

Committee on the Status of Women in Astronomy (CSWA)

Strategic Plan

November 2009

CHARGE

In June 1979 the Council of the American Astronomical Society (AAS) created the Committee on the Status of Women in Astronomy (CSWA) with the following charge: “CSWA recommends to the Council practical measures that the AAS can take to improve the status of women in astronomy and encourage their entry into this field.”

MISSION STATEMENT

The CSWA strives to create a climate of equal opportunity in hiring, promotion, salary, and in access to research opportunities and infrastructure at all levels within the field of astronomy ranging from undergraduate and graduate programs and then throughout a career in teaching, research, and/or other astronomy-related fields such as public outreach.

“Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” -- Margaret Mead

INTRODUCTION

During the past 30 years of the existence of the CSWA, the problems that the committee has had to address have gone through distinct changes. Initially, the AAS and other professional organizations confronted the issue of overt discrimination against women who wished to pursue a career in science. Gradually the stereotypes that women could not compete due to an inherent lack of ability were overcome. Women are intrinsically as able as men. That peeled back a layer of prejudice and revealed a new layer: sexual harassment. Thanks to some very public incidents, such as the Anita Hill case, academe began to respond to this problem as exemplified by the fact that most universities, institutions, and organizations, including the AAS, have adopted anti-harassment policies and procedures.

Peeling back this layer brings us to the present state of affairs in which two serious issues dominate. They include the problems of creating a work-life balance that allows for a fulfilling private and professional life, and the so-called two-body problem in which both partners in a relationship find it almost impossible to be employed at the same institution and very often even in the same state.

Other aspects of discrimination are now being revealed, in particular how conscious and unconscious bias, divorce, and the astronomical “caste system” (one’s academic background and/or current job title) affect astronomical careers. How do we address these issues in order to create a level playing field for all astronomers?

OBJECTIVE

Work with the astronomical community to create a climate of equality of opportunity, which ultimately renders the existence of the CSWA moot.

VALUE STATEMENT

The values upon which this plan is based are believed to be common to those who wish to pursue a career in astronomy:

- Women and men are equally talented and deserve equal opportunity;
- Full participation of men and women will maximize excellence in the field;
- The measure of equal opportunity is outcome; i.e., gender equity will have been attained when the percentage of women in the next level of advancement equals the percentage in the pool.

CSWA's ASSETS

- CSWA consists of a group of volunteers who have experience in dealing with issues outlined in this plan and who care enough about solving the problems to give of their time and energy to find solutions;
- CSWA functions in a climate of support from the Council of the AAS;
- The Baltimore Charter, the spirit of which was endorsed by the AAS council;
- The Pasadena Recommendations, which were endorsed by the AAS council;
- Community support for the series of Women In Astronomy conferences (1992, 2003 and 2009);
- In pursuit of its charter, CSWA currently:
 - publishes an electronic newsletter, AASWOMEN, which reaches 770 people, over 10% of the AAS membership;
 - publishes the STATUS news letter;
 - maintains a web page, a facebook page, and a blog site.

CSWA's WEAKNESSES

The CSWA operates with very limited funding. This restricts its ability to undertake more visible or effective actions in areas deemed to be relevant to its mission.

KEY ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED BY THE CSWA

The current unequal treatment of women and the impact on their professional lives occurs in several areas/ways. These will be considered by CSWA in order to prepare guidelines for wide dissemination aimed at recognizing, confronting, and overcoming the obstacles created in a person's professional career. Matters to be considered include how to:

- Establish a working environment in which a professional can balance the needs of a family with the pressures of succeeding in the competitive world of astronomy; for example; in regards to the pursuit of promotion, tenure, and grants;
- Reduce the unconscious bias (see, e.g., Steinpreis, Anders, & Ritzke 1999, Sex Roles, 41, 509);
- Increased negative impact of having children; family responsibilities. Women are more likely to be:
 - Family caretakers;
 - Custodial parent in divorce, and therefore tied to a specific geographical area;
 - The trailing spouse, and therefore end up under-employed (adjunct, lecturer; industrial equivalents) or on soft-money;
- Rectify the broad lack of institutional policies to address the two-body problem; childbearing/rearing (e.g. stop the clock policies);

- Increase the visibility of senior women (e.g. AAS awards and prizes);
- Increase funding opportunities to re-enter workforce (women are more likely to take time off due to family issues);
- Address the issue that women are more negatively impacted by the “life” part of the work-life balance. (For example, women with children are viewed negatively while men with children are viewed positively. See, e.g., Correll, Benard and Paik 2007, American Journal of Sociology, 112 (5), 1297)

GOALS

The overall strategy of the CSWA is to continue researching available scientific data and statistics that have a bearing on how to develop guidelines for accomplishing certain specific goals that will plot a course toward:

- Establishing an equitable work-life balance for women and men during an astronomical career;
- Dealing with the two-body problem;
- Confronting the male-female ratio inequality in astronomy;
- Eliminating all forms of discrimination and harassment;
- Creating a sense of belonging within the astronomical community with no regard to gender or race;
- Encouraging all students at all phases of their education to consider science as a career.
- Identifying, minimizing, and eliminating the unconscious bias that persists throughout the community of employers, applicants, and students;
- Learning to develop protocols that could be adopted by government funding agencies and AAS journal editorial boards to eliminate conscious and unconscious biases in the grant review and publication refereeing processes;
- Achieving comparable numbers of nominations and awards among women and men for AAS prizes.

STRATEGIES

- Determine how to reach a distribution of men and women that matches that available in the general population at all levels within a professional career;
- Create guidelines in the form of advice/policies/procedures for institutions that will assure that sexual discrimination or harassment are not tolerated;
- Encourage high school students and undergraduates to consider science as a viable and exciting career;
- Establish guidelines for a mentoring program (Big Sister model) for distribution to academic departments;
- Set up mentoring sessions at AAS meetings;
- Strengthen ties to CSMA;
- Encourage the nomination of women for AAS prizes;
- Encourage public outreach aimed at girls;
- Continue to support the Longitudinal Study;
- Continue to gather demographic data such as those provided by the STS/CSWA Survey.

ACTION STEPS

- Prioritize the goals;
- Prepare a list of suggestions for promoting women in astronomy and creating a female-friendly workplace:
 - For postdocs and graduate students;
 - For junior faculty/scientists;
 - For senior faculty/scientists, including department chairs and group leaders;
- Recommend that the AAS council invite Abigail Stewart to give a plenary talk on “Unconscious Bias” at the January 2011 AAS meeting;
- Prepare a budget, if required, to accomplish some of the key goals;
- Gather data/advice/articles and put them in one place on our web site:
 - Two-body problem;
 - Work-life balance;
 - Harassment;
 - Unconscious bias;
 - Re-entering the work force after a career break;
- Determine the future of STATUS;
- Establish a formal tie with the CSMA;
- Mine the ADVANCE web sites for good ideas that can be distributed to the community;
- Investigate methods to increase the
 - Readership of AASWOMEN and STATUS;
 - Attendance at CSWA sponsored AAS sessions at the AAS meetings;
- Develop guidelines for implementing family-friendly policies - some of these are mandated by law:
 - Maternity leave;
 - Parental leave;
 - Stopping the tenure/promotion clock for life events;
 - Flexible hours;
 - Childcare;
- Consider how to approach Work-Life balance issues;
- Promote a 21st century view of what an astronomy career track looks like;
- Sponsor outside speakers at AAS meetings;
- Set up networking events at AAS meetings;
- Print posters and/or brochures to widen awareness of CSWA’s goals and activities;
- Encourage the Council of the AAS to organize child-care opportunities at professional meetings.