Sexual harassment and stereotyping: How coastal sciences are failing women in the field

October 25 2023

Sarah Hamylton lowering an underwater camera from a boat for coastal research. Credit: Matthew Smith

New research published in *Cambridge Prisms: Coastal Futures* looking at the experiences of women working in coastal sciences worldwide has

unearthed important and disturbing findings.

Harassment during fieldwork, which can include sexual objectification of female researchers wearing fieldwork attire like wetsuits or swimsuits, or harassment when sleeping in close quarters on boats, is common. Gender stereotyping and discriminatory assumptions about women's ability to perform fieldwork tasks can also limit women's opportunities before they so much as see the ocean, with women in the field frequently being left out from fieldwork and passed over for appointments in favor of men.

Mothers working in coastal sciences also face further barriers in their careers as they are often unable to participate in fieldwork in particular owing to a lack of appropriate facilities and a more general absence of consideration of their needs.

Researchers investigating gender inequality in coastal sciences have also found that women in the field face substantial barriers to fieldwork participation more broadly. These barriers range from difficulties getting into the field through selective invitations, to lack of facilities for women at field sites and onboard scientific boats.

One anonymous early career researcher surveyed writes "I've twice experienced harassment on fieldwork expeditions".

Another researcher notes that "During fieldwork, as a woman I am not included in tasks that are considered more male oriented like heavy lifting or being helpful while deploying instruments. I try to make myself included, but I keep getting passed over for the nearest male."

A third comments that "Sometimes women are 'advised' to avoid fieldwork, for security reasons"—which include "[being] threatened by rape for being with a lot of men."

These testimonies—along with many others of a similar nature—were drawn from an international survey organized by researchers from Australian and New Zealand universities seeking to investigate perceptions and experiences of gender inequality for those working in coastal sciences.


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Authentic
BILLABONG
1973
phantom

Ana Vila-Concejo and Hannah Power setting up fieldwork instruments at One Tree Island. Credit: Amelia Shannon

A paper-based survey was initially launched during the 14th International Coastal Symposium, held in Sydney, Australia, in March 2016. Further responses were subsequently solicited via an online questionnaire that was posted on the Women In Coastal Geosciences and Engineering website and circulated through related social media channels, forming a multi-year dataset.

The researchers who authored the paper include suggestions for how to improve the situation and promote best practice in future coastal research. These suggestions include:

- Establishing field codes of conduct. Fieldwork codes should outline acceptable standards of behavior on fieldtrips; what constitutes misconduct, sexual harassment and assault; how to make an anonymous complaint; and disciplinary measures in the event of misconduct.
- Improving opportunities and capacity for women to undertake fieldwork. Trip organizers should strive for diverse field teams by identifying and addressing the intersecting disadvantages experienced by women. This may include making provision for other responsibilities that arise during the period of fieldwork, including work duties and family-related care.
- Acknowledging the challenges women face in the field and providing support where possible; publicizing field role models and trail blazers to counter gendered stereotypes and to promote fieldwork opportunities for women; and fostering an enjoyable and supportive fieldwork culture.

One of the paper's authors, Dr. Sarah Hamylton of the University of Wollongong, was the first person to review the 314 total survey responses that informed the final publication.

"It was my job to go through the responses—and it was hard work. I remember feeling overwhelmed and upset by some of the experiences people testified in response to our survey. It was at that moment I realized we had to publish these findings.

"When researchers go out into the field, existing power dynamics can morph in unexpected and challenging ways. Academic environments, and scientific environments, are already underpinned by hierarchy and power dynamics. Yet in fieldwork situations, people find themselves in new working contexts—on a beach or a boat doing research, for example, day and night, as opposed to working in a more conventional, office-based setting."

"Our research repeatedly made clear that when researchers are away from campus, their behavior can change. And this can result in everything from micro-aggressions to full-blown sexual harassment."

"Women in coastal sciences talk openly about experiencing discrimination and harassment when working in the field. Male survey respondents also acknowledge witnessing such discrimination and being disgusted by it. It's something that needs to be acknowledged by the scientific community and addressed. Undermining and harassing female researchers affects them on a personal level—it can be traumatic—and it also disadvantages them professionally, impacting both their ability to do their job and their desire to continue in the field."

More information: Sarah M. Hamylton et al, The challenges of fieldwork: Improving the experience for women in coastal sciences, *Cambridge Prisms: Coastal Futures* (2023). DOI: 10.1017/cft.2023.26

Provided by Cambridge University Press