

COMMENTARY

How to Avoid Gender-Based Hostility During Fieldwork

By *Beth Alpert Nakhai* | JULY 15, 2018

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Like many whose fieldwork takes place far from home, I found the 2014 report "Survey of Academic Field Experiences: Trainees Report Harassment and Assault," which documented the dangers that fieldwork in isolated settings poses to (primarily) women, both riveting and horrifying. By quantifying a set of problems that many of us were aware of but which few of us took action against, the report transformed our understanding of the professional responsibilities we must commit to while engaged in fieldwork.

I am an archaeologist who was, at the time the report came out, a trustee of the American Schools of Oriental Research and the chair of its Initiative on the Status of Women. Inspired by the report, I created a two-year survey on field safety in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Mediterranean basin.

Almost 500 people from 24 countries, excavating in almost as many, took the survey. Of the respondents, 55 percent were between the ages of 22 and 39; 63 percent were female; 90 percent identified as heterosexual; and 78 percent held advanced degrees. On excavations, their positions ranged from director or co-director to volunteer or paid digger.

Field Sites Are Rife With Sexual Harassment

A clear code of conduct, vigorously enforced, can help minimize problems.

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The results were eye-opening. For example, although more volunteers were female than male, and staffs were split fairly evenly by gender, 40 percent of excavations had no female director or co-director.

Excavation culture, which is vital to field safety, was often poisonous. Respondents found that sexual violations were tolerated at 20 percent of digs, and drug and alcohol abuse was tolerated at most. Physical assault, racial or religious harassment, theft, and vandalism each occurred at approximately one quarter of field projects.

Similarly, negative comments about physical attributes, dress, gender, gender presentation, and sexual orientation were also factors, and some respondents felt compelled to hide their sexual orientation and/or their gender identity. Violations of professional integrity were common, including discrimination in fieldwork and post-excavation assignments and opportunities based on gender, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity.

Independent investigators could have made a difference, but they were available at only a small percentage of digs. Codes of conduct could also have made a difference, but only half the digs had them, and many completely ignored or else ineffectively

addressed sexual violations. For example, fewer than half required either follow-up or repercussions for reported violations. Ultimately, many respondents were ambivalent about reporting violations of professional integrity to excavation or university leadership, given the lack of action when they did report.

How might the information that I gathered from this survey inform efforts to ensure safety in field settings? Fortunately, I am not the only person concerned with this problem; archaeologists in the United States and abroad are producing a growing corpus of research that documents gender-based violence and discrimination in our field. Here are some largely agreed-upon best practices that will help us to move forward:

- Increase the number of women who lead field projects.
- Develop protocols for appropriate behaviors, with clearly defined consequences for violations. These protocols should highlight both legal and ethical conduct in the field and on research projects; they should also reference best-practices statements produced by professional societies.
- Obtain written commitments from fieldwork leaders to model appropriate behaviors and to support and enforce consequences for violations.
- Institute effective trainings for field staff, volunteers, and employees, before and throughout field seasons.
- Establish and publicize chains of command for field projects, including those individuals responsible for resolving both formal and informal complaints.
- Create healthy fieldwork environments that, among other things, restrict alcohol consumption, ban drug use, and prohibit abusive language targeting race, religion, gender, dress, and physical attributes.
- Have independent investigators and medical professionals trained to deal with sexual assaults and other violations on site.
- Produce accurate, detailed records of all complaints, copied to appropriate individuals and institutional offices.
- Ensure that all relevant information regarding codes of behavior, reporting, and

so forth are easily accessible prior to and throughout field seasons, both electronically and in print form.

- Become familiar with the laws and customs in the country where the dig takes place, as they may differ from the laws and customs of directors' home countries.

Before Kathryn Clancy, Robin Nelson, Julienne Rutherford, and Katie Hinde released the "Survey of Academic Field Experiences," few knew just how widespread gender-based hostility was out in the field. Although there is still a lot of work to be done, as my own study confirmed, the problem isn't hidden anymore. We must continue to expose inappropriate behavior and insist that those organizing and participating in fieldwork follow best practices. Doing that hard work is the only way we can make field experiences safe and productive for everyone.

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