually harassed. You're still getting belittled. You still have to wrestle away from body-hugs that no male colleague would tolerate. You still have to endure comments about your appearance that make you cringe inside. You still are fending off dinner meetings that end up feeling like first dates. You still are expected to put up with someone's version of a joke about your sexuality in front of others because you don't want to damage your standing in your career.

You see, I had to do all those things too. It starts young, when you're walking down the street at 14, with catcalls from passing cars. This is when you realize that your body is "fair game" for any man who feels like taking aim. You face dress codes at school that presume men can't be controlled if they see you in spaghetti straps or shorts.

Then there's the workplace, where anyone from the delivery guy to the mucky-mucks you're meeting with size you up. I will never forget an opportunity I had to meet one-on-one with the politically connected director of the organization where I volunteered during my ambitious early 20s. What started as a late afternoon meeting was switched to dinner at a location that I didn't realize was his penthouse. When he pushed me against the wall to be groped and kissed, I felt stupid and

naïve. I ran out with an excuse of having somewhere else to be.

A couple more from a list far too long to recount in its entirety here: As an assistant being told I had nice breasts by a well-respected person in the media I worked with. On another occasion in an entirely different setting, being asked by a board member—jokingly of course—if I'd like to stroke his gun to see if he was happy to see me.

All of those instances had the same effect. They were belittling. They made me feel self-conscious, embarrassed, ashamed. They led me to see—in that moment—that no matter how smart or capable I was, I was still to these men just a piece of ass.

This is where I failed you. I kept my mouth shut. I didn't stand up for myself. I colluded with all of this by letting it slide. I smiled, evaded the hugs, endured the humiliating comments, rolled my eyes at the sexual jokes and believed that eventually my intelligence and skills would be regarded first and foremost, not my physical appearance.

Let me be clear. I'm not blaming myself or any woman for being the victim of sexual harassment. But I am blaming myself for not finding the courage to stand up for myself. I know it's not just young women who deserve my apology. All of us, regardless of age, are vulnerable to this kind of debasement.

So even though we watched a woman make a serious run for the presidency, we see who won and what did and didn't matter in people's choice for leadership. All around us women face daily humiliations that aren't enough to make news or merit a call to the police. But, over time, the damage done by "minor" verbal offenses and by seemingly "harmless" gropings is sinister. It chips away at women's confidence. It causes us to second-guess ourselves, to keep our voices soft, our hands down, to lean back.

I have two teenage daughters and I worry for them. Not just for the comments and the insults they may face, but because I so greatly fear they will lose their voices, just as I lost mine. I want to show them how to speak up for their dignity and how to have self-respect. I want to show them that speaking up for yourself takes practice. Calling attention to yourself takes courage. Just accepting things when you've been wronged or made to feel insignificant is simply not OK.

Today, I'm taking responsibility for my role in all of this. For all the times I lied to escape boorish behavior. For all the times I nervously laughed off inappropriate comments that I am certain the perpetrator would never have uttered in front of his own wife or daughter. For the times I didn't "educate" my offender by standing up for my own dignity, and for yours.

I am sorry.

The results of this election left many women feeling like they don't matter. Today I'm making a change. Starting now, I pledge to do what I should have been doing for the past two decades. When someone says to me, "Turn around so I can get a good look at you," I'll say "No thanks. You can hear what I have to say better when you're looking at my face." And then I'll tell them what I should have been saying all along.

Jennifer Ferro is president of Southern California public radio station KCRW and a member of the Zócalo Public Square board of directors.