

FACULTY

For Minority Female Astronomers, a New Research Effort Backs Up Anecdotes of Harassment

By *Fernanda Zamudio-Suaréz* | JULY 11, 2017

Women working in astronomy and planetary sciences have long spoken up about workplace harassment; a new paper now has data to back up those anecdotes.

Published in *Journal of Geophysical Research: Planets*, the paper, "Double Jeopardy in Astronomy and Planetary Science: Women of Color Face Greater Risks of Gendered and Racial Harassment," surveyed 474 astronomers and planetary scientists about their workplace experiences from 2011 to 2015. A standout statistic: Forty percent of women of color who responded said they felt unsafe at work because of their gender or sex, while 28 percent said they had felt unsafe because of their race.

Among all the scientists surveyed, women from minority racial and ethnic groups reported the highest rates of harassment, assault, and negative experiences. Although there is no one factor that explains why so many women responded that they have been harassed, two of the paper's co-authors said that some of the problems may stem from aspects specific to the field of astronomy.

Kathryn B.H. Clancy, an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and one of the paper's co-authors, said the field has been dominated with male leaders — department heads, deans, and prominent scientists — for longer than fields like the social sciences or life sciences. Getting over the hurdles that come with years of male-dominated leadership can be tough, even when a new female leader is appointed.

"I think there's high prevalence of sexual harassment and other types of harassment across all of these places," Ms. Clancy said. "But I think women have more social support and more means to work against some of these type of hostile workplaces when there's higher representation."

Increasing the number of female leaders in these departments can seem like an easy fix, but too often women in leadership positions are selected for their willingness to adopt the norms of the men who led before them, Ms. Clancy said. And it's usually white women, not women of color, appointed to these leadership positions, she added.

"Just generally speaking, diversity programs and affirmative-action programs: Who have they benefited the most over the last several decades? White women, right?" Ms. Clancy said. "So, again, I think the bigger issue for me is I want to see more women of color in leadership positions."

Women in the field are reaching points in their careers where leadership roles are available and having new leaders tackle issues like harassment is key, said Christina Richey, a former chair of the American Astronomical Society's Committee on the Status of Women in Astronomy and one of the paper's co-authors.

The nature of the field may also explain why harassment is so prevalent, Ms. Richey said. For example, when scientists are participating in an observatory run, or when astronomers travel to an observatory to study planets, stars, and galaxies for multiple nights at a time, they are taking notes after looking through a telescope with only one other person. This type of research forces moments of isolation between a woman and maybe just one colleague, likely a man.

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Such interactions aren't limited to faculty members. Graduate students may also deal with forced socialization during poster sessions at conferences, Ms. Richey said. If a noted scholar comes up to a female graduate student to ask questions about her poster or paper and begins to act inappropriately, the student

has to get through the

uncomfortable moment on her own.

Leaders, male or female, have to keep the field's unique situations in mind when setting policies to deal with harassment in the discipline, she said.

"You have these forced isolation and socialization moments, but I'll be perfectly honest with you I don't believe astronomy and planetary science is separate from the issues that society at large is dealing with," Ms. Richey said.

This paper, including its recommendations to help mend the hostile workplace that women from minority groups face in astronomy and planetary sciences, is just the first step of these authors' research on the issue. In its suggested solutions the paper echoed and cited proposals published by women of color about the topic.

Ms. Richey said she'd like to see further research on what type of training, from bystander intervention to hands-on style lessons, gives the best results. "Which of these techniques is the one that is seen as, shall I say, the most proven effective, so that we can then start to make that the standard protocol instead of just checking boxes."

Ms. Clancy said the research team also conducted interviews to go with the data, and plans to publish a paper that digs into more of those responses. Exploring the narratives and interviews will hopefully help more people understand the challenges women face in the discipline. "The solutions come a lot more from listening to people, and from in particular listening to people of color, than it does from, you know, running stats."

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