

OPENING STATEMENT
Ranking Member Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)

House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology
Subcommittee on Research and Technology
“A Review of Sexual Harassment and Misconduct in Science”
February 27, 2018

Thank you Chairwoman Comstock and Ranking Member Lipinski for holding this very important hearing on sexual harassment and misconduct in science. And thank you to the witnesses for being here this morning. This is an exceptionally qualified panel of experts to help inform a discussion on this topic and I look forward to your testimony.

As my colleagues have noted, one-third of female scientists overall report having experienced some form of sexual harassment. The problem is especially acute for women of color, who bear the burden of both sexism and racism. A 2017 survey of astronomers and planetary scientists found that 40 percent of women of color reported feeling unsafe in their workplaces. Women of color still face so many cultural and institutional barriers to successful careers in STEM. I am saddened to know that concern for their personal safety remains one of them.

Several factors contribute to an environment in which sexual harassment is pervasive. Most fields of science remain male dominated. Even fields that graduate large numbers of women have few women in senior positions. Students and post-docs depend almost exclusively on their faculty advisors in the early stages of their scientific careers. This intrinsic power imbalance between predominantly male faculty and their trainees puts young women at particular risk. Another factor is the large amount of money and prestige that faculty in STEM fields bring to a university. There have been some highly publicized cases in recent years in which it seems to many of us that the universities in question did the wrong thing before they did the right thing in handling a case involving a high profile male faculty member.

I recognize the difficulties that university administrators face in providing due process for all parties while minimizing their legal liability and protecting their reputation. However, I also believe that we are entering a new era in which following the letter of the law – in this case Title IX – is not sufficient. We must develop and implement new policies that go further to protect women and reduce the scourge of sexual harassment.

While I applaud NSF for their recent steps to strengthen oversight of universities, I also want to recognize the agency for its nearly two-decade old ADVANCE program. ADVANCE awards grants to support institutions in their efforts to identify and eliminate structural barriers to the full participation and advancement of women in academia.

I believe that a mix of incentive-based interventions and improved enforcement of Title IX – a carrot and stick approach - will be required to achieve our goals. I also look forward to a discussion about the challenges and merits of including sexual harassment in official definitions of research misconduct.

I hope that today's hearing represents the beginning and not the end of this Committee's role in fostering a public discussion of this critical issue. Every time we help chip away at a barrier to the full participation of women in STEM, we help strengthen the U.S. scientific enterprise overall.

I yield back.