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Sexual harassment report released by the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine

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The National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) released a report on the prevalence, nature, and impacts of sexual harassment of women in academic science, engineering, and medicine. The 300-page report compiled evidence from previous research and commissioned supplemental research, including a qualitative, semi-structured interview study of forty women faculty in the fields of science, engineering, and medicine. The purpose of this study was to develop insight into the complexities, contexts, and consequences of sexual harassment. According to a survey conducted by the University of Texas, approximately 20 percent of female science students and 27 percent of female engineering students experienced sexual harassment from faculty or staff. Another study included in the report, a meta-analysis of 86,0000 respondents, found that 58 percent of female faculty in any field have experienced sexual harassment.

The report found no evidence that current anti-harassment policies, “which often focus on symbolic compliance with the law and avoiding responsibility,” significantly reduce sexual harassment. Instead, it concluded that organizational climate, including the degree of male-domination and tolerance for harassment, was the single most influential factor in the likelihood of sexual harassment occurring in an organization. From these findings, NASEM recommended that academic institutions should actively foster diverse and respectful environments, specifically by incorporating factors such as collegiality and collaboration into evaluation and rewards structures in addition to individualistic teaching and research accomplishments. The report also stated that existing sexual harassment trainings have not demonstrated the ability to prevent sexual harassment or change behavior and suggested various ways to improve training systems.

The NASEM report highlighted the potential for professional organizations and societies to help spearhead cultural change through their conferences, members, and awards decisions and released a summary of its findings and recommendations. One recommendation NASEM made was that institutions should pay more attention to gender harassment, which includes sexist hostility and crude behavior, as it is the most common form of harassment. Lilia Cortina, a member of the NASEM committee that curated the report, warned that people may try to rank different types of harassment into a hierarchy of acceptability. However, Cortina explained, “frequent and pervasive gender harassment does the same damage as isolated incidences of sexual coercion.” She noted that any type of sexual harassment, even when it only entails sexual insult without unwanted sexual pursuit, can take a toll on the victim, and can result in adverse health effects ranging from headaches and depression to post-traumatic stress disorder.

Earlier this year, the House Science Subcommittee on Research and Technology held a hearing on sexual harassment and misconduct in science that similarly highlighted the need for workplace reform. The testimonies given by witnesses at the hearing largely agreed with the NASEM report findings, specifically regarding the impacts of organizational climate on the prevalence of sexual harassment. Witnesses also discussed policies that federal agencies and scientific organizations are using to address harassment; for instance, the American Geophysical Union adopted a revised ethics policy last year. The American Geosciences Institute also recently released a statement on sexual harassment in April 2018 that includes recommendations to its member societies to combat this issue.

Source: National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine.