Representative Johnson introduces bill to combat sexual harassment in STEM

October 5, 2018

Representative Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX-30) introduced H.R. 7031, the Combating Sexual Harassment in Science Act of 2018, on October 5.

H.R. 7031 would expand research efforts to better understand the causes and consequences of sexual harassment affecting individuals in the scientific workforce, including students and trainees.

Specifically, the bill would require the National Science Foundation (NSF) to award grants to higher education institutions or nonprofit organizations (or consortia of such institutions or organizations) for researching the sexual harassment experiences of individuals in vulnerable or underrepresented groups and developing or assessing policies to reduce the prevalence and negative impacts of such harassment.

The bill text acknowledges a 2018 report issued by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, which found that sexual harassment is pervasive in institutions of higher education and that 58 percent of women in the academic workforce experience sexual harassment. The report notes that pervasive sexual harassment causes significant damage to research integrity and a costly loss of talent in those fields.

"Recently there have been a disturbing number of sexual harassment allegations emerging across our society, including in the scientific workforce and academia," Representative Johnson stated in a press release. "That is why I introduced H.R. 7031. It is our hope that this legislation will build upon progress already made by the National Science Foundation through recent updates to its sexual harassment policy."

The bill would direct NSF, in coordination with the National Academies, to update the 2009 report entitled "On Being a Scientist: A Guide to Responsible Conduct in Research." It would also direct the Office of Science and Technology Policy to coordinate federal science agency efforts to reduce the prevalence and negative impacts of sexual harassment by establishing an interagency working group with annual external research expenditures totaling over $1 billion.

Finally, H.R. 7031 would require NSF and the National Academies to study the influence of sexual harassment in institutions of higher education on the career advancement of individuals in the scientific, engineering, technical, and mathematics (STEM) workforce.

The bill would authorize $17.4 million to be appropriated for NSF to carry out the provisions as outlined.

Independent from Representative Johnson's legislative proposal, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), National Institutes of Health (NIH), and NSF have all announced new initiatives to combat sexual harassment in science in the last month.

On September 21, NSF released its final policy requiring grantee institutions to report findings of sexual harassment, which took effect on October 21. It requires institutions to report any findings of harassment committed by an NSF-funded principal investigator (PI) or co-PI within ten business days.

AAAS announced on September 15 new procedures to revoke the status of its elected fellows, a lifetime honor bestowed on scientists in recognition of career achievements, for breaches of professional ethics including sexual harassment and racial discrimination. Two days after that, NIH also announced several initiatives to address sexual harassment, including the establishment of a centralized system for managing harassment reports for its internal research program and the launch of a new website detailing its policies and efforts to address misconduct.

Sources: American Association for the Advancement of Science; American Institute of Physics; Library of Congress; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine; National Institutes of Health; U.S. House of Representatives, Congresswoman Eddie Bernice Johnson.