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Vice Chair

July 24, 2014

Alan I. Leshner  
Chief Executive Officer and Executive Publisher, *Science*  
American Association for the Advancement of Science  
1200 New York Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20005

Dear Dr. Leshner:

Evidence shows science clearly has a woman problem. Women are clearly interested in science, since women earn about half the doctorates in science and engineering in the United States, but women make up only 21% of full science professors, 5% of full engineering professors, and 28% of the overall workforce.<sup>1,2</sup> Female resumes are viewed more negatively<sup>3</sup>, male scientists train fewer female students<sup>4</sup>, and female scientists receive 37% less grant funding.<sup>5</sup> Last week, it became clear that pervasive sexual harassment and hostile work environments are also major factors with which women in science must contend.

I was disappointed to learn that AAAS has itself contributed to this problem. The July 11 issue of *Science* Magazine featured a lurid cover photograph of transgender women in tight dresses and high heels with their heads cropped out of the frame. The use of headless, sexualized women of color on the cover of the most prestigious science publication in the United States sends the message that women and minorities still do not fully belong in the “boy’s club” of science.

The choice of cover was made even worse by *Science* editor Jim Austin’s comments suggesting that if men were drawn in by the exposed legs and tight dresses, it would be “interesting” to see how they felt once they discovered the women were transgender. The prevalence of the “trans panic” defense, in which perpetrators of violent crimes justify their actions by claiming shock at the identity of a trans person, makes this an abysmal motivation for *Science*’s choice of cover art, particularly since transgender people

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nature.com/news/inequality-quantified-mind-the-gender-gap-1.12550>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nature.com/news/inequality-quantified-mind-the-gender-gap-1.12550>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.pnas.org/content/early/2012/09/14/1211286109>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.pnas.org/content/111/28/10107>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB9147/index1.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9147/index1.html)

are disproportionately subject to hate crimes.<sup>6</sup> I appreciate the apology from *Science's* editor-in-chief, but question how such a sexist, racist, and transphobic cover was selected in the first place.

The *Science* cover is just one symptom of wider, systematic hostility towards women and minorities in science. Last week, it was reported that a former graduate student is suing Vanderbilt University for sexual harassment and discrimination, alleging outrageous treatment at the hands of her adviser.<sup>7</sup> According to the lawsuit, the professor isolated her from the lab through verbal abuse, and "would routinely call her ugly, fat and ... a stupid in front of other students." At a conference the professor "... required the female graduate students to attend a boat party where the male professors became intoxicated and were allowed to make romantic and sexual advances on the students." Needless to say, the student could not complete her doctoral studies under such abusive and discriminatory conditions, and withdrew from the program.

Unfortunately, this student's experience is far from uncommon. A new peer-reviewed study published in the peer-reviewed journal PLOS ONE revealed that over a quarter of women surveyed (and 6% of men) have been sexually assaulted while conducted scientific fieldwork.<sup>8</sup> The same study found 71% of women and 41% of men also reported that they been sexually harassed. The anecdotes sent to the authors of the study were chilling. One woman said a professor and male graduate students with whom she was working in a foreign country made comments about her body, speculated about her sexual history, placed pornographic photos in her workspace, and joked about selling her as a prostitute on the local market. When she complained to the professor, he revoked his promise to fund her through graduate school.<sup>9</sup>

AAAS' goals to "strengthen and diversify the science and technology workforce" and "foster education in science and technology for everyone" are critical to the future health and economic well-being of our country, but the STEM workforce cannot grow and thrive amidst the type of hostility detailed above. As one of the nation's preeminent science organizations, I expect you will take action to eradicate harassment and inequality in the scientific community. Please reply with the specific steps you will take to become part of the solution, instead of a contributor to the problem. The innovation, creativity, and competitiveness of the United States will benefit from your leadership.

Sincerely,



Jackie Speier  
Member of Congress

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.avp.org/resources/avp-resources/315>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.newschannel5.com/story/26015660/former-grad-student-files-20-million-lawsuit-against-vanderbilt>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.plosone.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pone.0102172>

<sup>9</sup> <http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/context-and-variation/2012/01/30/from-the-field-hazed-tells-her-story-of-harassment/>