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Submitted via Electronic Mail

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Gender Policy Council
c/o The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

RE: Prioritizing Protections for Women Working in Science at STRI

To Whom It May Concern,

I write on behalf of the undersigned scientists, many of whom have bravely spoken out [in recent media coverage](#) about the systemic sexual harassment and retaliation faced by women scientists affiliated with the prestigious Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI). By and through this letter, we respectfully request that the White House's Gender Policy Council (GPC) prioritize protecting women and other marginalized populations working in the sciences from discrimination, harassment, and violence.¹ As humanity faces large-scale challenges like the COVID pandemic and climate change, we need every scientific mind at the table working towards solutions. To that end, we respectfully request that the Biden-Harris Administration demonstrate leadership in this area by demanding reforms at STRI and the Smithsonian Institute with respect to the following policy points.² In making this request, it is our sincere hope that the GPC will work to develop recommendations that have a broader impact on the sciences, ushering in a more progressive era of safety and inclusion.

1. **Gatekeeping Model.** Traditionally, STRI has placed its staff scientists in gatekeeping roles to effectively control whether outside scientists may access its facilities and resources. These staff scientists are predominantly older, white, heterosexual, cisgender men from either Europe or North America. Providing so much power and control to staff scientists creates the opportunity for those individuals to abuse their positions through *quid pro quo* sexual harassment, retaliation, or other forms of unethical conduct, like scientific exploitation. This structure disadvantages historically marginalized groups by making them beholden to gatekeepers for access to resources, especially if there are no alternative means to conduct research or otherwise reach their scientific goals. When a

¹ Previous media coverage has exposed sexual harassment scandals within other scientific-focused federal agencies, suggesting a broad cultural issue within the federal government, not just within STRI or the Smithsonian Institute. *See, e.g., Rape, Harassment and Retaliation in the U.S. Forest Service: Women Firefighters Tell Their Stories*, PBS (March 1, 2018), <https://www.pbs.org/video/forest-service-1519930453/>.

² The National Academy of Sciences and the National Institutes of Health has already taken some progressive steps to address the issue of sexual harassment within the sciences. *See* Colleen Flaherty, *Consequences for Harassers*, INSIDE HIGHER Ed (June 28, 2021), <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/06/28/nih-says-75-grantees-have-been-removed-due-harassment-complaints>.

scientist courageously pushes back against exploitation or abuse by a gatekeeper, due to the small size of the tropical research field, that person risks, at minimum, reputation damage, and at worst, retaliation for challenging the *status quo*. Such a feudal system should be eradicated from the sciences for allowing discrimination, harassment, and violence to persist and flourish.

Of related concern, by requiring STRI staff scientists to endorse or otherwise weigh in on funding requests, proposed research plans, and fellowship decisions submitted by prospective and currently affiliated researchers, STRI has created an abusive patronage system. Through this system, staff scientists have a further opportunity to discriminate, retaliate, and in other respects exploit younger or otherwise marginalized scientists. For example, male staff scientists at STRI have openly subjected some younger women scientists seeking fellowships or post-doc positions to *quid pro quo* sexual harassment, intellectual exploitation, verbal abuse, and other forms of misconduct. In response, these exploited women acquiesce to receive necessary endorsements because they think there is no alternative and that STRI will not hold these abusers accountable as the abuse occurred in the open without any intervention or response. As another example, when more established women scientists challenge abusive male staff scientists, their abusers often retaliate by torpedoing their funding proposals with STRI, even passing on the women's ideas as their own or to other male colleagues, who then successfully receive endorsements for funding from STRI. Such practices have established a long-running "boys club" within STRI that has no place within any research institute, let alone one as prestigious as STRI.

While it is true that scientists experiencing discrimination or retaliation can file formal complaints with the Smithsonian Institute, many do not. One of the many reasons for this is due to confusion around the various laws and procedures that apply within STRI depending upon the complainant's affiliation and international location. These laws and procedures create complex, confusing, disjointed, and ineffective processes.³ Another reason for the lack of reporting is due to historical failures by STRI's leadership to address obvious repeat offenders who are well-known for their abusive conduct towards, in particular, younger women scientists. Instead of proactively addressing abuse occurring within STRI, its leadership leaves marginalized populations of scientists bearing the burden of filing formal complaints against well-connected and influential figures within the scientific community. This leaves victimized scientists at risk of losing valuable endorsements while also paying legal fees to protect themselves when levying serious accusations against well-funded staff scientists. Many Ph.D. students and early career scientists simply cannot afford legal assistance. Worse still are the costs that arise *even after a complainant successfully holds a perpetrator accountable*. In such cases, a women scientist who is affiliated but not employed by STRI may be able to get a staff scientist removed from his position only to have him remain involved in ongoing research projects or scientific papers because STRI has allowed him to claim that he voluntarily left the position. In such a scenario, the woman scientist must decide whether to keep working alongside the perpetrator, lose scientific opportunities by removing herself from such projects, or risk backlash in a small community that may still support the perpetrator by identifying

³ See Letter from GAO Managing Director of Science, Technology Assessment, and Analytics John Neumann, entitled "Sexual Harassment Policies: Smithsonian has Procedures for Prevention, but could Improve Guidance and Monitoring," to Reps. Eddie Johnson and Frank Lucas of the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology (April 9, 2020), <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-20-414r>.

herself and the real reason for the male scientist's removal. In short, by STRI merely providing a complaint process but otherwise leaving victimized scientists to shoulder the risks involved is not a sufficient response to address the systemic issues within its sites and workforce. The federal government must initiate a reckoning to end the ongoing sexually hostile environment within STRI.

To specifically resolve these concerns, STRI must end the gatekeeping model and patronage system. Staff scientists should no longer be the sole authority on funding decisions, fellowship selections, or allocation of resources and access to outside scientists at STRI. Instead, STRI should develop a diverse panel of staff scientists and outside advisors to review and prioritize fellowship applications, funding decisions, and requests for resource access. Such a panel must be trained annually on how to prevent implicit bias from impacting their decisions using objective criteria, as well as promptly identifying and recusing themselves when potential conflicts of interest or potential bias may arise. Furthermore, STRI should no longer require staff scientist sponsorship or endorsement as a precondition for research approval, fellowships opportunities, funding, or access to shared scientific facilities. Instead, to end the patronage system that has led to abuses of power for decades, STRI should allow applicants to apply directly and independently to the agency. In rethinking its decision-making structures from the top-down, we hope that STRI will be able to eradicate much of the prevalent discrimination, retaliation, and exploitation that has arisen within its research sites and workforce.

2. Research Site Safety. Site-based research and data collection in remote, international locations are often the norm for many scientists, especially those working in the tropics. In fact, many scientists chose their careers because of their interest in working in the field. In recent years, the scientific community has documented extensive issues with gender-based harassment and violence occurring at such remote sites, which has proven difficult for victimized scientists to escape.⁴ As exposed in [recent media coverage](#), STRI's leadership has been aware of and failed to address prevalent sexual harassment and violence at its research sites. Instead of ensuring the safety of its scientists, it left women scientists living and working in knowingly unsafe conditions. As but one example, within STRI-provided housing, a male scientist pushed away a rock being used by a women scientist to "lock" a bedroom door before entering and sexually assaulting his sleeping colleague. After this horrific event, STRI continued sending women scientists to stay at that same location without undertaking basic safety improvements, such as adding locks to bedroom doors. It should go without saying but will be said here to avoid ongoing deliberate indifference to the plight of women scientists being sexually abused at research sites: *STRI must have an unwavering commitment to prioritizing the safety and protection of all scientists residing and working at its research sites and locations.*

Beyond basic safety and security measures at research sites and related housing, STRI should designate mandated reporters and implement routine bystander intervention training. This will ensure

⁴ See, e.g., Kathryn B.H. Clancy, *et al.*, Survey of Academic Field Experiences (SAFE): Trainees Report Harassment and Assault, PLoS ONE (2014), <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0102172>; see also Ben Guiarno, *Antarctic geologist accused of sexually harassing, assaulting female researchers*, WASH. POST (Oct. 10, 2017), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/speaking-of-science/wp/2017/10/10/antarctic-geologist-accused-of-sexually-harassing-assaulting-female-researchers/>.

that all scientists and other workers at STRI sites can promptly identify and report unprofessional and unlawful misconduct while having the skills to safely intervene in order to prevent or otherwise deter abuse. As a world leader in tropical research, STRI attracts scientists at various stages in their careers from around the globe. This standing gives STRI a moral and ethical obligation to establish norms around what is and is not acceptable behavior while working at research sites and ensure a safe and inclusive environment for all scientists. Such norm-setting cannot be left to chance and must be a regular, intentional effort by STRI through bystander intervention and mandatory reporting requirements. In addition, STRI should take another basic step of implementing *consensual relationship disclosure requirements for all its staff scientists*. Through such a policy, STRI can help deter the well-established pattern of staff scientists exploiting remote working conditions and their positions of influence to pressure younger scientists into unwanted sexual relationships. Due to STRI's lack of norm-setting efforts to date, abused women scientists have had to develop a "whisper network" to warn the next generation of women scientists about which scientists and locations to avoid.

3. Streamlined Reporting Systems & Ending the "Pass the Trash" Approach. The Smithsonian Institution as a whole has both complex and ineffective sexual harassment reporting systems for affiliated scientists using its resources and sites, including STRI.⁵ To simplify matters, the Smithsonian Institution should have one single office serve as the point of contact for all types of misconduct reports, whether made anonymously, informally, or formally, whether made by staff scientists, affiliated scientists or other employees, regardless of whether the complaint is about sexual misconduct, retaliation, or other forms of professional misconduct. Every Smithsonian Institution website, including those for STRI, should have the contact information for this office clearly available on the main page, such as on a sidebar. Furthermore, every Smithsonian Institution site, including those within STRI, should have physical posters about the reporting process placed in prominent and frequently used locations, such as restrooms and cafeterias. Having one office as the point of contact for all reports ensures any legal complexities that arise from the personnel or jurisdiction are dealt with internally to avoid burdening reporting victims.⁶ A streamlined reporting system will end the historical malpractice of STRI's leadership to informally warn or resolve complaints through mere conversations with serial offenders. This single reporting office must coordinate prompt and strategic investigations into complaints occurring on the ground while also directly communicating with the complainant about available supportive resources. Such resources should include mental health, medical care, victim advocacy, law enforcement, and legal assistance⁷ in the location where the incident occurred and in the scientist's home country.

⁵ See *supra*, n. 3.

⁶ Previous members of STRI's leadership have flagged that Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972 may govern certain issues of sex discrimination and sexual misconduct arising amongst scientists conducting research at STRI. Given the amount of government funding for research and the volume of students conducting research at STRI who are engaged in federally funded educational programs and activities, there must be an independent opinion sought from the U.S. Attorney General about whether Title IX applies to certain situations arising at STRI.

⁷ It is essential that complainants be informed that they have the right to seek support from legal counsel to avoid over-reliance on agency counsel. Agency counsel should disclose that they represent the institution and cannot represent the complainant or advise the complainant about their legal rights and options, even if such counsel can offer some limited support to ensure the victim connects with the appropriate resources.

Improving reporting systems is but a first step. All too often, institutions seeking to hide pervasive issues of sexual misconduct have engaged in a “pass the trash” approach to silently shuffle out problematic personnel so that other institutions unwittingly hire them without warning. This has occurred at STRI. Maintaining a victim’s privacy is essential for encouraging reporting and preventing retaliation. Yet, it is unclear what the value is to STRI in protecting perpetrators found responsible for sexual misconduct after due process. *At a minimum*, STRI should provide a notice when personnel has been terminated (or allowed to resign) due to sexual misconduct. Doing so will prevent the perpetrator from enjoying an ongoing affiliation with STRI by misleading colleagues in the field about the circumstances of their departure. Additionally, such transparency would deter potential offenders and improve the reliability of the complaint process by demonstrating its effectiveness. It would also prevent STRI’s leadership from sidestepping accountability by offering “sweetheart deals” for staff scientists and other workers to resign to avoid the consequences of their sexual misconduct.

Without such a notice, victimized scientists have found themselves stuck collaborating with perpetrators on scientific papers, ongoing research projects, conference panels, and email discussions with colleagues who are oblivious to STRI’s sanctions. This places victimized scientists in the very awkward position of having to “out” themselves to colleagues if they want to be shielded from ongoing collaboration with the perpetrator, or they must tolerate such unacceptable situations to keep their privacy. To complicate matters even further, STRI has a history of keeping disciplinary outcomes hidden from those complainants who are merely affiliated rather than employed with STRI. This creates even more challenges for victimized scientists stuck working with offenders because they are not provided formal documentation about the outcome as proof of their need to be protected from the offender moving forward. Failing to provide a disciplinary outcome to the complainant creates a situation within STRI where speculation and gossip take the reins rather than facts, which, in turn, fosters hostile environments and retaliation. Nobody benefits from the lack of information — except the offenders. To resolve these concerns, *at minimum*, STRI should provide written outcomes to complainants along with a simple notice to personnel when it has taken disciplinary action to terminate a scientist or other worker’s relationship with STRI.

4. Ethical Standards & Board. To ensure accountability within the sciences, relevant scientific associations must design a unified system of ethical standards for research that governs researcher conduct. Within the sciences, there are long-standing instances of established scientists being abusive and/or exploitative of younger scientists, who often lack the professional clout and financial resources to challenge such abuse without risking their reputation and standing within their respective fields.⁸ Much like the medical, social work, and legal professions, scientists would benefit from a system of governance arising amongst and between scientists with ethical standards of conduct that push back against the field’s historical reliance on gatekeeping models and patronage systems. In addition to regulating conduct, this system could also serve as a database for scientific journals, conferences, research institutions, and funds to check on a scientist’s standing before collaborating, funding, publishing, or otherwise supporting that scientist’s work. Without such a centralized system,

⁸ See Giuliana Viglione, *The US National Academy of Sciences can now kick out harassers. So why hasn’t it?* Nature (Sept. 21, 2020), <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-02640-7>.

the scientific community unwittingly continues collaborations with abusive individuals whose conduct has harmed both the field and those working within it. While we recognized that the GPC may have a limited role in such groundbreaking efforts, government funding to support relevant associations in prioritizing such an effort would ensure that such an effort is undertaken.⁹

In anticipation of [recent media coverage](#) on sexual misconduct occurring within STRI, on April 27, 2021, [43 staff scientists signed a letter](#) demanding STRI leadership implement changes. While this solidarity with the victimized scientists is appreciated, and the changes requested are important, they do not sufficiently address the full scope and severity of the historical problems within STRI. It is also notable that this demand for action by staff scientists did not arise a year previously when the Government Accountability Office exposed systemic failures within the Smithsonian Institution regarding sexual harassment.¹⁰ To ensure that STRI's reforms are meaningful rather than cursory, we ask that you amplify the voices of these courageous women speaking out by giving them a seat at the table rather than solely working with staff scientists who have protected their own historically. These women include tenured professors and research scientists such as Dr. Sarah Batterman, Dr. Tana Wood, Dr. Meg Crofoot, Dr. Emma Sayer, and Dr. Nina Wurzburger, who endured pervasive and unabashed sexual abuse and retaliation early in their careers, only to turn around and protect younger scientists coming up behind them now. These women also include up-and-coming scientists like Dr. Katherine Sinacore and Ellen Dyer. Both of these women could easily have been pushed out of the sciences altogether after surviving sexual abuse but have instead endured and bravely spoken out early in their careers to ensure change. This group of outspoken women survivors are the *true leaders deserving a seat at the table* whenever STRI leadership commits to the necessary top-down reforms rather than the current half measures proposed by its staff scientists.

In conclusion, on behalf of the scientists signed below, I look forward to a response from the Gender Policy Council and any others copied on this communication who want to use this moment and the momentum of recent media coverage to build meaningful and long-lasting changes within STRI, the Smithsonian Institute, and the sciences in general. Ending pervasive discrimination, harassment, and violence against women and other marginalized populations of scientists is the only way to truly ensure that the most brilliant minds can work together for the betterment of our world.

Sincerely,



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⁹ Kathryn B. H. Clancey, et al, Opinion: Use science to stop sexual harassment in higher education, PNAS (2020) <https://www.pnas.org/content/117/37/22614>.

¹⁰ See *supra*, n. 3.

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CC: U.S. House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology
U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
U.S. Department of Justice, Office of U.S. Attorney General
U.S. Department of Energy
U.S. National Academy of Science
National Science Foundation
Ecological Society of America
American Geophysical Union
Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation
National Academies of Science Engineering and Medicine
National Aeronautics and Space Administration

Signatories

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