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Voices

When It Comes to Sexual Harassment, Academia Is Fundamentally Broken

Why everyone should read the National Academies' sexual harassment report

By The 500 Women Scientists Leadership on August 9, 2018

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Credit: Getty Images

The ~~National Academies~~ National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) recently published a report titled “Sexual Harassment of Women: Climate, Culture, and Consequences in Academic Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine.” Many news outlets, scientists and other experts have written about the report, highlighting the prevalence of sexual harassment and need for institutional action.

Even after reading every single related news article, however, it is still worth reading the 300-plus page report in its entirety, including the appendices with stories of women and their lived experiences with harassment (a place to start: read our longer summary of the report). The report lays out why academia is fundamentally broken and incapable of dealing with harassment; if we are to be truly committed to rooting out harassment and welcoming people from all backgrounds in STEM, the system needs a complete overhaul. No amount of “diversity” initiatives and studies on understanding why women and girls choose not to stay in STEM fields will make a real difference if we do not

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The report is not perfect. Despite acknowledging the prevalence of racism and racial harassment in addition to sexual harassment, it falls short in fully understanding and coming to terms with them. The report and its reception also demonstrate some fundamental flaws with the academic system: naming a problem does not mean you've solved it, and powerful institutions like NASEM often pay lip service to issues of diversity and inclusion without necessarily doing the hard work of following their own advice. It is now incumbent upon the NASEM to follow the guidance of its own report and address sexual harassment within its own ranks.

The report shows that scientific institutions, including NASEM, have actively perpetuated a tolerance for sexual harassment: for instance, by refusing to acknowledge that sexual harassment is scientific misconduct. In fact, NAS actively refused to name sexual harassment a form of scientific misconduct in a 1992 report on integrity in the research process, stating that “sexual harassment and financial mismanagement are illegal behaviors regardless of whether scientists are involved, but these actions are different from misconduct in science because they do not compromise, in a direct manner, the integrity of the research process.”

This conclusion influenced how the federal government and most government-funded institutions defined misconduct for years to come. What NASEM says and does matters beyond its own doors, beyond the ivory tower. NASEM now has the opportunity to set policy and fundamentally change how we address sexual harassment and other forms of harassment and discrimination in academia.

HARASSMENT AND SCIENCE

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women and those who do not conform to heterosexual and patriarchal gender norms.

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Harassment also goes well beyond the stereotypical older, senior man targeting a woman in a junior position. “Contrapower” (or bottom-up) harassment is common—for example, when women faculty are harassed by male students, including being devalued in biased and inappropriate student evaluations. Gender norms in these cases override existing power structures. “Ambient” harassment—the second-hand smoke equivalent of sexual harassment, which consists of harassment witnessed by others in a work group who are not themselves the targets—can be as damaging as individually targeted harassment. Harassment in its various forms is widely tolerated in academic institutions (and other similarly rigid hierarchical institutions that discourage the questioning of authority). Their institutional cultures often permit put-down behavior and negative attitudes towards women.

Sexual harassment is only one form of harassment; people of color deal with racial harassment and women of color experience both. Unfortunately, racial harassment and its effects when combined with sexual harassment have not been well studied to date. Addressing this knowledge gap is particularly urgent given the fact that women of color are much more underrepresented in science and academic fields than white women.

One recent [study](#) of women in space sciences found that women of color were more likely than white women and men of color to report feeling unsafe because of their gender (40 percent) as well as race (28 percent). The report finds that women of color

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People who are marginalized along sexual and gender minority axes—lesbian, bisexual, queer and trans women, as well as gay and trans men—experience even higher rates of harassment in academia. To understand and address its full scope, we must view harassment through the lens of intersectionality. Academia remains overwhelmingly white and male, a fact that certainly correlates with the prevalence of and tolerance for sexual and racial harassment.

Harassment has negative health consequences similar to those experienced in physically threatening situations. Coping with harassment is burdensome. It includes reactions ranging from appeasing the harasser and minimizing the incidents, seeking social support from friends and family, professional therapy, strategizing on future responses, engaging in activities to improve mental and physical health, and simply trying to stay focused on the work. However, it does not typically include actually reporting the harassment to authorities.

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In fact, women who experienced harassment often had their experiences normalized or were discouraged from reporting —the NASEM report cites that only 25 percent of victims filed formal complaints, with even lower reporting rates for women of color. Women do not report because of fears of retaliation and career damage; no guarantee of confidentiality; a lack of control over the process; and fears of contemptuous reactions to their very real experiences with discrimination.

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any education program or activity receiving federal funds —applying to almost any educational institution in the U.S.

Although these laws prohibit sexual discrimination, the interpretation of institutional liability by the courts, including the Supreme Court, has allowed institutions to get away with doing the bare minimum without holding harassers accountable or changing hostile environments. Legally, institutions are only required to show “file cabinet compliance”—the existence of policies on paper. The legal incentive for institutions is therefore to avoid liability by doing the bare minimum of making employees and students aware of these policies, and then to place the burden on victims to prove the harmful effects of harassment. Therefore, in practice, almost every formal complaint to a Title IX office does not yield meaningful resolution or punish the harassers because the process lacks transparency and is so cumbersome that it dissuades victims from filing complaints in the first place.

Other unique features of the academic system make harassment an entrenched problem: universities themselves function as “quasi governments” with their own internal police forces, dispute and grievance resolution systems, counselors and mental health services, and administrators overseeing these systems. The processes to address harassment differ from institution to institution; they also lack transparency. Private universities are particularly unaccountable to outside authorities. The tenure system creates a class structure where those with tenure can almost never be fired and those without tenure are entirely dependent on tenured employees for career advancement.

This inequality further exacerbates a fear of retaliation and a tolerance for harassment. Mandatory reporting requirements in most institutions take control away from victims

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The systematic ineffectiveness of anti-harassment policies, including Title IX regulations, leads to a question: *Is it ethically responsible to tell victims to report harassment to their institutions and their Title IX offices?* In the absence of any other levers of power, how can we ensure that universities take action and fundamentally change how they deal with and punish harassment? Existing hierarchical power structures (largely male and white), combined with a culture that is dismissive of women's experiences and a system that prioritizes avoiding liability over protecting victims, have led to a toxic environment for women and other marginalized groups in academia. *The entire system needs to be overhauled at every level, grounded in the revolutionary idea that women—women of color, non-cis women, immigrant women—deserve to feel safe and welcome in their work environments and have careers and lives unburdened by harassment.*

The “meritocracy” of academia fails women repeatedly; it fails to account for the many negative career impacts of harassment, including mental and physical health impacts, decrease in scientific output, career sacrifices and potential retaliation from harassers and others in power. People in positions of power are complicit in the rampant sexual harassment in academia, whether they are harassers themselves or whether they choose to turn a blind eye to the harassment at their institutions. And academic institutions are complicit in creating and perpetuating a system that does little to protect victims, thereby severely damaging the integrity and quality of scholarly work.

Overhauling the system will take work, but this is essential if science is to achieve racial and gender equity—because it is the right thing to do and because it will make our

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This report is the beginning, not the end, of addressing sexual harassment in science and academia. We have a long way to go, from beginning to reckon with the extent of racism and racial harassment, to evaluating the true value (or rather lack thereof) of harassers to science—irrespective of their supposed “brilliance” —and finally holding institutions, federal agencies and legislatures accountable for putting zero-tolerance policies in place. We need to understand that no amount of “diversity” initiatives and “encouraging” women to pursue STEM fields will compensate for the systemic rot and widespread tolerance and lack of accountability for harassment. To truly make science more diverse and inclusive, we must value the experiences of people from non-traditional backgrounds more than preserving the status quo and entrenching the status of those in power.

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As a start, let us all think about how we can help implement the 15 recommendations in the report, ranging from individual actions to federal policies. Among the most important, which address the need for deep institutional change:

We need to change individual attitudes and behaviors.

We must hold institutions accountable for their policies.

We need to fix Title IX offices.

We must advocate for legislative action. at the state and federal levels.

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cast to rise, to speak out in favor of institution-level changes and restructuring of their departments. We at 500WS will continue to advocate for women, push for policy change and provide support to those working and organizing to change academia.

Other posts by 500 Women Scientists:

[Science is Patriotic](#)

[Childhood Should Be Sacred](#)

[Harassers Are Bad Scientists](#)

[Bill Nye Doesn't Speak for Us](#)

[It's Time for Academia to Address Sexual Misconduct](#)

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