A majority of researchers have knowledge of, been victimized by, or have observed sexual harassment while conducting fieldwork, based on an online survey sample of 666 respondents just published in PLOS One by Kathryn B.H. Clancy (U Illinois-Urbana-Champaign), Robin G. Nelson (Skidmore College), Julienne N. Rutherford (U Illinois-Chicago), Katie Hinde (Harvard U) (Survey of Academic Field Experiences (SAFE): Trainees Report Harassment and Assault).

The study revealed that the majority of those targeted for harassment and assault were undergraduates, graduate students, and postdoctoral researchers. In fact, “women trainees were disproportionately targeted for abuse, with women more often targeted by someone superior to them in the field site hierarchy. We worry this is at least one mechanism driving women from science,” said Dr. Clancy.

Dr. Rutherford points out that “previous work by other researchers has shown that being targeted by one’s superior in the workplace has a more severe impact on psychological well-being and job performance than when the perpetrator is a peer, suggesting that women may be even more burdened than men by the phenomenon of workplace sexual aggression.”

In response to the team’s preliminary report at the April 2013 meeting of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) issued a statement declaring zero tolerance for sexual harassment in academic, professional, fieldwork or any other settings where our members work. While the AAA does not have adjudicatory authority over these matters, our Statement of Ethics: Code of Professional Responsibility sets out our clear expectation that anthropologists “…have a responsibility to maintain respectful relationships with others. In mentoring students, interacting with colleagues, working with clients, acting as a reviewer or evaluator, or supervising staff, anthropologists should comport themselves in ways that promote an equitable, supportive and sustainable workplace environment.” Dr. Nelson added, “In many instances, our participants reported a lack of knowledge regarding institutional policies or appropriate reporting channels when misconduct occurs. These results suggested that, in effect, many researchers were ill-equipped to advocate for themselves or others in cases of harassment or assault.”

The AAA has a long-term commitment to improving the status of women in anthropology, and maintains a standing Committee on Gender Equity in Anthropology. The Committee is currently developing an educational initiative to better serve members, “Addressing Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment in Anthropology.” Committee Chair, Dr. Jennifer Wies, Associate Professor at Eastern Kentucky University, is leading this initiative. “Anthropologists have been researching and responding to sexual violence and sexual harassment in the field and at home for decades. The continued emphasis on this issue reminds us of the importance of proactive and effective prevention efforts and intervention strategies,” said Wies in an interview earlier today. Dr. Hinde concludes, “The discussion that emerges from the results published in PLOS One today provides an opportunity for our professional communities to come together and effect solutions to improve the experiences of our trainees and colleagues.”

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Founded in 1902, the American Anthropological Association is the world's largest professional organization of anthropologists, with more than 10,000 members. The association represents all specialties within anthropology – cultural anthropology, biological anthropology, archaeology, linguistics and applied anthropology.