

Women Scientists at Sea

Lisa Beal

In 2014 there was an article in Nature about the prevalence of harassment of young scientists in the field: <http://www.nature.com/news/many-women-scientists-sexually-harassed-during-fieldwork-1.15571> and last year there was an article written by a female oceanographer about the sexual harassment she suffered at sea <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/09/11/ive-faced-outrageous-discrimination-as-a-female-oceanographer-i-want-better-for-the-next-generation/>.

Following up on these disheartening reports, I interviewed **Kent Sheasley, Captain of WHOI's R/V Neil Armstrong**, about gender bias and sexual harassment at sea. I asked how the environment aboard ship can be improved, how female scientists can protect and empower themselves, and the avenues open to women for reporting harassment.

What have you done to actively promote a positive and nondiscriminatory environment for women aboard your vessel?

Kent: With men and women working closely together in an isolated environment, the atmosphere must be safe for everyone. I believe that underlying such an environment is that everyone, man or woman, is here for the right reasons: to do their job well, to be part of the team, to work towards the common goal of getting great science done. The senior personnel on a ship are important in actively promoting this mindset, in recognising and encouraging people's strengths, and in empowering everyone to grow professionally, regardless of gender. Recruiting female officers and crew also helps. We currently have four women aboard Armstrong, with one more as relief. In a professional and productive environment mutual respect is integral and precludes discriminatory behaviours.

Given that studies show many incidences of harassment go unreported in the field, what can be done to minimise the risk that women face?

Kent: The work environment on the ship is paramount. Everyone should know their role and act the part, including the science party, to create a safe and respectful atmosphere in which we work together to meet challenges and get the science done. I think if there is over compensation and positive discrimination, or if the behaviour between men and women is micro-managed, there is a risk of the pendulum swinging back and forth and never finding equilibrium.

As Captain, I explain the harassment policy for the benefit of the science party during the safety briefing at the beginning of each cruise. I believe this sets a standard and minimises incidents. I like to emphasise that manners go a long way, as does respect of personal space. Should anyone have concerns about interactions they are told they can talk to me, and should they have concerns about me they are encouraged to talk to the Chief Scientist!

How can female scientists empower themselves at sea?

Kent: Old school advice was to tell women what to wear and how to conduct themselves at sea. Inherent in this advice is that women cannot be who they are at sea and should somehow minimise their femininity. This is just a band aid for a disrespectful environment and does not address gender issues or fix the problem.

Lisa: Twenty years ago as a graduate student I was encouraged to "grit my teeth" and "put my head down". These actions helped me persevere, but they were disempowering.

Years later I am left with regret that I didn't contribute to improving the shipboard environment for future women. So, what can women do differently now?

Kent: I would say that women can empower themselves at sea by not letting inappropriate comments or actions go without a clear response. Silence or "laughing it off" are often understood as tacit agreement and encourage more of the same behaviour. Having the confidence to communicate clearly "I am not comfortable with that", can be enough to stop a situation escalating to harassment.

Lisa: But it can be difficult for women to speak up, particularly when faced with a more senior scientist or crew member, or when feeling vulnerable and upset.

Kent: Yes, it's useful to have a few rehearsed phrases in your pocket so that you can bypass these emotions. By communicating directly there can be no question of "he said, she said" and it gives the transgressor a chance to be a better person.

Should harassment come up, how should women deal with it and report it?

Kent: Every vessel should have their harassment policy posted, in compliance with International Safety Management (ISM) regulations, where examples of illegal conduct and methods of reporting are outlined. Harassment is best reported promptly to the Captain or Chief Scientist, preferably both. In the event a woman is not comfortable reporting to someone aboard ship, or if she is concerned that appropriate actions have not been taken following a report to the Captain, she should report directly to the EEO Officer in Human Resources on shore. If she is uncomfortable reporting to anyone within the organisation, WHOI has implemented an independent EthicsPoint hotline. Aboard RV Armstrong these contact numbers and email addresses are posted with the policy on the main deck.

What are the official procedures? Are these set by UNOLS, or by WHOI? Please provide a link to the appropriate guidelines.

Kent: Clear policies and procedures are required by ISM and by UNOLS Research Vessel Safety Standards. These policies are set by the ship operator, which for RV Neil Armstrong is WHOI. Our harassment policies, as for all organisations, can be found online:

Shipboard Policies <http://www.who.edu/page.do?pid=10116>

Harassment Policy <http://www.who.edu/HR/page.do?pid=21736&cid=903&c=39#3>

As Captain I will report any incident to my boss, the Director of Ship Operations, and to the Director of Human Resources. Reporting to two people is meant to provide a check and balance. They will make enquiries into the incident. With guidance from them, I will take action and give counsel while at sea when appropriate.

Lisa: What happens when one or both parties in a harassment case are not from the institution operating the vessel, in your case WHOI?

Kent: I had to ask my boss about this question! If neither party are from WHOI then the WHOI HR staff would contact the other institutions or universities involved and facilitate the procedure. If one party was from WHOI and the other party from elsewhere, the two HR departments should work together to address the situation. The HR department of the harasser's institution would certainly be involved.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the process? Can women expect to receive a discrete and fair process?

Kent: I believe that women can expect complaints to be reported appropriately, investigated seriously, and acted upon with discretion. Just as sexual harassment is illegal, so is retaliation against any person reporting harassment. Cases where this may fall short can be related to unclear policies and responsibilities. Often women are hesitant to report harassment for fear it may negatively impact their career and in this case the EthicsPoint hotline is a good resource. This is an avenue for reporting around the chain of command to an entity that is completely independent of the organisation and you can even remain anonymous if preferred. Many organisations now have this resource, or something similar.

EthicsPoint Hotline <https://secure.ethicspoint.com/domain/media/en/gui/29876/index.html>

Lisa Beal is a Professor of Ocean Sciences at the University of Miami's Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science. She has participated in 16 scientific voyages to the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, totalling 342 days at sea, planning and leading 6 of these voyages as Chief Scientist.

Kent Sheasley is a professional mariner, sailing aboard WHOI research vessels since 1995 in support of all varieties of oceanographic projects. In 2003 he became Captain, primarily assigned to the R/V Knorr. Since retiring the Knorr in 2015, he and his crew have cross-decked to the newest UNOLS vessel, the R/V Neil Armstrong, to continue the Knorr legacy for the science community.