

Sexual harassment rampant in science, culture change urged

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Sexual harassment is rampant in academic science, and colleges and universities that train new scientists need a system-wide culture change so women won't be bullied out of the field, a national advisory group said Tuesday.

In fact, it's time to treat sexual harassment as seriously as research misconduct, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine concluded in recommendations aimed at U.S. institutions of higher education and the groups that fund them.

While women are still outnumbered by men, universities are recruiting more women to science-related fields than ever before. The new report makes clear that pervasive sexual harassment puts those gains at risk.

"If we are losing talent in science, engineering and medicine, then that is something that is detrimental to our country and quite frankly to the world," Wellesley College President Dr. Paula Johnson, who co-chaired the report, said in an interview.

Assault or unwanted sexual advances are making #MeToo headlines but don't tell the whole story, the report found. Most common in science is what the National Academies termed gender harassment, a hostile environment rife with sexist commentary and crude behavior that can negatively impact a woman's education and career, as well as her mental and physical health.

"Even when the sexual harassment entails nothing but sexist insult without any unwanted sexual pursuit, it takes a toll," said University of Michigan psychology professor Lilia Cortina, a member of the committee that spent two years studying the problem. "It's about pushing women out."

How common is sexual harassment in science education? The report cited a University of Texas system survey that found about 20 percent of female science students, more than a quarter of female engineering students and more than 40 percent of female medical students said they had experienced sexual harassment from faculty or staff. In a similar survey in the Pennsylvania State University system, half of female

medical students reported such harassment.

Minority women experience "a double whammy of discrimination," Cortina added.

The hierarchical nature of science can make it difficult to report and root out such behavior, with scientists-in-training often dependent on a single high-profile mentor for research funding, job recommendations and fieldwork in remote locations.

To escape the denigration, women may change majors, advisers or labs and sometimes just drop out, Cortina said.

Sexual harassment "has long been an open secret" in science, as aerospace researcher Sheila Widnall, an MIT professor and report co-chair, put it Tuesday.

Despite attempts to address harassment in recent years, most academic policies and training consist of "symbolic compliance" with anti-discrimination law that doesn't have much impact, the report found. Those policies typically rely on a woman filing a formal harassment complaint before the institution takes any action to improve educational or working conditions. The report said women rarely file those reports because they think, correctly, they'll face some form of retaliation.

Among the report's recommendations:

—An organization's climate is the single most important factor in whether sexual harassment is tolerated. Colleges and universities should promote greater gender and racial equity in leadership positions and stress diverse, inclusive and respectful environments.

—Institutions should find alternatives to the traditional hierarchy, such

as mentoring networks, so that students and junior faculty aren't dependent on one supervisor.

—Colleges must protect targets of harassment from retaliation and convey that reporting the problem is "an honorable and courageous action."

—Colleges should spell out escalating consequences for sexual harassment, with discipline based on an investigation process that is fair to both sides rather than focused on the institution's liability.

—Congress and state legislatures should consider prohibiting confidentiality agreements and other actions that shield harassers.

More information: [www8.nationalacademies.org/onp ...
.aspx?RecordID=24994](http://www8.nationalacademies.org/onp...aspx?RecordID=24994)

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