

Silicon Valley's sexism problem: Could the tide be turning?

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In this Sunday, Feb. 26, 2017, file photo, Uber CEO Travis Kalanick arrives at the Vanity Fair Oscar Party in Beverly Hills, Calif. Kalanick resigned amid criticism surrounding a culture of harassment at the company. Reports of sexism in Silicon Valley are not new, but the case at Uber has opened up the conversation. Uber has promised to institute broad changes. (Photo by Evan Agostini/Invision/AP, File)

Sexism in Silicon Valley has been an open secret for years. What's changing: A growing number of women are coming forward with personal stories of sexual harassment and discrimination, prompting apologies, resignations and plenty of hand-wringing.

It's too soon to tell whether the incidents will lead to meaningful, long-term change. But the revelations, many implicating [industry](#) bigshots, are at least leading to some humbled self-reflection in an industry long criticized as arrogant and self-centered.

In the latest example, prominent venture investor Dave McClure apologized over the weekend for making "inappropriate advances" toward several [women](#). His apology—titled "I'm a Creep. I'm Sorry"—follows a New York Times report that described offensive behavior by McClure and other prominent venture investors, as related by female entrepreneurs. On Monday, he resigned from the [venture capital](#) fund he co-founded, 500 Startups.

Reports of sexism in the industry are not new, as the male-dominated tech and venture capital industry has often downplayed or turned a blind eye to issues of discrimination and worse. The problems can be particularly acute for women leading startups, as their companies are dependent on clubby venture capitalists for funding.

So what's prompting more women to speak out? Credit Susan Fowler, a former Uber engineer who outlined a culture of [harassment](#) at the company. Uber CEO Travis Kalanick resigned in the aftermath, and the company has promised to institute broad changes.

Last month, meanwhile, several female entrepreneurs told the trade publication The Information about harassment by a partner at the VC firm Binary Capital. He and another partner resigned in late June. The accused partner, Justin Caldbeck, issued an apology, but that itself drew

criticism from others in the [tech industry](#).

"It feels like you're trying to nudge us to feel sorry for you that you need to leave your precious firm behind. YOU CAUSED THIS," Google product manager Brenden Mulligan wrote in a post on Medium.

One of Caldbeck's accusers, Niniane Wang, wrote that she "laughed out loud" reading the apology.

Indeed, plenty of skepticism remains about the tech industry's ability to change overnight.

After the allegations against Caldbeck came to light, LinkedIn co-founder and former CEO Reid Hoffman lamented a "lack of outrage and commentary" following the VC harassment reports.

In a post on LinkedIn, Hoffman called the renewed attention on Silicon Valley's gender problems "very good criticism." He urged [venture capitalists](#) to establish human resources policies—just as companies and other institutions do—"so that [venture capitalists](#) who engage in such behavior face the same sort of consequences that they would if their overtures were directed at an employee."

Experts and advocates also have long called for improving gender and racial diversity in the industry. Companies with more women overall and more women in leadership positions, the thinking goes, are less likely to face problems of sexism and sexual harassment.

While tech companies are often blamed for hiring too few women, the issue is also persistent at VC firms. According to a report by Deloitte and the National Venture Capital Association, women hold 26 percent of senior positions at VC firms and 11 percent of investment partners and equivalent positions. The 2016 report surveyed 1,336 firms in the U.S.,

which the groups say is representative of the overall VC workforce in the country.

Of course, the tech industry isn't alone. In 2014, the nonprofit worker rights group Restaurant Opportunities Centers United estimated that two-thirds of female workers and more than half of male workers experienced some form of sexual harassment, whether from customers, co-workers or bosses. The group called sexual harassment "endemic to the restaurant industry."

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission received 6,758 complaints alleging workplace sexual harassment in 2016, the latest available figure. That's down from 7,944 in 2010—though the decline of complaints does not necessarily indicate a decline of incidents.

"Tech companies are supposed to be doing things different," said Tom Spiggle, founder of the Spiggle Law Firm, which focuses on workplace law. "And they have been like Uber, almost a retro kind of sexual harassment behavior."

Spiggle, who often represents workers alleging [sexual harassment](#) and discrimination, said in a recent interview that he doesn't see the problems getting better, despite high-profile cases such as Uber's.

He said he was shocked when he started taking workers' cases in 2009, saying, "It felt like the 1950s."

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