


EDITORIAL

Excluding scientist survivors from the NASEM Action Collaborative is a step backward in changing culture to prevent sexual harassment

Sharona E. Gordon 

The 2018 report from the National Academies of Sciences, Medicine, and Engineering (NASEM) on sexual harassment of women in academic sciences raised awareness in our community about the high prevalence of sexual harassment, the harm it causes, and the need for change at the systemic level and in our academic culture (NASEM, 2018). As a next step forward, NASEM formed an Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education. “The purpose of the action collaborative is to bring together academic leaders and key stakeholders to prevent sexual harassment across all disciplines and among all people in higher education” (NASEM, 2019a). In this Editorial, I will discuss ways in which the Action Collaborative is really a step backward for institutions and an insult to scientist survivors of sexual harassment, whistleblowers, and community members.

The NASEM report recommends that anti-sexual harassment efforts focus on a form of sexual harassment known as gender harassment, defined as “verbal and nonverbal behaviors that convey hostility, objectification, exclusion, or second-class status about members of one gender” (NASEM, 2018). When pervasive and persistent, gender harassment can have as negative an impact on the physical and mental health of targets as sexual coercion and unwanted sexual attention, the other two forms of sexual harassment described in the NASEM report. Kathryn Clancy, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Illinois and an author of the NASEM report on sexual harassment, recently summarized the report’s findings as follows: “Our main finding was this: Since gender harassment is a more pervasive problem than other, more sexual forms of harassment, then absolutely everything we do to try to prevent harassment is wrong. The training programs, official reporting mechanisms, and overly legal definitions of sexual harassment are akin to mapping only the tip of an iceberg and then thinking you can navigate around it. The most treacherous part—the gender harassment—is hidden” (Yates, 2019).

Combating gender harassment requires culture change. The critical importance of culture is reflected in the NASEM report’s full title, *Sexual Harassment of Women: Climate, Culture, and Consequences in Academic Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine*. Historically, culture change is achieved from the bottom up, not the top down. Thus, laws that protect a group’s rights are ineffective when the dominant culture does not respect those rights. A sad example is the systematic oppression of black people in the United States, including state violence against unarmed children and disenfranchisement of black voters nearly 150 years after constitutional amendments protecting their right to equal protection and their right to vote. In the case of LGBTQ individuals and families, in contrast, legal protections lag behind growing cultural acceptance. A mountain of evidence demonstrates that changes in individual behavior result from changing social norms (e.g., Ayoub and Garretson, 2017). The television program *Will and Grace*, in which gay characters were welcomed into living rooms across the world, was effective at promoting LGBTQ acceptance because of its effect on changing social norms (Sobel, 2015).

The goals of the Action Collaborative do not align with the recommendations of the NASEM report to focus on culture change and eschew current, ineffective approaches to reducing and preventing sexual harassment. The four Action Collaborative goals are to (1) raise awareness about sexual harassment and how it occurs, the consequences of sexual harassment, and the organizational characteristics and recommended approaches that can prevent it; (2) share and elevate evidence-based institutional policies and strategies to reduce and prevent sexual harassment; (3) contribute to setting the research agenda, and gather and apply research results across institutions; and (4) develop a standard for measuring progress toward reducing and preventing sexual harassment in higher education (NASEM, 2019b). The nearly two thirds of women who report experiencing sexual harassment (NASEM, 2018) have no need for

Editor-in-Chief, *Journal of General Physiology*.

Correspondence to Sharona E. Gordon: seg@uw.edu

Views expressed in this editorial are those of the author.

© 2019 Gordon. This article is distributed under the terms of an Attribution–Noncommercial–Share Alike–No Mirror Sites license for the first six months after the publication date (see <http://www.rupress.org/terms/>). After six months it is available under a Creative Commons License (Attribution–Noncommercial–Share Alike 4.0 International license, as described at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>).

another awareness-raising committee that describes how the hierarchical nature of academia fosters sexual harassment. Descriptions and policies developed to evaluate sexual harassment have been well described. The first formal measures of sexual harassment used in the work place and academia came out in the 1980s (Berkowitz, 2019). That original paper has been cited nearly 1,000 times, with newer iterations cited at similar frequencies. The Action Collaborative and its member institutions may view our current understanding of sexual harassment as news, but scientist survivors are well aware of the issues. The NASEM report cited “uninformed, unfocused, and uncommitted academic leaders” as a major cause of the high prevalence of sexual harassment in academic sciences, engineering, and medicine. These academic leaders are not well positioned to act as our midwives for culture change. Although many members of the Action Collaborative likely have the best of intentions, others are among the most egregious, unapologetic institutions who are currently in the news for protecting harassers and punishing survivors and whistleblowers. These institutions need remediation and external supervision, yet by joining the Action Collaborative, they can issue press releases lauding their efforts (e.g., [Duke Today, 2019](#); [Vanderbilt University Medical Center, 2019](#)). The implied seal of approval of NASEM and the more progressive Action Collaborative members provides the worst institutions with cover to continue with their shameful behavior.

In contrast with the inclusive, survivor-centered approach taken by the NASEM committee in preparation of its report, NASEM has excluded scientist survivors from Action Collaborative leadership. This approach is consistent with NASEM’s history of silencing and demeaning women. In 2017, NASEM elected an accused serial harasser as the editor of their flagship journal, *PNAS*. He was forced to resign the following year due to public outrage over his behavior ([Wadman, 2018](#)). In 2018, NASEM was called out by MeTooSTEM founder BethAnn McLaughlin for studying sexual harassment, but still allowing men who had grabbed, groped, raped, diminished, and demeaned women to be members. More than 5,000 scientists signed a petition demanding they do better ([Change.org, 2019](#)). The NAS membership is currently voting on a policy change that would allow them to eject members found guilty of sexual harassment by their institutions, which is a step in the right direction. However, they will consider ejecting proven harassers only if scientist survivors file complaints directly with NASEM ([Wadman, 2019](#)). This approach retraumatizes scientist survivors and does additional harm by requiring them to break nondisclosure agreements. Even the manner in which the 2018 NASEM report on sexual harassment was rolled out disregarded the needs and contributions of scientist survivors of sexual harassment. This fall, NASEM committee teams visited dozens of campuses to share the results of their study. Incomprehensibly, the teams refused to meet with scientist survivors when asked. In addition, NASEM allowed campus administrators to prescreen questions for the committee’s presentations, eliminating scientist survivors’ questions and rebukes of the current climate on campus.

Survivor-centered policies can only arise from working groups that not only listen to the voices of scientist survivors but center them as leaders. The experience of sexual harassment is disempowering and dehumanizing. When academic leaders develop policies and strategies related to sexual harassment without including survivors, these leaders further disempower and dehumanize them. Institutional delegates to the Action Collaborative are primarily senior academic administrators, drawn from the same ranks as those who have protected sexual harassers at the expense of scientist survivors for decades. In this way, the Action Collaborative resembles the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). The USCCB is responsible for policies that protected priests who engaged in the sexual abuse of children and other parishioners, intimidated survivors into silence, and facilitated ongoing criminal behavior. The USCCB now recognizes that it has lost the moral authority to lead. “I have no illusions about the degree to which trust in the bishops has been damaged by these past sins and failures,” said Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo, President of the USCCB. “It will take work to rebuild that trust” ([Goodstein, 2018](#)). Leaders must work hand in hand with survivors, sharing power, to regain trust and develop policies and strategies that truly meet the needs of those most affected by sexual harassment. Real healing requires hard conversations where we name and admit to what has been silenced, hidden, and brushed aside. We need to talk about power, control, and behavioral norms. Moving forward requires learning new skills and intentional, ongoing evaluation to determine where we are improving and where we need more work. Accountability is an essential element of trust. Institutions must be held accountable for their behavior and adherence to legal standards for preventing sexual harassment, addressing harassers, and not tolerating retaliation against those who report sexual harassment.

Regaining the trust of the academic communities they lead will require senior administrators to show, in the words of the NASEM report, moral courage. It takes moral courage to bear witness to the pain of those we have wronged. It takes moral courage to acknowledge that our systems for supporting survivors and preventing sexual harassment are wholesale broken. It takes moral courage to admit that we cannot change culture from the top down. It takes moral courage to invite those we have wronged into the discussion and share power in shaping new approaches.

Sexual harassment is arguably the biggest problem faced by our community of scientists today. The NASEM report details the many losses we face due to sexual harassment, including loss of talent, resources, and productivity. Yet, I believe these tangible losses pale in comparison to the stain of sexual harassment on our integrity. The names of sexual harassers are already being taken down from buildings (e.g., Reidar Dittmann at St. Olaf College and Francisco J. Ayala at the University of California, Irvine) the way statues of confederate leaders are being removed, or at least contextualized, in public spaces. We cannot, we must not, continue to perpetuate the disempowering, dehumanizing system that is hurting so many people. Let’s be the generation of scientists that takes real action to end sexual harassment in the sciences,

engineering, and medicine. Let's show NASEM's Action Collaborative what meaningful action looks like.

References

- Ayoub, P., and J. Garretson. 2017. Getting the Message Out: Media Context and Global Changes in Attitudes toward Homosexuality. *Comp. Polit. Stud.* 50:1055–1085. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414016666836>
- Berkowitz, A.D. 2019. The Social Norms Approach to Violence Prevention. <http://www.alanberkowitz.com/articles/BPI.pdf>
- Change.org. 2019. Remove Sexual Harassers from National Academy of Sciences. <https://www.change.org/p/national-academy-of-sciences-remove-sexual-harassers-from-national-academy-of-sciences>.
- Duke Today. 2019. Duke Joins National Academies Partnership Preventing Sexual Harassment. <https://today.duke.edu/2019/04/duke-joins-national-academies-partnership-preventing-sexual-harassment>
- Goodstein, L. 2018. Catholic Bishops Promising to Fix Sex Abuse Problem Face Cover-Up Accusations. *The New York Times*.
- NASEM. 2018. *Sexual Harassment of Women: Climate, Culture, and Consequences in Academic Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine*. The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/24994>
- NASEM. 2019a. Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education. <http://sites.nationalacademies.org/sites/sexualharassmentcollaborative/index.htm>
- NASEM. 2019b. National Academies Join Colleges and Universities to Launch Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education. http://www8.nationalacademies.org/onpinews/newsitem.aspx?RecordID=04102019&_ga=2.174989218.1850210339.1554817106-1918162978.1532724522
- Sobel, S.L. 2015. Culture Shifting at Warp Speed: How the Law, Public Engagement, and Will & Grace Led to Social Change for LGBT People. *St Johns Law Rev.* 89:143–194.
- Vanderbilt University Medical Center. 2019. VUMC joins with National Academies, other institutions to launch initiative to prevent sexual harassment in higher education. <http://news.vumc.org/2019/04/11/vumc-joins-with-national-academies-other-institutions-to-launch-initiative-to-prevent-sexual-harassment-in-higher-education/>
- Wadman, M. 2018. Accused cancer scientist resigns as editor of prestigious journal. *Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aau0602>
- Wadman, M. 2019. National Academy of Sciences will vote on ejecting sexual harassers. *Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aax5204>
- Yates, D. 2019. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign News Bureau. How does sexual harassment affect young women in physics? <https://news.illinois.edu/view/6367/778750>