

ASI 2015: Gender & Astronomy Panel

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Two Important measures towards a gender-equitable workplace:

1. Gender Sensitisation Training

2. Transparency & Accountability in Governance

1. Gender Sensitization training

We are all born MALE or FEMALE and LEARN to be women or men, and so we are all prone to unconscious gender bias. I use the term “bias” in the academic sense, i.e., to mean an error in decision making, rather than a very negative “prejudice”. One mechanism to address this unconscious bias is to make ourselves aware of it.

Gender Sensitisation training should be

- regular and officially sanctioned,
- in the form of workshops and online modules

These modules would:

- Teach well-intentioned men and women about gender stereotypes, giving us tools to recognize stereotypes and bias and thereby avoid them
- Teach us about best practices in institutions, how to conduct interviews, how to run meetings, organize seminars, TAC discussions
- Teach us how behavior that could be perceived as innocuous could actually be micro-aggression
- Teach us how to proactively prevent gender harassment and sexual harassment and of course the difference between the two

Such Gender Sensitisation training should be mandatory for everyone - scientists, administrators, students and contract staff, but would be particularly important for the gatekeepers, namely institution leaders, journal editors, and funding directors.

And I hope I made it clear that this is NOT skill-building for women and NOT survival skills for women.

2) Transparency & Accountability in Governance

This is a measure which is beneficial to all employees regardless of gender and also to the health of the institution.

For example, in hiring, the criteria should be identified and committed to beforehand, and spelt out in the job advertisement.

For instance, if scholarly publications, teaching track record and demonstrated ability to work in a team are the three criteria arrived at for a particular hiring, the committee cannot then, after seeing the candidates, prefer someone who has leadership qualities; or cannot then NOT prefer someone who has a dual-career need.

There should be written justification for decisions.

Statistics of applicant pool AND selected pool should be publicised.

A significant step would be to require a diversity officer to sit in on interviews and evaluation committees as an observer and also monitor all institutional processes.