

House science subcommittee discusses sexual harassment and misconduct in science

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As the #MeToo movement affects industries across the country, the House Science Subcommittee on Research and Technology convened a hearing titled “A Review of Sexual Harassment and Misconduct in Science” to review sexual harassment and other workplace misconduct in science. The hearing highlighted the need to reform workforce culture in the scientific sphere and showcased modern and relevant policies that federal agencies and scientific organizations are implementing to address harassment. Subcommittee Chairwoman Barbara Comstock (R-VA-10) opened the hearing by describing a sexual harassment case involving a University of California, Berkeley astronomer. She expressed concerns that [efforts](#) by the committee to encourage female participation in science starting from the pre-kindergarten classroom would be eventually stifled by the fear of sexual harassment in the workplace, thus effectively perpetuating a gender wage gap due to women ending their pursuits of scientific careers with high earning potential. Other committee leaders highlighted national studies that address sexual harassment in their opening statements. For instance, Subcommittee Ranking Member Dan Lipiski (D-IL-3) mentioned that the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine is conducting a study on the Impacts of Sexual Harassment in Academia, and Committee Chairman Lamar Smith (R-TX-21) shared that he and Committee Ranking Member Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX-30) sent a letter last month to the Government Accountability Office requesting a report on sexual harassment in the scientific community. Hearing witnesses shared stories, research, and new initiatives addressing sexual harassment. Dr. Kathryn Clancy, Associate Professor at the University of Illinois, described the two main forms of sexual harassment: “come-ons” (the type most reported by the media) and “put-downs” (the most prevalent and frequent form). Her research shows that sexual harassment tends to be more prevalent in male-dominated work environments and those with organizational tolerance towards harassment. Dr. Clancy’s research found high numbers of women reporting sexual harassment in the field sciences (71 percent across their careers), and planetary scientists regularly observe sexist remarks from coworkers (79 percent from peers, 44 percent from supervisors, and 85 percent from others in the workplace over just the last five years). Attorney Kristina Larsen reiterated Dr. Clancy’s findings, providing specific examples of harassment from clients who she has represented. In her testimony, Ms. Larsen highlighted three main issues facing victims in the scientific field: confusion about where to get help, secrecy of investigations, and harm to the abused throughout the process.

Christine McEntee, Executive Director of the American Geophysical Union (AGU), noted that AGU formally adopted a revised ethics policy in September 2017 with new language that defines harassment, bullying, and discrimination as scientific misconduct. She also commended the American Astronomical Society and American Geosciences Institute for recently adopting similarly strong policies on harassment. In addition, she promoted implementing training, including bystander intervention, and positive approaches such as recognizing institutions that advance positive work-climate and equity issues.

Rhonda Davis from the National Science Foundation (NSF) Office of Diversity and Inclusion talked about NSF’s recent efforts to eliminate sexual harassment and misconduct, as announced by the agency on February 8. NSF proposed a new award term and condition that would make it clear the agency expects to be notified when an awardee organization finds that an NSF-funded investigator or co-investigator has committed sexual harassment, so NSF can take decisive action, as appropriate, using all the tools at their disposal. NSF employees also received a notice clarifying how sexual harassment complaints within the agency are to be reported and handled. NSF created a web portal ([NSF.gov/harassment](https://www.nsf.gov/harassment)) where any scientists can file a report and find NSF policies on harassment. NSF will solicit feedback on this new award term and condition proposal through the Federal Register process within the next several weeks.

Sources: American Geophysical Union, National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, National Science Foundation, Nature, PlosOne, U.S. House Committee on Science
