

Scientific groups revisit sexual-harassment policies

Officials worry that under-reporting remains a problem.

Helen Shen

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When Heather Flewelling, an astronomer at the University of Hawaii's Institute for Astronomy in Honolulu, was stalked by another scientist at the annual meeting of the American Astronomical Society (AAS) in 2014, her friends sprang into action. They escorted her between sessions to keep her safe — an experience that inspired Flewelling to help create [Astronomy Allies](#), a volunteer group that aids people who experience harassment at AAS conferences.

It is one of a growing number of efforts to combat [sexual harassment](#) at scientific meetings. Some involve grassroots mobilization, whereas others are led by professional societies — for example, the American Association of Physical Anthropologists has introduced a statement on unacceptable conference behaviour, including sexual harassment, in its registration process for its 2016 meeting. But it is unclear whether such efforts are succeeding.

"It's inevitable that the real problem is bigger than the reported one," says AAS president Meg Urry, an astronomer at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. "People take a tremendous risk in coming forward to make an accusation against someone who is typically more senior or established."

Comprehensive data are hard to come by, but researchers are beginning to quantify the problem of harassment that takes place outside the laboratory or office. In a 2014 survey of field scientists, for example, a staggering two-thirds of the 666 respondents reported having experienced sexual harassment at a field site, and one-fifth reported having been sexually assaulted¹.



[Berkeley sexual harassment case sparks outrage](#)

Fieldwork and scientific conferences share several similarities, notes Julienne Rutherford, a co-author of the study and a biological anthropologist at the University of Illinois in Chicago. Both activities throw young trainees into close contact with researchers in powerful positions, and both situations blur the lines between work time and play time. "There's a parallel there," Rutherford says.

Sherry Marts, a cancer researcher turned career coach and consultant in Washington DC, is conducting an online survey on harassment that has received 150 responses so far. Her preliminary analysis reveals that only about 1 in 5 people who reported experiencing sexual harassment at a meeting (most commonly in the form of verbal comments or leering) said that they filed an official complaint. The top two reasons given for not speaking up were thinking that an incident did not warrant it and not knowing how to report it.

The survey uses a self-selecting sample, so it cannot be used to estimate how often harassment occurs at conferences. But it does give a sense of how difficult the problem can be to address, despite concerted efforts by several scientific groups.

Mixed results

The AAS introduced an anti-harassment policy for its meetings in 2008 that prohibits behaviours such as intimidation, denigrating jokes and

display of graphic material. Other societies have joined in more recently. In late 2013, the Entomological Society of America created a code of conduct for its annual conference; the society received its first formal sexual harassment complaint in November 2014.

“I was a little surprised that this happened at the very first meeting we went into with the policy,” says the society’s executive director David Gammel. “Hopefully our policy makes clear to people that our society wants to know about it and wants to do something about it.”

Many professional organizations have only high-level statements of beliefs, instead of detailed policies and procedures. For example, the Society for Neuroscience (SfN) statement of values encourages diversity within its ranks and meetings but does not list behaviours that are prohibited at society events. A separate ‘guide for attending professional meetings’ advises women to minimize potential harassment by avoiding private meetings, making daytime appointments instead of dinner meetings and paying their own way. (The SfN says that the document is intended as a resource and not a policy.)

Janet Bandows Koster, executive director for the Association of Women in Science in Washington DC, says that every professional society should institute anti-harassment policies that cover behaviour at meetings. Ideally such policies would allow for confidential reporting and make clear that complaints will be handled by a society’s professional staff, rather than fellow scientists who may have academic ties to an alleged harasser.

But it can be hard to tell whether such policies are working. The American Geophysical Union says that it has not received any harassment complaints from its meetings since it began tracking such statistics five years ago. And the AAS has received only one formal complaint since 2008.

Urry, the AAS president, suspects that some victims may remain silent because they worry that the details of even anonymous reports could be enough to identify them. And without formal reports, societies have limited ability to address harassment at their events.

Informal programmes such as Astronomy Allies can help to fill some of these gaps, says group co-founder Katherine Alatalo, an astronomer at the Carnegie Observatories in Pasadena, California. “Our idea is to give victims of sexual harassment some empowerment,” she says. “Somebody to say, ‘No, this is absolutely inappropriate, you’re not overreacting’.”

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References

1. Clancy, K. B. H., Nelson, R. G., Rutherford, J. N. & Hinde, K. *PLoS ONE* **9**, e102172 (2014).



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