

OPENING STATEMENT
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of the Subcommittee on Research and Technology

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, for holding this hearing and thank you to the witnesses for being with us this morning to discuss this very important issue. The stories we have been hearing about widespread sexual harassment occurring across different workplaces, industries, and seemingly in every corner of our society are sickening. We must do all we can to fight the scourge of harassment, sexual and otherwise. There is much we need to do as a society to ensure that all individuals are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve. I am hopeful that this societal moment, in which we are collectively recognizing the scope of this problem, will lead to a real significant change.

Today’s hearing is specifically about sexual harassment and misconduct in the sciences. The issue of sexual harassment in the sciences is not new. It is a long-standing problem of mistreatment that violates individuals’ dignity, and it is keeping some of the brightest minds from pursuing their ambitions and, thus, impeding the progress of science. It is critical for this Committee and this Congress to find new and better ways to address sexual harassment and misconduct in the sciences. This conversation has taken on a new sense of urgency in recent years due to numerous high-profile revelations involving prominent scientists. Their individual stories have helped to bring this issue to light and research shows that their experiences are not rare.

A survey conducted by one of the panelists here today, Dr. Clancy, revealed that 35 percent of female scientists have experienced some form of harassment. On this Committee, we often talk about encouraging more women to pursue their interests in science. How might a young woman’s decision to pursue science be affected when she learns she has a one in three chance of being sexually harassed during her career? I look forward to hearing more about the research into sexual harassment in the sciences – including the impact on the recruitment, retention, and advancement of women.

A major challenge is the low rate of individuals reporting when they are harassed. A 2015 campus climate survey on sexual assault and harassment revealed that only eight percent of victims report their experiences. The most commonly-cited reason for students not reporting their harassment was that they did not think anything would be done. And many junior scientists do not report harassment by their more senior colleagues for fear that doing so will negatively impact their careers. We cannot effectively address the problem of sexual harassment in science without a better understanding of the scope of the problem. One topic I hope we discuss today is how the reporting systems can be made more accessible and responsive.

The National Academies is conducting a study to review the research on the impact of sexual harassment and to identify successful policy interventions. This is an important step toward improving our understanding of how best to address sexual harassment to the benefit of individuals and the scientific enterprise as a whole. I look forward to the recommendations the study panel will produce and to working with my colleagues on this committee to implement them.

In the meantime, universities, federal science agencies, and scientific societies all have a role to play in creating a more welcoming, safe, and inclusive environment for STEM students and researchers. Fortunately, promising changes are being made. For example, the National Science Foundation has proposed a change to its award terms and conditions, requiring universities to report findings of sexual harassment; NASA recently launched an anti-harassment campaign to assess and improve the training and coordination related to their anti-harassment programs; and several scientific societies, including the American Geophysical Union, which is here with us today, have updated their codes of conduct and training programs to prohibit and prevent harassment.

As a longtime supporter of women in the workplace, I am encouraged to see progress being made on this issue and I look forward to a discussion on additional cultural and structural changes that will foster a safe environment for all students and researchers. We cannot afford to lose another brilliant scientist because she did not feel safe in her lab. But even more important, no one should stand by idly while we have an opportunity to prevent harassment in any context.

Thank you. I yield back the balance of my time.