

How to stop the sexual harassment of women in science: reboot the system

29 January 2016, by Zuleyka Zevallos, Swinburne University Of Technology



Enough! There is a way to end the harassment of women in science. Credit: Shutterstock/Dean Drobot

The culture in astronomy, and in science more broadly, needs a major reboot following revelations early this year of another case of harassment against women by a senior male academic.

The journal *Science* [revealed earlier this month](#) that the latest case involved Christian Ott, a professor of theoretical astrophysics at Caltech university, in the United States.

Frustrated that Ott was not fired and only [placed on unpaid leave](#) for a year, the two female students who raised the allegations took their story to the popular online news outlet [Buzzfeed](#).

Also this month, US Congresswoman Jackie Speier [raised the case](#) of Professor Tim Slater, who [had been investigated for various sexual harassment incidents](#) that began after he was hired by the University of Arizona in August 2001. Slater went on to the University of Wyoming.

Slater spoke to the news website [Mashable](#) and said he had received sexual harassment training as an outcome of the investigation.

But Congresswoman Speier questioned why the

investigation into [Slater's sexual harassment was sealed](#) "while he went on with his career", even though women who were victims lost years of study and career progress due to his conduct.

A familiar pattern

In these two cases, a pattern emerges: so-called rising stars in academic astronomy engage in routine harassment of students early in their careers, receiving tenure and accolades, all the while engaging in abuse of power.

Remember last year's case of the Professor of Astronomy, Geoff Marcy, who in early October wrote [an open letter of apology](#) acknowledging his history of sexual harassment at University of California, Berkeley.

Two days later [Buzzfeed broke the news](#) of a six-month investigation into Marcy, which covered incidents from 2001 to 2010. A few days later Marcy's resignation was [announced by the university](#).

But later that month, [Buzzfeed reported](#) three more women shared their experiences of harassment by Marcy while he was at San Francisco State University. In December, the journal [Nature reported](#) more incidents in 2011, 2013 and 2014.

A few days ago, it was revealed that UC Berkley has [granted Marcy an honorific Emeritus Professorship](#), despite these events.

How big is the problem?

The current incidents are not isolated. A [recent survey](#) by the American Astronomical Society's Committee on the Status of Women in Astronomy included 426 astronomers, 82% of whom had heard sexist remarks from peers; 57% had experienced verbal sexual harassment; and 9% had been physically harassed.

These recent high-profile cases are notable because the victims of harassment have pursued alternative routes to raise awareness and chosen to speak out. Still, going to a politician or the media should be a last resort.

The pattern in these cases is clear: women attempt to manage the harassment directly with their abusers, who hold power over them. They are afraid to launch a formal report due to fear of retaliation.

After prolonged harassment, sometimes years later, they make a formal complaint. In all cases, harassers are not immediately suspended. They are given some one-off training and then allowed to move on with their careers.

The same is not true of victims, who struggle to put their progress back on track and who live with the anxiety of having their harassers back on campus.

Institutions appear reticent to take strong disciplinary action, focusing on mentoring rather than tackling sexual harassment as a systemic problem requiring an institutional solution.

The system is failing women

Science careers depend heavily on recommendations from supervisors, and this is in an environment where many senior researchers collaborate. This leaves victims vulnerable, fearful of the consequences of speaking up. This anxiety is not unfounded.

In mid-2015, prominent scientists [jumped to the defence](#) of Sir Tim Hunt after he [made a sexist "joke"](#) during the World Conference of Science Journalists in South Korea.

The women scientists who spoke out against this, and other incidents of sexism, [are routinely faced with a torrent of abuse](#).

Senior leaders' kneejerk reaction is to publicly defend sexual harassers, such as by [emphasising a friendship with Marcy](#) even after he was found guilty of sexual harassment, without adequate consideration for his victims.

But as of this week, more than 500 astronomers and physicists from across the world have [signed a letter of support](#) for both of Ott's victims, which reads:

A career in astronomy is a joy and a privilege, and one that we firmly believe should be open to all. Harassment and bullying force talent out of our field, and as such have no place in it.

Too few institutions are proactive about sexual harassment. MIT took action [in December 2014](#), but then again Dr Walter Lewin was already retired when he carried out online sexual harassment. The online course he ran was cancelled.

Administrator of NASA, Charles Bolden, [recently issued a strong statement](#) warning institutions to be compliant with civil rights laws against sexual harassment in order to remain qualified for grants.

The National Science Foundation similarly warned it may [terminate funding to institutions](#) found to be non-compliant with anti-sexual harassment regulation. Still, the onus largely remains on institutions to police compliance. Recent history shows this is not always effective.

The situation we are seeing within astronomy is perhaps more public than in other areas of science, but the machinations are by no means unique. A [Survey of Academic Field Experiences](#) by the University of Illinois' Professor Kate Clancy and colleagues included responses from almost 700 scientists from various disciplines.

Almost three-quarters of the sample (72%) had observed or been told about sexual harassment at their most recent research field site. Two-thirds (64%) of researchers had experienced sexual harassment, mostly at the hands of a senior researcher.

Women were 3.5 times more likely than men to report being subject to sexual harassment.

Beyond sexism

Beyond sexual harassment, science has problems with other forms of harassment, and it's not

confined to just the US.

Astronomer Dr Jessica Kirkpatrick founded the [Equity and Inclusion in Physics and Astronomy](#) group on Facebook, which she manages with fellow astronomer Adam Jacobs and me, a sociologist.

At its peak, late in 2015, we had more than 4,000 members from around the world. Our group was expressly formed to support underrepresented groups in astronomy and physics. This included white women; racial and ethnic minorities; people with disabilities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people; and others.

Our group was regularly inundated by astronomers and physicists who were angry at [our group's aims](#) to improve inclusion of underrepresented groups.

During the "[shirtstorm](#)" incident, where a prominent scientist wore a shirt with naked women during an interview about an international space mission, our group was descended upon by astronomers trying to derail discussions of sexism.

In various other incidents, especially in discussions of racism, very senior researchers attacked junior scholars for their activism, both within our group and in other, more high-profile professional astronomy networks.

All of this harassment and abuse happens in front of a potential international audience of thousands of astronomers and physicists.

But senior astronomers rarely speak up, simply watching from the sidelines as our most vulnerable members, women of different race or ethnic backgrounds, people with disabilities and other minority students and early career researchers, are lambasted, sometimes by hundreds of disparaging comments and abuse over a weekly period.

After trying different approaches to reform the group, we took drastic measures. We decided to reboot the group. We ejected everyone and asked them to re-join after filling out a form where members explicitly vow to uphold our mission to create an inclusive culture in astronomy and physics.

Our group is currently close to 900 members who made this commitment, and the environment is much improved (though we occasionally experience individual issues). The culture has shifted because everyone who belongs to our community has signed on to take responsibility for their education on issues of inclusion and equity. We are striving towards proactive action.

In a similar way, astronomy at large needs a reboot. The culture of harassment, abuse and resistance to equity and diversity needs to be stamped out through direct intervention.

Rebooting the culture of harassment

At the individual level, we need more astronomers speaking out against sexual harassment and related forms of discrimination. The current system relies heavily on victims coming forward in a climate where this is professionally and personally costly.

It is therefore up to the rest of us to pick up the slack, so here are a few ideas on what to do.

We need to speak up

When you hear or see a colleague being made to feel uncomfortable due to gender and sexual issues, a few simple words calling out this behaviour can make a big difference.

Inappropriate sexual and gender-based jokes or sexual comments are not benign. They plant a seed for sexual harassment, making women uncomfortable and unwelcome, and setting the tone for future abuse.

Lead by example

Leaders who take an active approach to equity and diversity foster stronger, more productive teams. Be sure to find regular opportunities to discuss issues of sexual harassment (and racism and other forms of discrimination). Invite an expert on discrimination to give talks, or discuss useful anti-harassment resources.

Make it easier to report abuse and harassment

Equity and diversity officers are often an underutilised resource. Institutions that are serious about stamping out harassment should empower these officers to pursue action that is effective.

[Information escrows](#) can be one way to manage confidential sexual harassment claims, where a third-party agent holds onto anonymised reports until a second complaint is made. When two independent claims are made, an investigation can be launched.

Alternatively, host regular confidential discussions with students and staff that allow institutions to gather confidential feedback about incidents that individuals are otherwise too afraid to report. This is more about creating an environment where faculty, staff and students have an opportunity to tell you about departmental or managerial issues before they spiral out of control.

Make sure the policies work

Listing anti-harassment policies on your website and campus manual is not enough. Administrators might ask themselves these two questions:

1. Does my institution have evidence that the policies are working for the people they're meant to protect? Absence of complaints does not necessarily mean your faculty, staff and students feel safe and supported.
2. How do you know if reporting mechanisms are working? Scientists who experience harassment don't always know the options available to them, and those who do report are often unhappy with the outcome.

Make safety a day-to-day priority

Much of academia is a baptism of fire. We are not taught how to teach; we are not taught how to supervise students effectively; we are not taught how to manage sexual harassment and other issues of discrimination. ([These guidelines](#) can help you make a start.)

Relevant and ongoing anti-sexual harassment training should be part of managerial responsibilities. All staff should get the same basic

training, but it should be tweaked at the individual level.

Managers and decision-makers (anyone who sits on a funding or recruitment panel, for example) should attend training on physical sexual harassment. They should also attend training on other forms of harassment that make workplace culture untenable for many women and underrepresented scientists.

Unconscious gender bias training can help managers see how the behaviour they take for granted may be a problem for those with less power.

Diversity training encourages managers to effectively manage different groups and be more aware of potential exclusion. It can show them the benefits of having a diverse team finding innovative solutions to research problems

Strategic planning

What would it take to overhaul and radically improve your institution so that women are not demotivated through a hostile work environment? How can you actively protect staff from harassment, bullying and discrimination?

University strategic plans nowadays often have equity and diversity statements, with anti-harassment and anti-bullying sometimes highlighted, but how will your university reach its goals if harassment underpins organisational culture?

Given that surveys find sexual harassment is a common experience, a strategic vision for a healthy, successful science organisation needs to formulate clear targets and key performance indicators that directly address the elimination of harassment, gender bias, racial discrimination, and other forms of abuse

A collective stand against harassment

National efforts [in the UK](#) and [Australia](#) as well as [regional programs in Europe](#) are working towards the elimination of gender bias. Sexual harassment

is one important piece of the puzzle.

Source: The Conversation

Joining the global movement to make gender equity and diversity policies and outcomes more explicit is the best way to commit to a more inclusive culture within science.

In order for institutions to make a clear commitment against harassment, discrimination and bias, they should publish data and analysis about their policies and practices. This makes institutions more publicly accountable.

Act now, before it's too late

There is no denying that astronomy has a problem with sexual harassment, along with other forms of discrimination and abuse of power.

But we don't need to wait for journalists and politicians to shine a spotlight on more individual cases of harassment. It's time individual researchers, science managers, departments and institutions made the commitment to reboot science and wipe out harassment.

Science faces many complex problems that require the type of innovation that can only be fully realised with gender equity and diversity. Astronomy, like other sciences, simply cannot afford to miss out on the talents of different groups of women if they feel forced to leave the professions because of [sexual harassment](#).

Similarly, science cannot reach its full potential without diversity, and diversity cannot flourish in a culture of racism, discrimination and fear. Research excellence cannot happen without rebooting science culture. The rest of us are ready for change. Are you?

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