

Subtler forms of harassment erode women's feelings of legitimacy in physics

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In a national survey of undergraduate women studying physics who were attending professional conferences, 74.3 percent said they experienced forms of sexual harassment including gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention in their physics communities. Credit: Florida International University

Sexual harassment is another barrier women in STEM must overcome,

according to a new study.

In a survey of undergraduate women studying physics who were attending professional conferences across the country, 74.3 percent said they experienced forms of sexual harassment in their physics communities including gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention. That's compared to other studies showing a lower incidence rate across academia.

"What we did find was that the most impactful forms of harassment were forms that are maybe considered the least extreme," said Zahra Hazari, a co-author of the study who is an associate professor of science education at Florida International University's STEM Transformation Institute. "The underlying cultural current has people making sexist comments or implying women are not as good, which makes you feel you're not good enough all the time."

Often, women live with the subtlest, most pervasive forms of sexual harassment, researchers said. The study found this behavior erodes women's confidence in their ability and sense of belonging, which makes it much more likely for them to switch majors and walk away from potentially lucrative STEM careers.

Increasing the presence of female physics majors, empowering them, and supporting them is one way to begin to demand cultural change, according to the researchers – it's something Hazari is working on. She's leading an effort to increase the number of female physics majors in a coordinated campaign with high school physics teachers nationwide. If the initiative is successful, it could change the face of physics in the United States.

"Having experienced it, I know it's something you live with day-to-day. It happens frequently in different forms – your contributions not being

taken seriously or people not including you in conversations or just being treated slightly differently," Hazari said. "This is why I do what I do. I don't want other women to face these barriers and experiences trying to pursue their dreams."

The researchers recommend hiring diverse women faculty and graduate students in physics to help create opportunities for social support across underrepresented groups in a field traditionally dominated by men.

Another necessary support to drive cultural change is administrative. Universities and colleges should create and publicize professional codes of conduct that identify and promote behaviors that increase collaboration, inclusion and problem solving. They should also speak directly against sexual harassment and move quickly to handle cases of sexual harassment by focusing first on the needs of the victim, not trying to rehabilitate the alleged perpetrator.

The study was published in the academic journal [*Physical Review Physics Education Research*](#). The study included researchers from the American Physical Society, the U.S. Department of Energy, Drexel University and the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

Provided by Florida International University

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