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A Sociological Framework to Address Gender Equity in the Geosciences

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Lack of equity in the science workforce is a sociological problem; those wishing to seek its amelioration can benefit by viewing the issue with a sociological lens (and a sociologist). One useful framework that we have used to think strategically about how to lower barriers to equity is Barbara Risman's (2004): this framework views barriers to equity as individual, interpersonal ("interactional"), and institutional. Any given barrier may fit into one or more of these frames. Individual barriers include those intrinsic to an individual and may include: lack of access to vital networks and mentors, lack of preparation, etc. Such barriers can be addressed through mentoring programs and attention to building networks (e.g., through professional society memberships). Interpersonal or "interactional" barriers are those that arise from how we perceive and treat one another. Implicit bias underlies many of these barriers, including whether we perceive women as scientists, as competent, as dedicated (etc) as men. Such barriers can be reduced through implicit bias awareness. Institutional barriers arise from the structure and history of the academy itself, from its policies and procedures. Many such policies and procedures have a differential impact on men or women, generally without that intention. Policies that reduce equity barriers include family leave, childcare facilities, search committee training, clearly articulated practices for evaluation of applications and personnel reviews, equal starting pay and startup packages, equable canvassing for names to consider for nominations for honors and awards, to name a few. By viewing the issue through such a framework, the appropriate response can be generated for a more effective result.