

United States Senate

April 27, 2021

President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

Thank you for your recent efforts to restore scientific integrity throughout the federal workforce, which include the January 27, 2021 Presidential Memorandum on Restoring Trust in Government Through Scientific Integrity and Evidence-Based Policymaking and in response to that memorandum, the Office of Science and Technology Policy's (OSTP) March 29, 2021 announcement on the establishment of the interagency Task Force on Scientific Integrity of the National Science and Technology Council to review scientific integrity policies across the federal government. We write to request that as you continue work to bolster the federal scientific workforce, you prioritize addressing sexual and gender-based harassment across all relevant agencies. The beginning of any new administration brings the opportunity to set the tone for how federal agencies will carry out their missions. We believe that establishing a clear, consistent message that sexual and gender-based harassment will not be tolerated during your term is critical to not only improving morale among federal scientists, but also attracting and retaining a highly qualified scientific workforce.

While great strides have been made regarding representation and inclusion of women and non-binary people in science, technology, engineering, and medical (STEM) disciplines, sexual and gender-based harassment remains a pervasive problem. According to a 2018 report conducted by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) on sexual harassment of women in academic sciences, research suggests that "the most potent predictor of sexual harassment is organizational climate—the degree to which those in the organization perceive that sexual harassment is or is not tolerated." Now is the time to demonstrate that sexual and gender-based harassment will not be tolerated within your administration.

Additionally, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) issued a report in March 2020 on sexual harassment in STEM research. The report looked at the five federal agencies responsible for administering approximately 80 percent of federal STEM research grants—the U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Energy, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, National Science Foundation, and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The GAO recommended these agencies finalize and publish complaint procedures and establish goals and plans for prevention efforts. Additionally, the report recommended that the

U.S. Department of Justice, through their role as convening an interagency working group comprised of these five agencies to share information relative to Title IX activities, adopt leading practices for collaboration that includes agreement on agency roles and responsibilities as well as development of mechanisms to monitor, evaluate, and report collaborative efforts. Of the 17 recommendations made by GAO, only four have been implemented to date.

Among the important actions you took on your first day in office was the issuance the Executive Order (EO) on “Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government.” Taking a similar approach to addressing sexual and gender-based harassment would be a prudent and complementary approach. It is important to assess to what extent federal programs and policies perpetuate systemic barriers to addressing sexual harassment in scientific professions and the degree to which racial and gender-based harassment intersect.

Additionally, OSTP should, like the Office of Management and Budget in the racial equity EO, study methods for assessment, working with each relevant agency to conduct a review and identify federal resources to advance anti-harassment policies. Indeed, the recommendations in the NASEM report include increasing resources to research and evaluate the effectiveness of current sexual harassment policies, programs, and trainings and to treat sexual harassment with the same level of priority as research misconduct. Likewise, the March 2020 GAO report noted that among the five federal agencies reviewed, “none...have goals and plans for all of their efforts, and thus they lack clear ways to evaluate how well these efforts are working and to identify any needed improvements.”

Such an EO focused on sexual and gender-based harassment would build on your Administration’s recent efforts to address gender equity in education, including your EOs on “Establishing the White House Gender Policy Council and Ensuring Education Free from Sexual Violence,” and “Guaranteeing an Educational Environment Free from Discrimination on the Basis of Sex, Including Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity.” As you stated in the policy council EO, “[t]he full participation of all people – including women and girls – across all aspects of our society is essential to the economic well-being, health, and security of our nation and of the world.” We could not agree more. Like race, ethnicity, and other characteristics you have identified, gender-based biases can be a clear barrier to full and equal participation in the workforce. For these and other reasons, it is imperative for the federal government to address sexual and gender-based harassment across all relevant agencies.

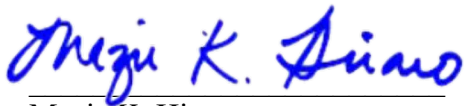
Finally, agencies should work with academic institutions, scientific societies, national advocacy organizations, and other relevant stakeholders to evaluate opportunities to improve coordination and engagement focused on decreasing instances of sexual and gender-based harassment in scientific professions. While many academic institutions and scientific societies have incorporated anti-sexual harassment policies, they are often developed and implemented on an ad-hoc basis. The federal government needs to work with relevant stakeholders to develop and implement best practices for addressing sexual and gender-based harassment in scientific

professions, and national advocacy organizations with expertise on this issue can help to inform and guide its approach.

Now is the time to set the tone that the United States federal government will implement strong, proactive, consistent policies, procedures, and trainings to address sexual and gender-based harassment in scientific professions and serve as a model for other institutions to follow.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Brian Schatz
United States Senator



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator