

Discrimination claimed in science, engineering fields

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Women in science and engineering technology fields face sexism on a daily basis while also missing out on opportunities afforded to male counterparts, says a workers' association.

In a 2017 survey by the Association of Science and Engineering Technology Professionals of Alberta (ASET), women reported issues ranging from sexual assault and harassment to a boys' club where they were asked to fetch coffee and take meeting minutes.

"There weren't any huge surprises," said Tara Chahl, a project manager in the pipeline industry who sits on the association's council.

"There are a lot of strong voices in this generation coming up," she added. "Hopefully they'll find a balance of equality in the workforce."

Her own experiences with sexism included being passed over for opportunities early on when she worked with a group of men who were also friends from college, she said. She also learned a female colleague in the same laboratory was paid significantly less than men with fewer qualifications.

"Her education, her experience and the amount of work she did superseded everyone," Chahl said.

Sexism has followed Chahl throughout her careers in the pipeline industry as well as previously in the Canadian Forces infantry, she said.

"As I worked through the battalion over eight or nine years, I became less tolerant of harassment. I started calling it out."

About 140 women responded to the survey which asked about barriers at work, from finding mentorship to whether women were pressured to "play a stereotypical female role" at work.

"I was most surprised by the section of comments that reflected an attitude in the workplace

that I thought was gone for at least 30 years,” said Barry Cavanaugh, chief executive and general counsel for ASET.

One respondent noted that women were generally assigned to take meeting minutes.

“Had to push that this would be rotated among all participants,” she wrote.

Cavanaugh said he found the results disturbing.

“We’re struggling, with some success, for a way to take some action as a result of what we’ve learned,” he said, adding ASET has launched networking events and teleconference meetings for female workers to specifically address these issues.

“We recognize that we have to ramp up the discussion.”

ASET is a self-regulating professional association representing 18,000 members.

Less than 2,000 are women.