



COMMITTEE ON  
**SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY**  
Lamar Smith, Chairman

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## **Statement by Chairwoman Barbara Comstock (R-Va.)**

*A Review of Sexual Harassment and Misconduct in Science*

**Chairwoman Comstock:** Imagine being a young astronomer and your dream of working with one of the most well renowned astronomers in the world comes true.

Then imagine the horror when the professor you hope will be your mentor turns into your tormentor—a predator. You are in his office and he tries to kiss you. You spur his advances, but later at a work dinner, he puts his hand on your leg and slides it up your thigh under the table. You try to report the behavior, but some at the university are more interested in protecting one of their most powerful and lucrative researchers.

This happened. This is a real case. And that young woman left the field of astronomy because of harassment.

Now imagine if this were your daughter, your sister, your wife or your mother. Driven out of a dream career in a field with lifelong high-earning potential.

Sexual harassment, abuse of power and intimidation in the workplace, classroom or research field site is unacceptable in any situation. Period.

Whether it's in Congress or in the fields of science and technology, every individual has a right to a safe work environment—free of harassment—where one can learn and work.

The last few months have been a watershed moment and opened many eyes to systematic harassment and abuse in a variety of workplaces.

What has happened in Hollywood, the media and in other industries has opened the floodgates for women who are no longer afraid to speak out against predators in their workplaces.

For the last few months, I have worked with my colleagues to reform the process of reporting sexual harassment in Congress and to create a zero tolerance environment. Democrats and Republicans—men and women—have been working to change the process so that victims have a safe place to turn and predators are no longer protected by taxpayer dollars and silence.

Today is an opportunity to shine a light on how predatory and abusive behavior are affecting another community—science.

Women in science are particularly vulnerable to harassment and abuse. Powerful scientists who manage large federal grants have enormous influence within universities and exert significant control over the education and training of young scientists.

If a PhD student is being harassed by her adviser, what safe avenues does she have for reporting the misconduct without derailing her education and career? How does a university respond to this when an abuser is a rainmaker for the university?

As more and more victims come forward, I cannot help but wonder how many brilliant women and their ideas we have lost in the STEM fields to harassment. How many women have given up good, life-long earning capacity as they leave fulfilling careers due to harassment?

Currently, there are laws and policies in place designed to protect individuals from gender based discrimination and harassment in education, but the process does not seem to be functioning well.

Since October, the Science Committee has been investigating how federal science agencies and universities handle harassment complaints. So far, the committee has found inconsistency in how different agencies deal with complaints and investigations, unclear policies and procedures that leave victims unsure of where to turn, and institutions more interested in checking the boxes of compliance rather than doing the right thing. A survey by the National Postdoctoral Association found that nearly 30 percent of post-doctorate candidates had experienced sexual harassment.

I was pleased to see that two weeks ago National Science Foundation (NSF) Director France Córdova make a strong statement to the science community about zero tolerance for harassment.

NSF also announced it is taking additional steps towards protecting scientists and students. We are fortunate to have a strong, accomplished woman leading NSF, and I appreciate her shining a light on this problem and acting quickly to respond. I look forward to learning more about those proposed policies today.

The purpose of this hearing is to learn how science agencies and research institutions handle complaints under current law and policies, assess the impact of harassment on women's participation in STEM, and discuss recommendations for improving the process as well as the overall culture in science.

Taxpayers spend millions of dollars a year on research and education programs to get young girls interested in STEM. I meet young women eager to go into STEM careers from my district nearly every day.

I want to guarantee that every one of them is given the tools and support necessary to succeed, without fear of harassment or abuse.

I look forward to hearing the testimony of our witnesses and their ideas for ensuring a bright and safe future for every scientist.

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