

The Baltimore Charter for Women In Astronomy

“Women Hold up Half the Sky” -- Chinese saying

Preamble

We hold as fundamental that:

- Women and men are equally capable of doing excellent science.
- Diversity contributes to, rather than conflicts with, excellence in science.
- Current recruitment, training, evaluation and award systems often prevent the equal participation of women.
- Formal and informal mechanisms that are effectively discriminatory are unlikely to change by themselves. Both thought and action are necessary to ensure equal participation for all.
- Increasing the number of women in astronomy will improve the professional environment and improving the environment will increase the number of women.

This Charter addresses the need to develop a scientific culture within which both women and men can work effectively and within which all can have satisfying and rewarding careers. Our focus is on women but actions taken to improve the situation of women in astronomy should be applied aggressively to those minorities even more disenfranchised.

Rationale

Astronomy has a long and honorable tradition of participation by women, who have made many significant and highly creative contributions to the field. Approximately 15% of astronomers worldwide are women but there is wide geographical diversity, with some countries having none and others having more than 50%. This shows that scientific careers are strongly affected by social and cultural factors, and are not determined solely by ability.

The search for excellence which unites all scientists can be maintained and enhanced by increasing the diversity of its practitioners. Great discoveries have always occurred in times of cross-cultural enrichment: along trade routes, in periods of geographical exploration, among immigrants and multinationals. The introduction of new approaches frequently results in new breakthroughs. Achieving such diversity requires revised, not lesser, criteria for judging excellence, free of culturally-based perceptions of talent and promise.

A review of available information on the relative numbers and career histories of women and men in science reveals extensive discrimination. Access to the profession -- graduate education, hiring, promotion, funding -- is not always independent of gender. Unequal treatment of women in the laboratory, the lecture hall and the observatory, more subtle but at least as important as overt discrimination, creates a chilly climate which discourages and distresses women, alienates them from the field, and ultimately damages the profession.

Existing inequities can be eliminated only partially by legal stricture or they would not continue today. Improving the situation requires awareness of the very real barriers women currently face, including sexual stereotyping, opportunity and pay differentials, inappropriate time limits on advancement, overcritical scrutiny and sexual harassment. Sexual harassment, ranging from an uncomfortable work environment to unwanted sexual attention to overt extortion of sexual favors, can force confrontation between junior astronomers and older, better established colleagues who can strongly influence career advancement; it diverts attention from science to sex, places an undue burden on the harassed, and damages their self-esteem.

The entire profession must assume the immediate and ongoing responsibility for implementing strategies that will enable women to succeed within the existing structures of astronomy and allow the desired acceptance of diversity to develop fully.

Recommendations

1. Significant advances for women have been made possible by affirmative action. Affirmative action involves the establishment of serious goals, not rigid quotas, for achieving diversity in all aspects of the profession, including hiring, invited talks, committees, and awards.
 - (a) Standards for candidates should be established and publicized in advance. Criteria that are culturally based or otherwise extraneous to performance or the pursuit of scientific excellence should not be applied.
 - (b) Women should participate in the selection process. If insufficient numbers of women are available at particular institutions, outside scientists can be invited to assist. Men must share fully the responsibility for implementing affirmative action, as they hold the majority of leadership positions.
 - (c) The selection of women should reflect on average their numbers in the appropriate pool of candidates and normally at least one woman should be on the short list for any position, paid or honorific. When women are underrepresented in the pool, their numbers should be increased by active and energetic recruitment.

(d) Demographic information for each astronomical organization should be widely publicized. If the goals for affirmative action are not achieved, the reasons must be determined.

2. The criteria used in hiring, assignment, promotion and awards should be broadened in recognition of different pacing of careers, care of older and younger family members, and demands of dual-career households. Provision for day care facilities, family leave, time off and re-entry will instantly improve women's access to an astronomical career and is of equal benefit to men.
3. Strong action must be taken to end sexual harassment. Education and awareness programs are standard in U.S. government and industry and should be adopted by the astronomical community. Each institution should appoint one or more women to receive complaints about sexual harassment and to participate in the formal review process. Action against those who perpetrate sexual harassment should be swift and substantial.
4. Gender-neutral language and illustrations are important in the formation of expectations, both by those in power and those seeking entrance to the profession. Documents and discussions should be sensitive to bias that favors any one gender, race, sexual orientation, life style, or work style. Those who represent astronomy to the public should be particularly aware of the power of language and images which, intentionally or unintentionally, reflect on astronomy as a profession.
5. Physical safety is of concern to all astronomers and of particular significance to women, who often feel more vulnerable when working alone on campus or in observatories. This issue must be addressed by those in a position to affect security, making it possible for everyone to work at any hour, in any place, as necessary.

Call to Action

Improving the situation of women in astronomy will benefit, and is the responsibility of, astronomers at all levels. Department heads, observatory directors, policy committee chairs, and funding agency officials have a particular responsibility to facilitate the full participation of women: to nurture new talent, to ensure the effectiveness of teaching, and to examine and correct patterns of inequity. The profession should be responsible for regular review and assessment of the status of women in astronomy, in pursuit of equality and fairness for all.

A rational and collegial environment which allows full expression of intellectual style is necessary for achieving excellence in scientific research. Women should not have to be clones of male astronomers in order to participate in the mainstream of astronomical research. Women want and deserve the same opportunity as their male colleagues to achieve excellence in astronomy.

Signatories

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