

A curious and illuminating anecdote has emerged from the Ellen Pao v. Kleiner Perkins trial in San Francisco: Another woman at the firm who was once harassed was asked to weigh in on the punishment for her harasser.

Trae Vassallo, a former Kleiner partner, testified that, in 2009, a co-worker sexually harassed her at a restaurant and later, during a 2011 business trip, tried to enter her hotel room wearing only a bathrobe.

The other partners asked Vassallo what she thought should happen to the man. One of them asked her if she really wanted to go public with the bathrobe accusation, perhaps not understanding or caring that silence would force her to continue to work with this man. He asked if she'd told her husband about the incident. Kleiner eventually hired an investigator to look into Vassallo's claims and, in 2012, fired her harasser -- so the end result was correct. But the path it took to get there was tortured and, to put it mildly, unfriendly to Vassallo.

Kleiner clearly didn't comply with what is considered the norm in most professional workplaces. There's a reason why managers, not victims, are the ones expected to punish bad behavior -- to erase any ambiguity over why a person gets punished and whose fault it is. Otherwise, the harasser's firing seems to be caused by the victim rather than the harasser's own actions.

Outside the Silicon Valley bubble, what happened at Kleiner sounds outrageous. But you could tell that it didn't sound so strange to the firm's partners who, on the witness stand, described their bumbling attempts to "help" Vassallo. They seem to still not understand what exactly they did wrong.

In the small world of venture capitalists and the early-stage companies that they fund, basic human resources departments are often lacking, and a loosey-goosey attitude toward HR issues often remains as the companies grow into tech giants. When it comes to preserving the tech boy's club, blame-the-victim procedures are much more insidious than the so-called pipeline problem, in which women aren't interested in studying math and science.

You can groom all the women you want for tech and venture-investing jobs, but if they're patronized, dismissed or told that they are ultimately responsible for the fates of their antagonizers, they won't want to stay.

Coincidentally, a woman unrelated to the Pao case, Julia Ferraioli, wrote a blog post this week about a series of excruciating experiences in her first engineering job that almost ran her out of the industry. Here's one:

One of my peers decided that it would be oh-so-funny to sneak up behind me, grab me around the waist, and tickle me.

The first time it happened, I asked him not to repeat it, that it made me uncomfortable. The second time, I told him to stop. The third time, I talked to my manager. The fourth time, I talked to my manager's manager.

The Tickler laughed every time I told him to stop; he saw my right over my own body as laughable. His desire for amusement outweighed my need to feel secure in my work environment. My colleagues were sometimes present during these incidents, but no one intervened, or spoke up on my behalf.

My conversations with the management chain were equally disheartening as the inaction of my colleagues. They explained it away with goodnatured teasing, team camaraderie, and warned me about ostracizing myself from the group. After all, my gender already created a wall between me and the team, and I didn't want to make that worse!

The common thread that runs through the stories of both Vassallo and Ferraioli is that they were encouraged -- implicitly or explicitly -- to stay quiet about the way they'd been treated. Complaints were thought to be bad for "the team."

If being on the team means giving up basic respect and safety, no wonder so few women want to make the bargain.

Silicon Valley isn't purely bad. Ferraioli, who's now at Google, says she's found an engineering job she loves, with people who respect her. Vassallo, who was described by her Kleiner colleagues as a world-class investor, still serves on boards and acts as an independent adviser.

Unfortunately, most tech companies are way more comfortable attacking the pipeline problem, donating money to educational programs that draw women into the kind of math and science classes that feed into technology jobs. Apple just donated \$50 million to this effort. Kleiner partner John Doerr often says something must be done to bring more women into his profession.

But if these companies want women in their ranks, they need to do more for the women they've already hired. They need to create a workplace where women want to be.