

In September 2019, it was revealed that several people at MIT had taken money from Jeffrey Epstein, including

- former Media Lab director Joi Ito, who I took an AI Ethics class from
- the late Marvin Minsky, who is regarded as one of the founders of artificial intelligence

I was deeply disturbed by this and advertised a protest about MIT approving this donation to the department mailing list. Richard Stallman, the famous free software activist, took issue with the wording that Marvin Minsky was accused of “sexually assaulting” one of Epstein’s trafficked girls. This quickly turns into a flame war, where I saw many people in my department entertain the idea that it was our duty as “scientists” to doubt the stories of sexual assault survivors.

It was horrifying to see colleagues I had previously trusted to so blatantly and willfully distrust women’s voices. It didn’t matter to me whether it was “sexual assault” or “rape”. The fact of the matter was that Minsky saw that women were in a sexually-coercive environment on a university-approved visit and didn’t report the incident to anyone. Seeing so many people who I considered colleagues so vehemently argue that this behavior was OK made me severely distrust my safety as a woman in engineering, especially as the only female graduate student in my advisor’s lab.

This attitude didn’t stop after Ito and Stallman resigned. When I emailed out to the department in May 2020 asking about what the department’s stance was about Minsky after a favorable comparison to him in a PR report, a senior professor told me I “shouldn’t be a scientist” for believing in “hearsay” of the assault accusation. Although I reported him immediately to the department, I was badly shaken about how I would be respected as a scientist.

Lockdown gave me a lot of time to think about what I wanted in life. I seriously considered leaving the PhD program and switching to social science / media studies, where I could more easily critique the unjust systems that so clearly did not have my best interests at heart.

Ultimately though, I decided to remain as a roboticist because I felt that I had an extremely unique position as an engineer who has done significant social science readings. Rather than deciding to give up the system entirely and provide critique from the outside, I chose to take the harder path and try to change the system from the inside. I go into this work with eyes fully open that this will be a difficult path for me personally and professionally, but I want to make the best effort to fight for justice with all of the privilege I have.

I sincerely hope that the Schmidt fellowship is worthy of my trust to aid me in this mission.