

ICSU Committee on Freedom and Responsibility in the conduct of Science (CFRS)¹

Advisory Note²

Mobility and Field Research in the Sciences: Gender Equality and Prevention of Harassment

This Advisory Note provides advice on strategies to promote gender equality and equitable access to all resources in the practice of science, and to remove barriers to the full participation in science mobility and internationalization by women. Its focus is on field work and visiting scholars carrying out short- to medium-term research studies at home or abroad.

Research has shown that mobility is an important component of successful long term career advancement – particularly for women. Internationalization and the global cooperation of scientists is enhanced by mobility. ICSU Statute 5 on the Principle of Universality of Science commits ICSU and its Members to ensure the freedom of movement, association, expression and communication for scientists and to promote equitable and non-discriminatory access to science.³ One of the challenges in supporting freedom of movement and equitable access to science is harassment, especially gender-based harassment in the scientific workplace, be it a laboratory or a field research site. Scientific field work, and research and scholarship that moves beyond normally regulated workplace practices, provide particularly sensitive areas and are of concern to ICSU.

Barriers and challenges

Gender-based harassment, both overt and subtle, is reported to be a significant form of discrimination against women and occasionally men. This harassment includes actions by supervisors or peers as well as by other individuals encountered in field research circumstances. It creates a barrier to mobility and scientific networking and is contrary to the Principle of Universality of Science. The potential for gender-based harassment in the context of social hierarchies or dependencies in academic settings forces a particular responsibility on academic or research institutions to set clear standards, and on individual scientists and scholars to guard against any forms of gender-based harassment. As noted, women, in particular, are at risk for gender-based harassment. This can limit their mobility, and contribute to the well-documented underrepresentation of women among senior career scholars and leaders in science and industry. If not consistently and adequately addressed, these issues will negatively impact the scientific enterprise. They have the potential to harm the integrity of the research community, relationships among its practitioners, and victims' commitment to scientific research and scholarship.

Addressing this challenge to equitable access requires consistent strategies:

1. Documentation.

Systematic data on the incidence and prevalence of gender-based harassment in the science and research workforce in general, and in field work in particular, are lacking. ICSU Members, higher education and research institutions, and non-governmental organizations are therefore encouraged to collect relevant data and metrics on the harassment of scholars engaged in field research. Analysis and interpretation of these data should be a subject of publications, scientific meetings and advisory bodies.

2. Policies and Procedures.

Existing local or national harassment policies and the codes of conduct of universities and other research organisations must adequately cover field research and international research visits. In particular, the policies or codes of conduct should include a statement to the effect that scientific visitors to an organisation are covered by such a code and they should be so informed as part of their appointment or recruitment process.

Funding bodies are advised to ensure commitment to such practices at an organisational level for any research or scholarship activities they support. ICSU Members are encouraged to promote policies and procedures to address harassment in these international contexts.

These would typically include:

- Providing training to all members of the research community on the many forms of harassment, how to identify them, and how to deal with them;
- Developing a strong statement from research and scholarly organisations that any form of harassment is unacceptable;
- Developing easily accessible, transparent and confidential reporting mechanisms that can be readily invoked by field researchers in all circumstances. These could be an ombudsperson, a web resource or other crisis intervention resources;
- Implementing clear and well documented processes for ensuring reported harassment is reviewed and dealt with efficiently;
- Instituting clearly articulated sanctions against those found to perpetrate harassment, be they organisational members, visiting scholars, field researchers or interns, or others; and
- Supporting other organisations in dealing with harassment issues.

Harassment, particularly of field researchers or visiting scholars, is a scourge that must be purged from the scientific landscape.

This can be achieved with concerted action, and will lead to an improved work environment, increased gender equity, and measurably better outcomes for the practice of science.⁴

¹ The CFRS is a policy advisory committee of the International Council for Science (ICSU). See www.icsu.org/freedom-responsibility/freedom-responsibility-portal for its terms of reference and further information.

² This Advisory Note was developed by CFRS and does not necessarily reflect the views of individual ICSU Member organisations.

³ This commitment is echoed in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's), <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>; and see ICSU comments at <http://www.icsu.org/publications/reports-and-reviews/review-of-targets-for-the-sustainable-development-goals-the-science-perspective-2015/SDG-Report.pdf> .

⁴ This Advisory Note benefited from the presentations and discussion at the International Workshop “*Gender Issues in Field Research. Mobility and Internationalization of Science,*” held in Mexico City on 27 April 2016. This event was organised by the Mexican Academy of Sciences, ICSU Regional Office of Latin America and the Caribbean and ICSU/CFRS (see <http://www.icsu.org/news-centre/news/top-news/icsu-cfrs-workshop-on-gender-issues-in-field-research>).