

OPEN SECRETS AND MISSING STAIRS

Sexual and Gender-Based Harassment at Scientific Meetings

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"[Sexual harassment is] designed to coerce women, not attract them. Labeling sexual harassment as an inept form of courtship is a convenient fabrication to mask the abuse of power involved, a way to cloud and obscure the real dynamics of harassment. Behind the harasser's behavior there is always a real threat."

Martha Langelan, Back Off! ***How to Confront and Stop Sexual Harassment***[1]

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Participation in meetings is crucial for career advancement in science. Attendance is a privilege, and individuals who harass and bully fellow attendees abuse that privilege. The experience of harassment at meetings limits targets' participation through effects on attendees' behavior and ability to learn.

An internet-based survey of meeting attendees found that harassment at meetings included comments on appearance and other forms of verbal harassment, unwanted touch, stalking, and sexual assault. Targets of harassment reported that the experience of being harassed caused them to think more about their personal safety at meetings, to avoid social events, and to stop attending meetings where harassment occurred.

Most of the targets did not report the harassment, because they did not want to be labeled as a complainer or troublemaker, and they did not know how or to whom they should report it. A large majority of respondents indicated that they would like scientific meetings to be governed by an anti-harassment policy or code of conduct, with an easy and confidential reporting process. They would also like to see serial or repeat harassers banned from attending meetings.

Some scientific societies have adopted codes of conduct for their meetings. However, simply adopting a policy is not sufficient to eliminate harassment. Full implementation includes: publicizing the policy widely; training staff (and volunteers, if necessary) how to take incident reports; taking action quickly; and, as much as possible, maintaining strict confidentiality.

The burden should not be on the targets of harassment to make the case for adoption and enforcement of a meeting code of conduct. The adoption of a code of conduct and the commitment to its enforcement must come from the highest level of organizational governance, with authority granted to the organization's staff to implement enforcement procedures. Ask anyone who performs research why they belong to a scientific society, and the answer almost always includes mention of the annual meeting. Participation in scientific meetings is crucial to advancement in a research career. For many people, meetings are also enjoyable opportunities to socialize with colleagues and friends whom they may not see at any other time. For others, participation in scientific meetings is often stressful, made that way in part by experiences of harassment, bullying, and intimidating behavior.

"If you are here unfaithfully with us, You're causing terrible damage."

Rumi (tr. Coleman Barks), "The Open Secret"[2]

It is important to remember that participation in meetings, just like membership in a scientific society, is a privilege, not a right. In addition to the registration fees, the cost of that privilege is respectful, professional, and civil behavior toward fellow attendees. Harassers and bullies don't just abuse their targets. They abuse the privilege of being part of a valuable professional event, the goodwill of their professional community, and the trust of their colleagues.

Recently, incidents of harassment have been reported in blogs and addressed in editorials and opinion columns in journals.[3] Harassment limits the target's participation at a meeting in many ways, from the cognitive load of concern about personal safety to decisions to forgo a particular event or meeting in order to avoid the harasser. Many harassers are known for their behavior, and attendees and staff warn each other about whom to avoid. Such serial harassers are the "missing stair" at meetings: the structural flaw that newcomers have to be warned about and that never gets fixed.[4]

Harassment is one of several ways that women and other underrepresented minorities encounter conscious and unconscious bias at meetings. Meeting attendees are harassed on many bases, including gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, citizenship status, age, appearance, or disability. This report focuses on sexual and gender-based harassment, but the recommendations apply to harassment for any reason.

This report will explore how, and how often, sexual and gender-based harassment occurs at meetings, how harassment limits diversity and inclusion efforts, and what meeting producers such as scientific societies can do to identify and stop harassers and harassing behavior. The report includes data from the 2015-16 Survey of Meeting Experiences (SOME). SOME was an internet-based survey, and recruitment of subjects focused on science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine (STEMM) professionals. The survey data demonstrate that harassment is a significant concern for women who attend scientific conferences and that the experience of harassment has an impact on women's behavior at meetings and their willingness to attend events. Participants who agreed to be contacted provided anecdotal support for the survey findings.

WHAT IS HARASSMENT?

Harassment is any form of *unwanted* or *unwelcome* attention that invades the physical and emotional spaces of others in a way that is frightening, insulting, or disrespectful.

The harasser's claim that he didn't intend to harass is irrelevant.

Harassment creates a hostile, intimidating, or offensive environment. In professional situations such as meetings, harassment often takes the form of comments or actions whose hostile intent is clearly evident to the target, and may be evident to others, despite the harasser's claim they he[5] was "just joking" or "just flirting" or "didn't mean anything by it."

Harassment may also take the form of impolite, insensitive, or thoughtless comments or behavior based on gender or other stereotypes. Examples are:

- assuming that a woman has a subordinate role in a team;
- addressing questions or comments to the men in a group while ignoring the women;
- repeatedly interrupting or talking over women in a group;
- making comments about the appearance or personalities of other women;
- calling women by a term of endearment;
- suggesting or selecting dining or entertainment venues that sexualize or objectify women.

Some might argue that the offensiveness or hostility in this behavior is unintended, and, while this may be true on occasion, it does not make the behavior less offensive or hostile. Harassment must be assessed from the perspective and experience of the target, not the intent of the harasser. The harasser's claim that he didn't intend to harass is irrelevant.

Harassment at Meetings Comes Out of the Shadows[6]

In 2011, a group of women from the open technology movement founded the Ada Initiative[7] (named for Ada Lovelace) to counter the open hostility faced by women at "geek" conferences and conventions, including technology industry conventions, free and open-source software conferences, gaming conventions, and comic book and science fiction fan conventions.[8] The Ada Initiative quickly developed an "open source" conference anti-harassment policy, and they mounted a successful campaign to promote the adoption and enforcement of such a policy at major technology and fan conferences and conventions. To date, hundreds of conferences have adopted a code of conduct or other anti-harassment policy, and nearly 20 major conference

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sponsors now require a policy for all sponsored events.[9] In 2013, John Scalzi, an author and popular speaker at science fiction fan conventions, pledged that he would no longer attend conventions that did not have an anti-harassment policy. More than 1,100 authors and fans co-signed his pledge over the next few months.[10] Following Scalzi's announcement, an article on the Ada Initiative's work appeared in a major publication of the conventions and meetings industry.[11]

At about this same time, reports of harassment at scientific meetings began to emerge in science blogs. In 2013, an anonymous guest blogger for the *Women in Astronomy* blog described an encounter with someone she described as a "known serial harasser."[12] More recently, the same blog published an account of harassment at a meeting of the American Astronomical Society.[13] The resignations of Geoff Marcy from his position at the University of California, Berkley and Brian Richmond from the American Museum of Natural History increased the visibility of sexual harassment at conferences. Among the most egregious incidents in both of these cases occurred at professional conferences[14,15] The Survey of Academic Field Experiences published in 2014 further documented the extent and type of "off-campus" harassment that women in science experience.[16]

Blog posts with advice on what to do about the problem also appeared. Most of the advice offered assumed that women should not expect conference producers (primarily scientific societies) to address sexual harassment at their meetings and that women needed to develop strategies for handling harassers and harassment on their own.[17] In a 2015 blog post from PLOS titled "7 Tips for Women at Science Conferences," academic editor Hilda Bastian flatly stated, "There'll be inappropriate jokes and demeaning, unprofessional conversations. Women will be harassed – especially at social events."[18]

Advice on how men can be good allies to women facing harassment appeared in the *Women in Astronomy* blog,[19] and in the *Scientopia* blog written by "Prof-Like Substance.[20]" (The comments on the latter blog are particularly telling, for example: "[H]itting on girls at conferences is how I met my wife. If I listened to this circle jerk I would never have met the love of my life and had kids." And, "Can you please explain or justify why being a women makes you so entitled that things should change to suit you?") In late 2015, *Science* published an editorial by Bernard Wood that called on male professors "to be strong allies of the women affected by sexual misconduct." Wood wrote, "[A]ny scientist should think twice before collaborating with those who use their research reputation to harass female colleagues, and before inviting them to meetings. Why? Because every paper they publish, talk they give, and conference they attend enhances the influence they have abused."[21]

For the most part, scientific and other scholarly societies have been slow to recognize or acknowledge that harassment occurs at professional, scientific, and academic meetings. In the face of inaction, women members are developing strategies for handling harassment themselves, including establishing "allies" programs.[22] The survey data reported here, however, will help the members, governing boards, and executive staff of these organizations understand that sexual and gender-based harassment does occur at their meetings and that the solution their meeting attendees want—a clear, effective, well-publicized, and well-implemented anti-harassment policy—is readily achievable.

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Harassment at Meetings: A Little Bit Workplace, A Little Bit Street

For a large segment of meeting participants, the meeting is their workplace, however temporary.[23] This includes:

- staff of the scientific society or other meeting producer;
- contractors and temporary hires;
- venue staff;
- exhibitor staff;
- any attendees who are required by their employers to attend as part of their regular job duties or as representatives of their employers.

For these individuals, the harassment they experience at a meeting—including unwanted touch and unwelcome attention from members or customers—may constitute workplace harassment. Federal and other legal requirements regarding informing staff of their right to a harassment-free workplace, and having effective reporting mechanisms and procedures for addressing harassment, apply in this setting.

In the interviews conducted in conjunction with the Survey of Meeting Experiences (SOME), attendees report harassment akin to the types of harassment that go on in workplaces. Examples include "quid pro quo" harassment, in which the harasser promises to help the target advance in her career in exchange for sexual favors or threatens the target or her career if she refuses his sexual advances. One way in which this commonly occurs at meetings is that the harasser initiates contact by asking about the target's research, and feigns interest until he is able to turn the conversation to increasingly personal topics. This "conversational harassment" is accompanied by increasing levels of physical intimacy or touch. This type of harassment can escalate to sexual assault.

Much of the harassing behavior that occurs at meetings is comparable to street harassment. The organization Stop Street Harassment (SSH)[24] defines street harassment as "unwanted interactions in public spaces between strangers that are motivated by a person's actual or perceived gender, sexual orientation, or gender expression and make the harassee [sic] feel annoyed, angry, humiliated, or scared. ... It differs from issues like sexual harassment in school and the workplace or dating or domestic violence because it happens between strangers in a public place, which at present means there is less legal recourse."[25] Street harassment includes behaviors such as catcalling or calling women by terms of endearment; comments on appearance; following or stalking; unwanted touch, rubbing or groping; flashing or masturbating; and assault. Meetings have the feel of a public place, where participants are in unfamiliar and sometimes crowded surroundings with large numbers of strangers, the harasser has some guarantee of anonymity (despite the ubiquity of name tags), and the targets of harassment often have no recourse and are unlikely to take action against the harasser. Examples of this kind of harassment described by survey respondents include harassers who:

- followed the target around the meeting venue;
- commented that the target's wedding ring "looks fake";
- grabbed the target's buttocks while she was presenting at a poster session;
- grabbed the target's arm and attempted to pull her into the seat next to him;
- obtained the target's hotel room number and pounded on her door late at night.

They get a sexual thrill out of the act of harassment itself and the fear and anxiety their actions provoke.

For the majority of attendees, presentation and participation in professional society meetings is a requirement for career advancement, particularly in STEMM fields. In addition to providing a venue for presentation and discussion of research, meetings are essential for building professional networks, identifying opportunities for career advancement, and developing professional collaborations. While attendees' experience of harassment at meetings may not fully meet the legal definition of workplace harassment, it can have a detrimental and possibly devastating effect on their professional advancement.

Because most efforts to stop and prevent sexual and gender-based harassment at meetings are fairly new, harassers are likely confident that their behavior will not be reported or challenged and that there will be no consequences even if it is reported. Whatever their conscious motivation for harassing behavior, all harassers contribute to the sense that women are unwelcome and unsafe.

Why Does Harassment Occur at Meetings?

Sexual harassment is not about romantic interest or the desire for sexual pleasure. It is about power and status.[26] In her groundbreaking book, *Back Off!: How to Confront and Stop Sexual Harassment and Harassers*, Martha Langelan describes sexual harassment as a social practice "designed to coerce women, not attract them. Labeling sexual harassment as an inept form of courtship is a convenient fabrication to mask the abuse of power involved, a way to cloud and obscure the real dynamics of harassment. Behind the harasser's behavior there is always a real threat." She describes three kinds of harassers: dominance harassers, strategic and territorial harassers, and predatory harassers.

Dominance harassers use harassment to assert their status and to reassure themselves that they command attention, respect, and deference from women in every situation. Harassment in groups is often a form of male bonding. Comments on appearance, jokes, the use of terms of endearment, and demeaning or belittling remarks are examples of ways that the dominance harasser bolsters his ego and claims power. This is the most common form of sexual harassment.

Strategic and territorial harassers use harassment to intimidate their targets (as individuals and as a group) and to maintain privilege and prestige. At meetings, harassers use their access to the podium or the microphone to present sexualized images of women or to trivialize, mock, or sexualize women's contributions. They may target a particular woman to undermine her performance, sabotage her work, and eliminate her as competitor.

For some harassers, the harassment is part of predatory behavior. They get a sexual thrill out of the act of harassment itself and the fear and anxiety their actions provoke. Their behavior may escalate to the use of threats, coercion, or physical force. Predatory harassers exhibit a wide range of behavior, including comments about the target's appearance or sexual desirability, "accidental" touching or groping, threat of economic reprisal or promise of reward (quid pro quo), physical intimidation, physical violence, and rape. The harasser's motive is to exert power and compel capitulation with his demands. The escalation of harassing behavior by predatory harassers is sometimes called "rape testing"—if the target is passive or submissive in response to the escalating harassment, he assumes she will eventually capitulate or can be forced to capitulate to his demands for sexual acts.

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One form of rape testing that was reported by more than one SOME respondent unfolds in this way: The target is approached by an older, more senior scientist, often someone who is well-known in his field. The harasser starts by complimenting the target on her research and "talks science," then shifts the conversation by asking the target about her career plans. He may hint or state that he knows of a position that is about to become available and that would be a perfect fit for her. He may suggest they have drinks or dinner in a place that is quiet and often fairly isolated or at some distance from the meeting site. Some harassers gradually move the conversation into questions or revelations of a more personal nature: marriage, children, home life, and, eventually, sex life. The harassment then escalates to physical contact: a roaming hand on the knee or shoulder. It's at this point that the encounter may become a "quid pro quo" offer (do this for me and I'll do that for your career) or threat (if you don't do this for me, I'll damage your career). Until his behavior is met with clear and firm resistance, the predatory harassment will continue to escalate, even to the point of physical assault.[27,28]

This predatory harassment is particularly damaging to young women, who have already gotten the message that they are not welcome in the field of work they have chosen, many having internalized those messages in the form of impostor syndrome. (Impostor syndrome is characterized by the inability to internalize one's accomplishments, believing that luck or accident, rather than skill or ability, is the reason for one's success.) One woman explained, "The realization that he really had no interest in my work was devastating. My confidence in my ability to finish my dissertation took a nose-dive, and if it hadn't been for my advisor's encouragement I would have left the field."

THE SURVEY OF MEETING EXPERIENCES

The Survey of Meeting Experiences (SOME) attempts to quantify the types of harassment that occur at meetings and the impact of that harassment on the behavior of those who experience or witness it.

60%
(123) of the respondents reported having experienced harassment at a meeting at some point in their careers.

SOME was an internet-based survey, and subjects were recruited through postings on numerous email lists and social media sites and at presentations by the author. Because people who have experienced harassment at meetings are more likely to complete the survey than those who have not had such experiences, SOME will not provide accurate data regarding the incidence and prevalence of harassment at meetings. Despite this limitation, SOME does provide useful data on the types of harassment that occur at meetings and the steps that societies and other meeting producers can take to reduce the incidence of harassment at their events.

The survey questions are based on surveys used to measure the incidence and impact of street harassment[29] and the incidence and impact of sexual harassment at research field sites.[30]

Because the survey data collection was anonymous, SOME respondents who were willing to be interviewed about their experiences were invited to contact the researcher separately, by email.

Characteristics of SOME Respondents

Demographics. Of the 221 total respondents, 192 women (87 percent) and 29 men (13 percent) participated in the survey. Of the 29 men responding, 12 indicated that they had experienced or witnessed harassment at meetings. However, only three of the men who reported experiencing or witnessing harassment completed the questions about the type and frequency of harassment. Their responses did not change the results, and so the results below reflect all responses to those questions.

The survey also asked about gender identity, and two participants described themselves as transgender.

Eighty-five percent of respondents self-identified as straight/heterosexual, 13 percent identified as bisexual, and 2 percent identified as gay/lesbian.

Eighty-three percent of respondents self-identified as white, non-Hispanic; 9 percent identified as Hispanic or Latino/a; and 6 percent identified as Asian. Two percent of respon-

Of those who said they were harassed at least once at a scientific meeting:



84%
said the harasser commented on her appearance

79%
said they were leered or stared at

49%
said they were asked for sex

39%
said they were touched, groped, or grabbed

dents indicated they are Black or African-American, and 2 percent identified as multiracial.

Education and Employment. When asked about their highest level of education, 48 percent of respondents reported that they have completed a postdoctoral fellowship or residency; 23 percent have a doctoral degree, 12 percent have a master's degree, and 6 percent have a bachelor's degree. All respondents reported completing at least some college.

Respondents are employed primarily at universities or professional schools (31 percent), at a STEMM nonprofit (11 percent), or in the federal government (11 percent). Sixteen percent are students at the graduate level. Subject matter specialties were predominately in biological sciences (39 percent), mathematics (17 percent), and computer science/information technology (10 percent).

Society Membership and Meeting Attendance. As would be expected, nearly all respondents (97 percent) have been a member of at least one professional membership organization at some point; 72 percent have been members of three or more societies. When asked about current membership, 88 percent responded that they belong to at least one organization, and 41 percent belong to three or more.

Similarly, 97 percent of respondents have attended at least one professional meeting in the past 24 months, and 82 percent attended three or more. In addition to attendance at national or international meetings, 62 percent reported attending at least one local or regional meeting in the past two years.

Harassment Experiences of SOME Respondents

Sixty percent (123) of the respondents reported having experienced harassment at a meeting at some point in their careers. Those who indicated they had experienced harassment were asked to complete questions about the type of harassment they had experienced and how they had changed their behavior in response to being harassed. (Note: Questions in much of the survey allowed for more than one response.)

Of those who have experienced harassment, most (90 percent) reported being harassed because of their gender. A majority reported that they were targeted because of their age (59 percent), and nearly half were targeted because of how they were dressed (49 percent).

When asked about the type of harassment they had experienced, 75 percent or more of those responding reported:

- The harasser made a comment on the target's appearance (84 percent).
- The harasser called the target an endearment (83 percent).
- The harasser asked the target questions about her personal life (85 percent).
- The harasser leered or stared excessively at the target (79 percent).
- The harasser made a biased comment to or about the target (79 percent).
- The harasser volunteered information about his personal life (77 percent).

In interviews with SOME respondents, the subjects described having harassers question them about their living situation, marital status, and the quality of their "love life." One subject reported her harasser said he could tell her

Harassment has an impact on women's behavior.

52%
of harassment targets give greater thought to what they wear

49%
worry more about their personal safety at meetings

33%
avoid going to social or networking events



wedding band was fake. Harassers also volunteer information about their own marital status, their unhappiness "at home," and the strength and intensity of their sex drive.

More than 30 percent of respondents reported:

- The harasser asked for the target's phone number or hotel room number or asked for a date (59 percent).
- The harasser asked the target for sex (49 percent).
- The harasser made a bigoted comment to or about the target (43 percent).
- The harasser pretended an interest in the target's research as a prelude to making a sexual advance (41 percent).
- The harasser touched, groped, or grabbed the target (39 percent).
- The harasser followed or stalked the target (32 percent).
- The harasser purposely blocked the target's path (31 percent).

More than 20 percent of those responding reported that the harasser either promised or implied the possibility of career advancement in exchange for sex or threatened or implied a threat to the target's career due to her refusal of sexual favors (i.e., "quid pro quo" harassment).

A small number of respondents also reported that harassers had "flashed" or "mooned" them, had masturbated in front of them, or had assaulted them.

How Harassment Changes Behavior

When asked how respondents' behavior at meetings had changed as a result of being harassed, the most common responses were:

- They avoid the people who harassed them (61 percent).
- They give greater thought to what they wear (52 percent).
- They think more about their personal safety at meetings (49 percent).
- They avoid social events at meetings such as offsite events, events where alcohol is served, group dinners or sight-seeing excursions, social or networking events, or events that are likely to be crowded (33 percent).

A small percentage (13 percent) reported no longer attending or submitting abstracts for the meeting at which they were harassed, and 19 percent reported no change in their behavior as a result of being harassed.

Barriers to Reporting Harassment

Of those reporting experiences of harassment at meetings in the survey, 82 percent said that they had not reported that harassment when it occurred. The reasons most frequently cited for not reporting harassment were:

- The target thought the harassment was not serious enough to report (70 percent).
- The target did not know how or to whom to report the incident (54 percent).
- The target was afraid of being labeled a complainer or trouble-maker (46 percent).
- The target was afraid her report would not be taken seriously (42 percent).
- The target was afraid she would be blamed for inviting or encouraging the harassment (24 percent).
- The target was afraid that word would get out about her complaint or that the harasser would find out she had complained and would retaliate (20 percent).

Of the 18 percent of respondents who said they had reported harassment, most (63 percent) said they had reported it to a friend or colleague. Very few (10 percent)

Harassment targets are reluctant to report harassment.

54%
said they did not know how or to whom to report it

46%
said they were afraid of being labeled a complainer or trouble-maker



24%
said they were afraid of being blamed for the harassment

reported the incident to a staff member or volunteer with the organization that produced the meeting. Of those who reported harassment to someone who was in a position to act on the report, the majority (65 percent) said that either they did not know what happened as a result of their report or they knew that nothing was done.

Of those who experienced harassment, less than half (43 percent) said they would report an incident of harassment if it happened to them in the future. The reasons they gave for being willing to report incidents were related to improving the overall meeting experience for attendees and included:

- I want to make sure it doesn't happen to anyone else (81 percent).
- No one should be allowed to get away with this (74 percent).
- I want to help ensure the safety of all meeting attendees (72 percent).
- I want the meeting staff to know this is going on (58 percent).

Those who said they would not report harassment should it occur in the future said:

- They were afraid they wouldn't be listened to (60 percent).
- They did not know how or to whom to report it (56 percent).
- They were afraid the harasser would find out they had reported it (42 percent).
- They were afraid they would be blamed for inviting or encouraging the harassment (33 percent).
- They were afraid report would not be kept confidential (29 percent).

Those who reported experiencing harassment said that they would be more likely to report a future incident if:

- They knew how and to whom to report it (76 percent).
- They knew the report would be kept confidential (73 percent).
- They knew the meeting had an anti-harassment policy or code of conduct (62 percent).
- They knew what action would be taken (60 percent).

What Can Meeting Organizers and Producers Do?

Of all the respondents to the survey who answered this question:

- More than 77 percent responded that meeting organizers should ban repeat or serial harassers.
- Seventy percent want meetings to have an anti-harassment policy and to enforce that policy.
- Only five percent indicated they believe that nothing can be done, harassment is just something that happens at meetings.

Harassment Works as Intended

Women who have experienced harassment at meetings reported changes in their behavior as a result of being harassed. Concern about their personal safety, concern about how to dress to avoid being harassed, and a desire to avoid the harasser were the most common reactions reported. These reflect an internalization of the message that women are unwelcome or don't belong at meetings and that they are the ones responsible for ensuring their own safety while at meetings.

By forcing women to consider their safety and appearance in ways that men do not, harassers effectively reduce the level

Women want societies and associations to take action to stop harassment.

77%
said that repeat harassers should be banned from future meetings

70%
want a meeting code of conduct or anti-harassment policy that is strictly enforced



of participation of women at meetings. The stress of constantly surveying surroundings for the appearance of threat keeps women from fully participating in and benefiting from meeting attendance. The concern about safety puts significant limits on the activities that form the purpose of meeting attendance, making it harder to learn from presentations, to be effective when presenting, and to make connections with others. This is emphasized by the high percentage of respondents who indicated that they avoid social events, crowded areas (including poster sessions), and events at which alcohol is served. By limiting women's participation in this way, harassers are effectively interfering with the efforts of scientific societies to promote the success and advancement of women in scholarly and technical fields. Although scientific societies may take great pride in the role that their meetings play in advancing research and education, the quality of these meetings is compromised by the "missing stairs" and the open secret of harassment.

Reporting Harassment

The survey results reflect the effectiveness of sexual and gender-based harassment as a form of social control. Women who said they had been targets of harassment were afraid to report the behavior, even though most of them believe the harassers should not get away with it. Women did not report harassment out of fear that they would be labeled a complainer or troublemaker, that they would be subjected to further harassment or retaliation, and that they would be ignored or blamed for encouraging the harassment.

Despite this reluctance, a large majority of respondents indicated that they would consider reporting harassment provided that the meeting producer had an anti-harassment policy in place, that they knew where and how to report it, and that the report would be kept confidential.

Thus, the burden is on scientific societies and other meeting producers to ensure that incidents of harassment are handled in a way that avoids the potential for retaliation, damage to the target's reputation, and other social and career harms.

What Societies and Associations Can Do To Stop and Prevent Harassment

The survey respondents expressed overwhelming support for the establishment and enforcement of anti-harassment policies for meetings.[31] In particular, the option of banning repeat or serial harassers from attending future meetings received significant support, and has been adopted as a part of the code of conduct enforcement by several organizations.

A handful of scientific societies have responded to the call to end harassment at meetings. In particular, in 2013 the Entomological Society of America adopted and implemented a clear and effective policy based on the Ada Initiative's recommendations. The American Association for the Advancement of Science strengthened the code of conduct for their meeting in 2015, clarifying the definition of harassment and adding information on how to report harassment at their meeting. The American Astronomical Society, the American Geophysical Union, and the American Chemical Society have adopted codes of conduct that include gender-based harassment. Simply adopting a policy is not sufficient to prevent harassers' behavior. Full implementation includes:

- as part of the process of registering for the meeting, requiring registrants to indicate that they have read and agree to abide by the policy;

The adoption of a code of conduct and the commitment to its enforcement must come from the highest level of organizational governance, with authority granted to the organization's staff to implement enforcement procedures.

- publicizing the policy widely at meetings, including prominent placement in meeting materials (print and online), posting the policy throughout the meeting venue, announcing the policy at the start of each plenary session (not just the opening session), and including a statement about the policy in slideshows that display between sessions;
- training staff (and volunteers, if necessary) how to take incident reports;
- assigning one individual to speak to the target, the harasser, and witnesses and empowering that individual or a small group of individuals (no more than three) to make decisions on what action to take;
- taking action at the meeting whenever possible;
- as much as possible, maintaining strict confidentiality, such that any "news" about the incident and the organization's response does not come from organization staff or volunteers;
- establishing a grievance procedure that can be activated after the meeting ends, to give harassers the opportunity to appeal decisions.

For a meeting anti-harassment policy to be effective, it is crucial that decisions be made and action taken as quickly as possible, keeping in mind that:

- Women are unlikely to take the time to make false reports of harassment at meetings. (Data from workplace harassment studies show that less than 15 percent of reports of workplace harassment are found to be false.)
- Attendance at meetings is a privilege, not a right, and harassers abuse that privilege.
- Harassers pose a threat to the safety and participation of conference attendees, and eliminating that threat is of highest priority.

Conclusions

Most scientific societies and other meeting producers are unaware of how often harassment occurs at their meetings. Women are reluctant to complain about harassing behavior out of fear of retaliation, fear of damage to their careers, or simply not wanting to be labeled as a troublemaker by colleagues. Rather than simply complain, women members of scientific societies who are fed up with the extent of the harassment they experience at meetings have begun to create "allies" programs, in which women volunteers make themselves available to be contacted by any woman who feels her comfort or safety is being compromised by a harasser. The fact that women are establishing procedures for dealing with harassment, without sanction by the meeting organizers, is a strong indicator of the seriousness and extent of this problem.

The burden should not be on the targets of harassment to make the case for adoption and enforcement of a meeting code of conduct. The adoption of a code of conduct and the commitment to its enforcement must come from the highest level of organizational governance, with authority granted to the organization's staff to implement enforcement procedures.

Organizations who claim a commitment to diversity and inclusion, and to the advancement of women and other underrepresented groups, must address this issue effectively. To ignore the problem of sexual and gender-based harassment belies those claims. The privilege of membership and full participation in scientific societies requires behavior that is respectful, professional, and collegial toward participants of all genders. It is past time to acknowledge the open secret of harassment and get to work to repair the missing stairs.

CALL TO ACTION

Leaders of scientific and other scholarly societies who are committed to the full inclusion and participation of women and other underrepresented minorities must take action.

Companies and organizations that sponsor meetings should require adoption and enforcement of anti-harassment policies or codes of conduct as a condition of funding.

Acknowledging the existence of harassment within their ranks is only the beginning of what organizations can do.There are many concrete steps to take to begin to address the depth of the problem at professional gatherings. Here are some of them:

- Adopt, implement, and enforce anti-harassment policies or codes of conduct for meetings.
- Hire or train at-meeting responders (preferably paid staff, not volunteer leadership) to handle harassment incident reports.
- Provide bystander intervention and ally training on when and how to intervene in harassment incidents.
- Provide training to session chairs and moderators to stop harassment and bullying by or of speakers and during question-and-answer sessions.

Invited speakers should refuse to present at meetings that do not have and enforce an anti-harassment policy or code of conduct.

Companies and organizations that sponsor meetings should require adoption and enforcement of anti-harassment policies or codes of conduct as a condition of funding.

Meeting exhibitors and vendors should:

- Avoid the use of images, slogans, or other marketing materials that demean or objectify women.
- Explicitly include harassment by other meeting participants in corporate sexual harassment policy.
- Develop policies and procedures for reporting harassment of employees and steps to stop the harassment.
- Train employees on what they can do to stop harassment if they are the target and what to do if they witness someone else being harassed.

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End Notes

1 Langelan, Martha J. *Back Off! How to Confront and Stop Sexual Harassment and Harassers.* NY: Simon & Schuster. 1993.

2**https://sufism.org/origins/rumi/rumi-excerpts/poems-of-rumi-tr-by-coleman-barks-published-by-threshold-books-2**

3 Wood, Bernard. Zero tolerance. Period. *Science* 2015;350:487.

4 **https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Missing_stair**

5 Although men are occasionally the targets of harassment, in most situations of sexual or gender-based harassment, the harasser is a man who targets women.

6 In this paper, the term "meetings" is used to refer to any event or gathering for the purpose of scientific or professional education or training or the presentation and dissemination of research results.

7 **www.adainitiative.org**

8 A timeline of documented events can be found at **http://geekfeminism.wikia.com/wiki/Timeline_of_incidents**

9 **http://geekfeminism.wikia.com/wiki/Conference_anti-harassment/Adoption**

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21 Wood, Bernard. Zero tolerance. Period. *Science* 350: p. 487. 2015. **http://www.sciencemag.org/content/350/6260/487.full?sid=45cb8637-5238-421a-a2c8-740fdf87b855**

22 Chen, Sophia. Astronomy allies team up to confront sexual harassment. *APS News* vol. 24. December 2015. **https://www.aps.org/publications/apsnews/201512/astronomy.cfm**

23 "Meeting participants" includes anyone present at a meeting, including attendees, staff, contractors, exhibitors, vendors, sponsors, and venue staff.

24 In 2012, Stop Street Harassment (SSH) commissioned a study by the market research firm GfK, which resulted in "Unsafe and Harassed in Public Spaces: A National Street Harassment Report." Using a nationally representative survey and the results of focus group sessions across the US, SSH found that:

- More than 60 percent of women reported experiencing at least one type of street harassment, including verbal harassment, sexual touching, following, flashing, and being forced to do something sexual.
- Most (86 percent) of women who reported being harassed said they had been harassed more than once.
- Most (81 percent) women who reported being harassed reported a change in their behavior as a result of the experience.
- Around half (53 percent) of the survey respondents said that they had done something proactive about harassment they experienced or witnessed.
- Near all respondents (91 percent) believe there are ways to stop street harassment.

25 Unsafe and harassed in public spaces: A national street harassment report. Reston, VA: Stop Street Harassment. 2014. p. 5. **http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/National-Street-Harassment-Report-November-29-20151.pdf**

26 For an excellent review and analysis of the literature on harassment, power, and status, see: Berdahl, JL. 2007 Harassment based on sex: Protecting social status in the context of gender hierarchy. *Academy of Management Review* 32: 641-658.

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31 A model anti-harassment policy and procedures for implementing such a policy are available at **http://bit.ly/anti-harassmentmodels.**



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- development and adoption of meeting codes of conduct;
- staff training on harassment awareness, active bystander intervention and de-escalation, and code of conduct enforcement
- workshops on active bystander intervention, how to resist harassment, and how to be an effective ally;
- ombudsman services, serving as the initial point of contact for harassment reports and investigations at meetings.

Her interest in the issue of harassment and bullying emerged from her experiences as an association CEO, and her training as a self-defense instructor.

Sherry is co-author (with Raven Dana) of *The Book of How: Answers to Life's Most Important Question.*

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