Harassment in archaeology is occurring at 'epidemic rates'
30 March 2021, by Melissa de Witte

In the discipline of archaeology, harassment is widespread, with archaeologists of color, LGBTQIA+ researchers and scholars with disabilities reporting abuse at much higher rates, according to research presented by Stanford archaeologist Barbara Voss.

In two peer-reviewed articles published in the journal American Antiquity, considered archaeology's most prominent academic journal, Voss examines how from the 1800s to the present day, discrimination and harassment, including sexual assault, within her field has occurred at "epidemic rates." In the first paper, Voss gathers study after study to show how harassment has pervaded the discipline. For her second study, Voss provides a set of evidence-based solutions aimed at ending and preventing harassment, as well as ways to best support survivors.

"No one should have to endure harassment to be able to do the work they love," said Voss, an associate professor of anthropology in the School of Humanities and Sciences.

The problem is as much a personal issue for Voss as it is a professional one. In both articles, Voss recounts experiences from her own 35-year career of being harassed and assaulted while working in the lab and in the field.

"I want my fellow archaeologists affected by harassment to know that they are not alone, and that what happened to them was not their fault," Voss said. "To date, it has mostly been early-career archaeologists who have come forward to tell their stories and hold their perpetrators and the discipline accountable. It is important for senior archaeologists like me to add our voices and contribute long-term career perspectives to this issue."

These types of harassing behaviors lead to hostile and intimidating work environments with devastating consequences not only for victims but for the entire discipline, Voss said.

"Harassment is not just an interpersonal matter," Voss said. "Harassment harms and interferes with the archaeological study of the past, reducing the quality and integrity of the advancement of archaeological research. It reduces the productivity of practicing archaeologists and drives others out of the field altogether."

Identifying harassment

Harassment in the workplace can take many forms. It can be physical—such as nonconsensual sexual contact or quid pro quo coercions—or nonphysical—which includes nonverbal and verbal behavior such as sexually-charged jokes and innuendo, derogatory insults or other bullying comments. Harassment can also be considered discrimination when connected to a target's identity: gender, sexual orientation, age, race, ethnicity, national origin, class background, queerness and/or disability.

Over the past decade, there have been a number
of studies that examined harassment within archaeology. Some focused on the problem in the context of their own country—like the Acoso Sexual en Arqueología study, a web-based survey in Spain—while others examined the issue regionally—like the Gender Equity and Sexual Harassment study, which surveyed the membership roster of the Society for California Archaeology.

Voss compiled the data from over a dozen of these various surveys—conducted in the U.S., Canada and Spain, as well as an international study involving participants from 26 countries—to identify trends and patterns of behavior in the discipline.

When examined cumulatively, these various reports paint a troubling picture.

Voss’s analysis found that harassment is often between one archaeologist and another, typically towards people on their own research team.

Female archaeologists are more likely than male archaeologists to be harassed. Voss’s analysis shows that somewhere between 34 to 75% of women archeologists have experienced harassment at least once in their careers. But men are not immune to abuse, either: about 15 to 46% of male archaeologists said they experienced harassment. Between 5 to 8% of male archaeologists and 15 to 26% of women archaeologists reported unwanted sexual contact, including sexual assault—a rate Voss calls "staggering."

Reporting harassment at much higher rates are archaeologists of color, ethnic minority archaeologists, nonbinary archaeologists, LGBTQIA+ archaeologists and archaeologists with disabilities, Voss found.

Harassment frequently involves an imbalance of power where harassers target subordinates, usually in entry-level positions, who have little to no recourse available to take action against their superiors.

Because archaeology is a team science, individual archeologists rely on senior researchers for access to sites, collections, laboratories and specialized equipment. Sometimes, these same scholars also decide who gets promoted, funded and published.

"This places students and early-career professionals in positions of strong dependency on those at higher levels," Voss said. "While most gatekeepers conduct their roles ethically and responsibly, this organizational structure creates opportunities for abuse of power."

When harassment occurs from the top down, this can lead to intergenerational cycles of abuse. Senior researchers also role model positive and negative behavior, including harassment. Two studies that Voss cited in her paper found that some junior researchers emulated bullying and a "party culture" modeled by their senior colleagues. In other instances, senior members of the teams actually encouraged junior researchers to participate in the harassment of other team members.

"While individuals are always responsible for their own behavior, we can also see the role that social norms and organizational structures play in allowing or limiting harassment," said Voss.

Making changes in the field

Because the problem is so systemic, changes need to be made at multiple levels, Voss emphasized.

Voss offers six interventions, backed by research in harassment prevention, which include:

1. Listen to survivors and vulnerable members of the discipline; they will know where the problems are and what can be done to prevent harassment.
2. Define harassment as scientific misconduct, on par with plagiarism and falsification of data.
3. Establish a global independent harassment reporting hotline with powers to investigate reports of harassment and resources to support survivors.
4. Require codes of conduct, which emphasize behavior not beliefs, with clear mechanisms of enforcement for all archaeology research
and educational programs.
5. Change organizational procedures to reduce potential abuses of power by gatekeepers.
6. Include training in interpersonal skills as part of education and mentorship for archaeology and other team-based sciences.

What archaeologists can do right now

Transforming the culture will require action by everyone in the discipline, Voss stressed. While structural changes must be made, individuals can also make adjustments to their own behavior and attitudes at work.

For example, in the survey research Voss studied, she learned that respondents regularly describe harassment as something normal and to be expected. One way people can change this cultural mindset is to publicly affirm that reporting harassment is an act of bravery that supports the well-being of their organization, she said.

Voss also recommends that people familiarize themselves with the confidential resources and reporting procedures within their own organization, so they know what to do if they or someone they know experiences abuse.

Voss also asks her fellow archaeologists to call out harassing behavior when they see it. "Simple comments like "Not OK!" or "You need to stop that" disrupt harassment by redirecting the harassers' attention away from the target and towards the intervention," Voss said.

Voss is hopeful that cultural and individual change is possible.

"We don't have to continue to tolerate the high occurrence of harassment in archaeology and in other field sciences," Voss said. "There are proven, evidence-based solutions that, when implemented, prevent harassment before it starts, support survivors when it does and hold confirmed perpetrators accountable."

More information: Barbara L. Voss.