

Moving The Needle Toward A Less Biased Research Community: Practical Thoughts About Harassment

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UC Santa Barbara
LIGO collaboration meeting (March 2016)

The Problem:

Bullying:

- includes any inappropriate conduct or comment by a person towards a worker that the person knew or reasonably ought to have known would cause that worker to be humiliated or intimidated, but
 - excludes any reasonable action taken by an employer or supervisor relating to the management and direction of workers or the place of employment.

-WorkSafeBC “bullying and harassment”

Harassment:

- unwelcome conduct that is based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, or genetic information.

US Law: Gender-based (Title IX) and race-based (Title VI) discrimination may not affect educational opportunities.

Harassment based on membership in a class, including sexual harassment, causes additional harm because:

- it generates bias, which is an injustice contrary to our values
- it concentrates harm, magnifying its impact
- harm ripples beyond those directly harassed
- members of marginalized and underrepresented groups are more likely to experience “regular” bullying as well

Why would this be a problem in this community?

- Power dynamics are extreme here
- The workplace is untraditional
- The current most-used system to protect those being harassed, the whisper culture, isn't working
- Our community is steeped in unconscious bias and is set such that white, cisgendered, heterosexual, able-bodied men are the dominant group by a larger percentage than the general population
- It is a difficult problem to see when you're not the one being harassed.

The CSWA Survey on Workplace Climate

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2. University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, IRB approval (#15354, University of Illinois)

With Gracious Support from the American Astronomical Society's Committee on the Status of Women in Astronomy (AAS CSWA)

- We recruited 426 participants for an online survey
- Questions were confined to experiences in their current and previous positions within the past 5 years only

How often do you hear the following language from your PEERS?

Negative comments about religion or lack thereof

141 109 32

426
Total

66%

Negative remarks about mental ability/disability

155 77 10

58%

Negative remarks about physical ability/disability or

152 74 10

57%

Transphobic remarks

66 10 5

Rarely

Sometimes

Often

20%

Comments about not acting "feminine enough" or

135 61 10

49%

Sexist remarks

180 145 15

82%

Racist remarks

161 55 10

52%

Homophobic remarks

159 29

45%

0 70 140 210 280 350

How often do you hear the following language from your SUPERVISOR?

Negative comments about religion or lack thereof

68 32

Negative remarks about mental ability/disability

63 31

Negative remarks about physical ability/disability or

68 20

Transphobic remarks

23

Comments about not acting "feminine enough" or

52 27

Sexist remarks

105 67

Racist remarks

69

Homophobic remarks

33

426
Total

25%

24%

22%

6%

20%

44%

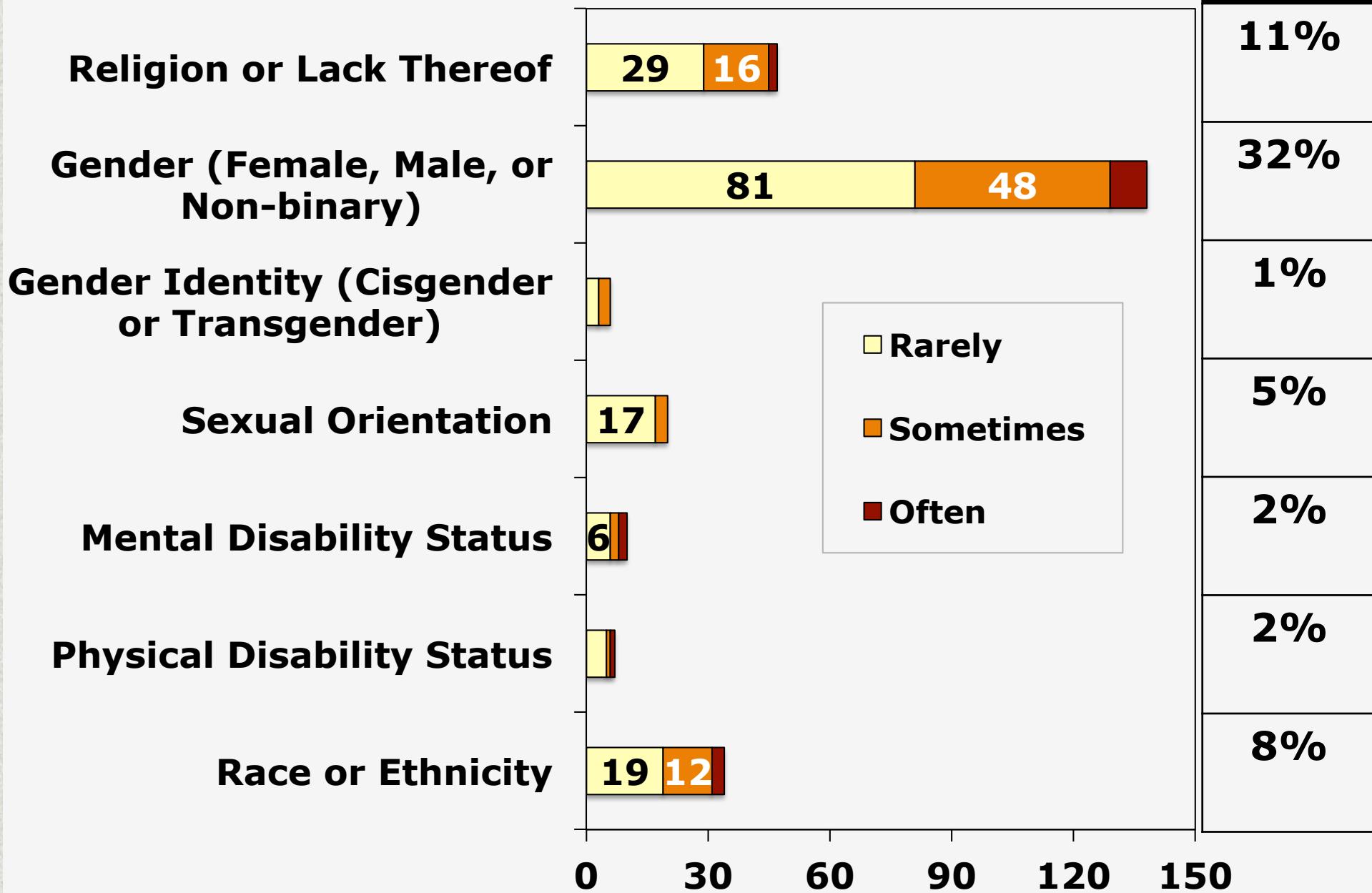
20%

10%

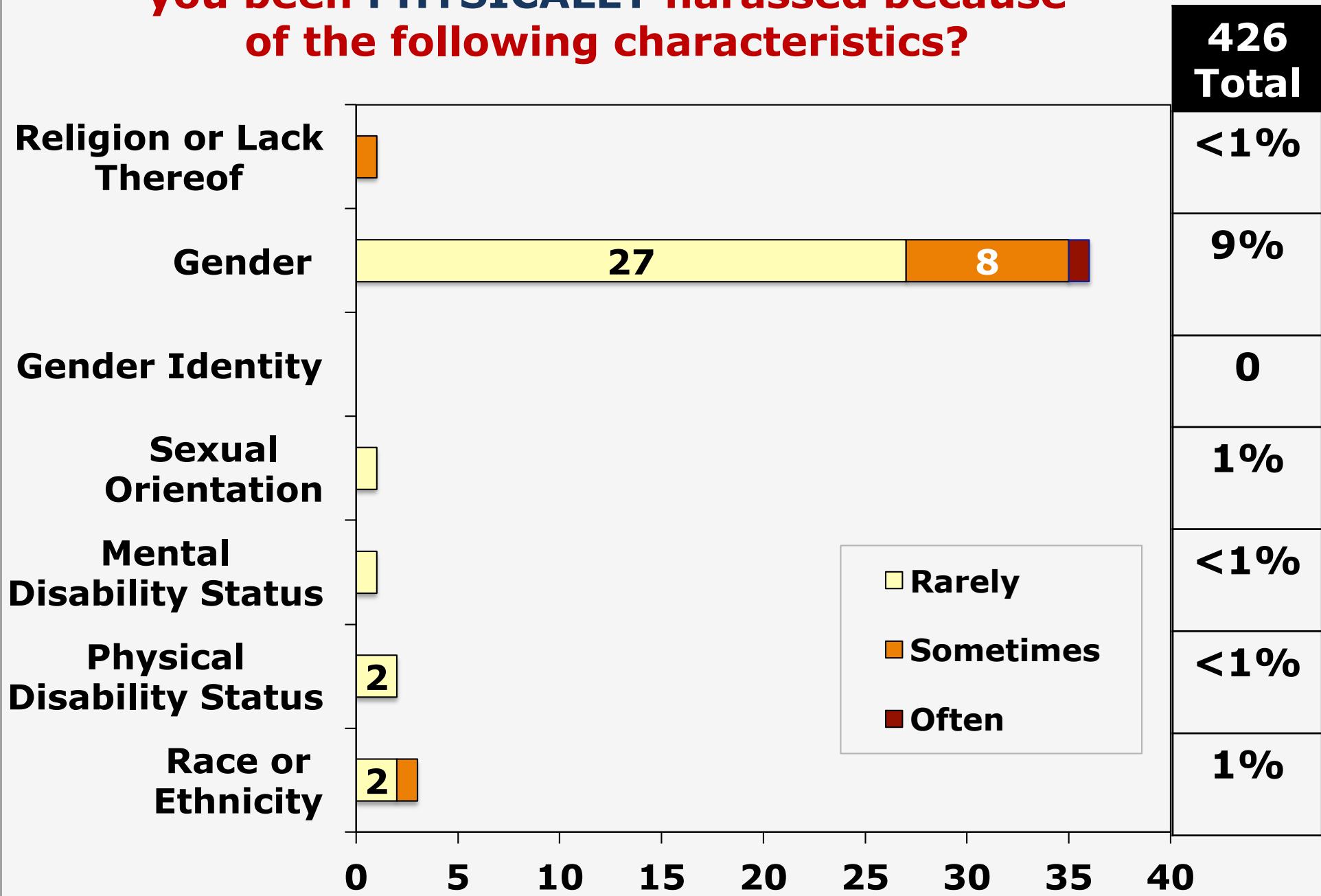
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often

0 50 100 150 200

In your current position, how often have you been VERBALLY harassed because of the following characteristics?



In your current position, how often have you been PHYSICALLY harassed because of the following characteristics?



What group(s) was the individual(s) that PHYSICALLY harassed you a member of?

**Non-University/Organization/
Institution Affiliated or Surrounding
Community Member**

7

**Non-Academic Staff (Secretaries,
Support Staff, etc.)**

3

**College/University/Organization/
Institution Administration**

2

**Supervisors outside of the Physics/
Astronomy Department or
Organization/Institution**

4

**Supervisors within the Physics/
Astronomy Department or
Organization/Institution**

13

**Peers outside of the Physics/
Astronomy Department or
Organization/Institution**

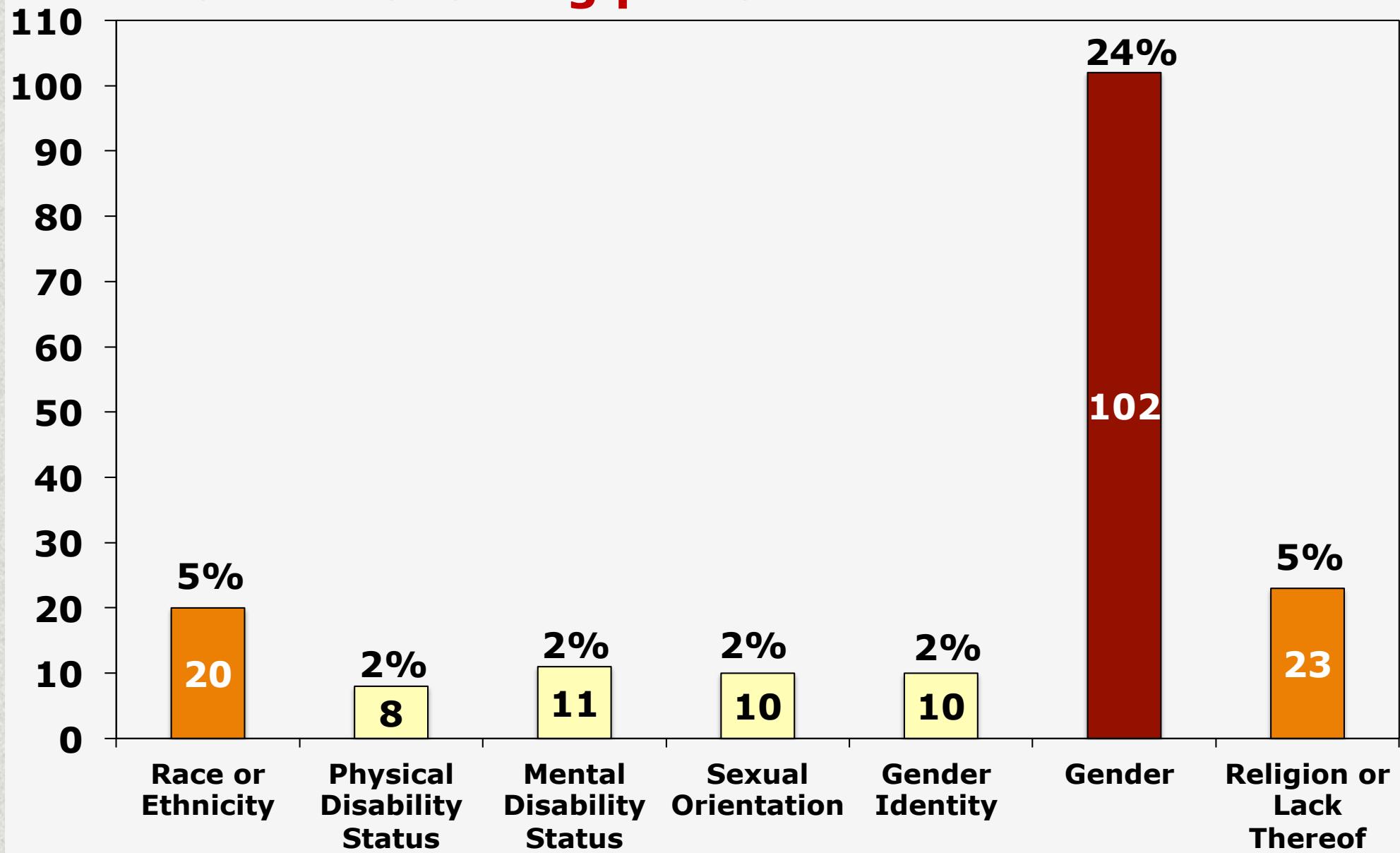
11

**Peers within Physics/Astronomy
Department or Organization/
Institution**

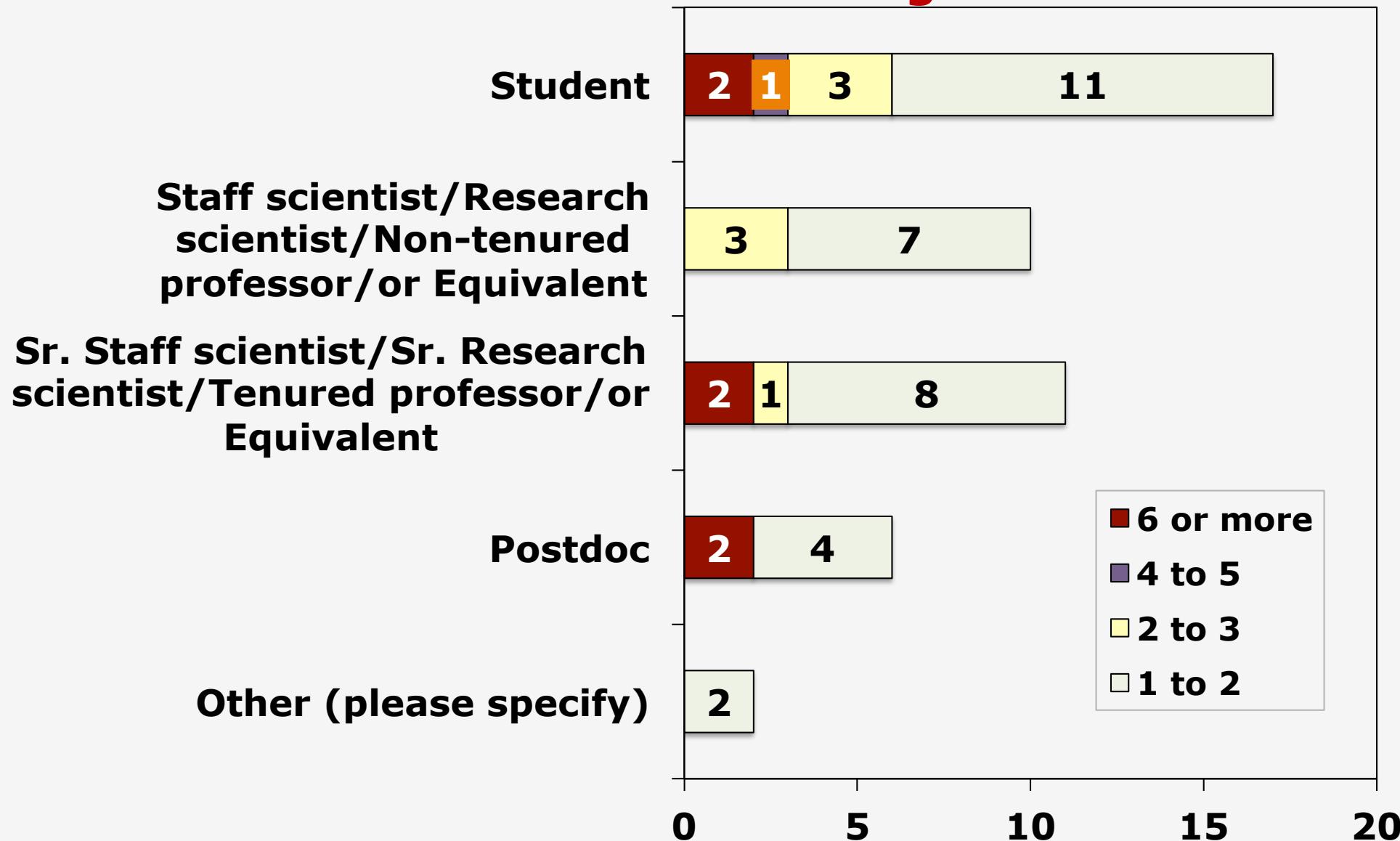
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0 5 10 15

In your current position, do you feel or have you ever felt unsafe because of any of the following personal characteristics?



In your current position, how many classes/meetings/conferences/field work/opportunities/etc. have you skipped per month because of feeling unsafe?





Survey Preliminary Conclusions

- Scientists in the astronomical and planetary science communities experience and witness inappropriate language, verbal harassment, and physical assault.
- Abuses that relate to gender are those that appear in the greatest proportion in this sample.
Note: anecdotally, race-based abuses are also common per-person
- Inappropriate comments, harassment, and assault lead to a number of scientists feeling unsafe in their workplaces, and pursuing fewer scholarly opportunities as a direct result of these experiences.

The Solution

The problem is **HARASSMENT**

Why is a solution needed? And why should we be the community to fix this greater societal issue?

- Human Decency
- Because it's 2015
- Because we're currently in the spotlight and forefront of this issue
- Because we're some of the most intelligent people of the planet and we can do better
- Because we brag about wanting to be diverse and inclusive
- Because the science in this field is being directly impacted

HUMAN DECENCY!

Sexual harassment and
race-based harassment
affect a large fraction of
our community.

#NotAllMen

#YesAllWomen

Many people are watching how the most egregious cases are managed.

Large cost:

- generates bias, which is an injustice contrary to our values
- lost productivity
- lost talent
- personal harm

Both justice and excellence require a solution

Goal Today

spark discussion about next steps toward
eliminating harassment

In the News: Geoff Marcy

- harassed many women over two decades
- Berkeley's Title IX investigation found that Marcy violated Title IX with behavior that included grabbing the crotch of a student (assault)
- behavior in the official UC Berkeley investigation is the tip of the iceberg
- caused widespread harm to young women in the exoplanet community, who knew that many knew about his behavior and didn't act

In the News: Christian Ott

- harassed and bullied multiple students and postdocs
- used his power as an advisor to coerce abusive personal interactions based on gender
- told colleagues that he didn't like women
- professionally retaliated against those who didn't go along
- egregious and well-documented case

Why did Marcy and Ott end up in the news?

- responses didn't prevent foreseeable future problems

Caltech response ≠ Berkeley response

From the Marcy case:

- university structures to combat harassment are seriously broken
- over-application of secrecy makes responses ineffective

From the Ott case:

- What is the plan for when Ott returns? With a history of retaliation and an egregious record, more than hope is necessary.
- This case isn't isolated and it isn't a "choice between Ott and Gossan" in which "sides shouldn't be taken."
- Unfortunately, it is the LIGO collaboration's responsibility.

The LIGO collaboration has had additional problems with bullying

So, what can we do? Universities

- The mission should be to solve problems, not merely to avoid lawsuits.
- Current reporting and investigation structures have lost credibility. Independent offices are needed that can collect all complaints, including anonymous complaints, proactively investigate patterns of behavior, and communicate across institutions.

Departments

- find out what the problems are (for example with a climate survey)
- brainstorm solutions and implement them
- have senior leadership for the above efforts
- address “small” problems immediately and unequivocally with clear statements that continued bad behavior will lead to serious consequences
- Hire women and minorities.

Collaborations like LIGO

- take action to protect the careers of targets of harassment
- Feel free to complain about the fact that you have to do this because effective structures do not exist elsewhere.

Individuals everyday (how to be an ally)

- When you hear offensive comments, say that you disagree. People are listening.
- It **is** your business when you see bad behavior (at a poster, another table, etc.). It may well be awkward but oh well.
- Avoid saying that you are “colorblind” ([https://
implicit.harvard.edu](https://implicit.harvard.edu)) or otherwise questioning the experiences of marginalized groups.

A student comes to you with a story that may qualify as harassment.

- **Have accurate priors.**
 - It's most likely worse than it sounds.
 - It's unlikely to be “just a misunderstanding” or a false accusation.
- **Express your belief, concern, and support.**
 - There is little downside since the rare false accusation will be identified later upon investigation.
- **Don't let the story stop with you.**
 - (Know your mandatory reporting requirements.)
 - Know the difference between confidential and non-confidential resources.

You are worried that one of your graduate students is not publishing at the rate necessary to graduate on time and get a postdoc job. S/he has been spending a lot of time on outreach lately.

You...

- a) tell her that she isn't taking her research seriously enough and should stop her outreach activities.**

- b) you give her your estimate of the number of papers required to graduate and/or get a job and of how much time they will take to write. You ask her about her goals and plans and how she sees outreach fitting into them.**

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JUST GOOD MENTORING

Ditto, but instead of outreach, your student has been spending time on Black Lives Matter protests.

Is this the same scenario just with different details?

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Is this the same scenario just with different details?

NO. THIS WILL HAVE A RACIST IMPACT.

At department coffee, you overhear one postdoc say to another that a peer from another institution got a faculty job “because she’s a woman.”

You...

- a) agree because affirmative action means women are hired more than men these days.**
- b) ignore it because they weren’t talking to you and you know that they are stressed out by the difficult job market.**
- c) say “I disagree” or “I think that’s unlikely.”**

	1992 Grad Students	2003 Assistant Profs	% Advancement
# Men	602	182	(30±3)%
# Women	176	31	(18±3)%
% Women	(23±2)%	(15±3)%	

	2003 Grad Students	2013 Assistant Profs	% Advancement
# Men	549	106	(19±2)%
# Women	235	37	(16±3)%
% Women	(30±2)%	(26±4)%	

“there is certainly no preference for hiring female assistant professors”

**Meredith Hughes, CSWA
Status Jan 2014**

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FALSE

**YOUR STUDENTS
ARE LISTENING**

At dinner at a conference, you see a female colleague doing the “polite cringe” at a neighboring table.

You...

- a) don’t do anything because you don’t really know the people that well and it would be awkward and really it isn’t your business what is happening at a neighboring table.**
- b) say something or otherwise intervene because it is your business.**

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An undergraduate woman in your class smiles at you a lot and gives you a heartfelt handwritten thank you note at the end of the term.

She...

- a) is totally into you!**
- b) is a friendly person who values human connections, has been taught to do nice things like this, and would be horrified if she realized that you thought she was “totally into you.”**

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ODDS ON

You (a postdoc) would like to ask out a graduate student. You think she may be interested because she was nice to you and didn't get upset when you said something suggestive.



Full Frontal with
Samantha Bee

Try the “Could she really tell me to get lost?” test.

Harassment isn't about love or even sex. It's about power, including the real or perceived need to not tell you to “get lost” because it might be professionally damaging.

You hear from deaf people that the deafness analogy used in the LIGO press conference is offensive.

You...

- a) think that they are overreacting and limiting our language by being too PC.**
- b) feel personally offended because you feel that you have been unfairly criticized for insensitivity.**
- c) respect their experience and find another analogy.**

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Grad students are complaining about harassment on Facebook in terms you find overwrought, overly aggressive, and too absolutist.

You...

- a) lament the fact that their public stridency will hurt their career chances.**
- b) lament the fact that students these days can't handle dissenting opinions.**
- c) lament the death of free speech.**
- d) lament the fact that harassment is widespread in our community and take meaningful action to improve the situation.**

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You feel like “not I’m not going to network with/get to know/work with women because it’s too dangerous.”

- If you’re really not sure how to interact with women safely, remember that...
 - reasonable action relating to
 - people are generally forgiving and respond well to real apologies after real mistakes.
 - the difference between Marcy/Slater/Ott and a misplaced comment is large, so if you’re trying then
- If you’re
 - I too find it irritating to spend energy on these issues.
 - Self-reflect and decide that you’re smarter, better, and less petty than this. Be a bigger person.

Summary:

- Harassment is an everyday occurrence that is wasting time, energy, and talent. It is bad for justice and bad for scientific progress. It affects a large fraction of women and people of color, particularly women of color.
- Small problems add up. Large problems affect the community far beyond those directly harassed: Not “taking sides” or not protecting complainants from retaliation sends a strong negative message

Suggestion highlights

- Independent, professional offices are needed to collect complaints, proactively identify patterns, and pursue investigations with the mission of solving problems rather than avoiding legal liability. They should be empowered to take anonymous complaints and to share information across institutions.
- Adjust your personal priors to reflect the current reality (With more information, problems you hear about will probably be worse than you expect.)
- It is your business to get involved when you see questionable things happening.
- Large collaborations need to step up.
- Privileging the career of a harasser over that of the harassed causes ripples of harm.