



El Tiempo Latino

styleTechnology
INTERNATIONAL

Smithsonian Panama scientists denounce years of sexual harassment

by Redacción | Dec 10, 2021



Buzzfeed research reveals a culture of harassment and inappropriate sexual behavior at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI) in Panama, the only complex of the academic-

educational institution located outside the United States. The research compiles the stories of 16 female scientists who worked on the premises and even left the place so as not to continue tolerating harassment.

Stay informed of the most relevant issues of politics, economy and health and how they affect the Latino community. [Subscribe here](#) to our newsletters.

Why is it important? Smithsonian is the largest institution of museums, education and research in the world, fusing arts, history and science in galleries and research with scientists from around the world. Its only venue outside the United States is located on Barro Colorado Island, in Panama, a key environmental research center in advances in evolution, biodiversity and climate change.

- Every year about 1,200 research scientists meet at the STRI to develop their doctoral or postdoctoral scientific work. However, research reveals that being a woman researcher on the spot is difficult and they must tolerate harassment, inappropriate sexual comments or manipulations in order to continue and end their contracts or scholarships.
- The [American Association of University Women](#) points out in an investigation on workplace harassment that 34% of women have been harassed in their workplaces, and that 38% of them have resigned for these reasons. Similar to the scientists who left the STRI for sexual harassment.

Context. 16 women researchers who worked at the STRI told their stories of harassment and abuse within the institution by men in positions of power within the organization - heads of laboratories, research, advisors or inmates - and how this affected them in work and personal life, to the point that some left the premises.

- Sarah Batterman filed a formal complaint with the Smithsonian in 2020, in which she denounced that Benjamin Turner - who led the institute's biochemistry laboratory - had raped her at a conference in San Francisco, 2011. After their complaint, seven other women said they had been harassed by Turner. "I have never felt so isolated, but now I know that I am not alone," Batterman said upon learning of the other complaints.
- Meg Crofoot, an anthropologist who first went to high school in 2003, told BuzzFeed that Egbert "Bert" Leigh - a sponsoring scientist of her research who worked at STRI - constantly made inappropriate sexual comments, and that when she returned in 2009, Leigh tried to court her until so in 2010 she decided to stop residing on the island and have an apartment in Panama, while going by boat every day to the institute to continue her research. "I remember once told how one of the young researchers was generating an erection," Crofoot recalls.
- Emma Sayer's case relates to who controlled access to the biochemistry laboratory and filtered the samples being studied, Benjamin Turner. "He used this rhetoric of 'we are a great team' to force

people to drink." Sayer recalls that at one of the parties organized by Turner forced a young instigator to drink to the point of vomiting and took photos of her "to blackmail her later." Sayer filed formal complaints and this cost him access to the laboratory.

Another 13 women told their stories of abuse and harassment within the institution, at least since 2000, some also confirmed the complaints, but preferred to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals. While these women continue to be educators in different universities around the world, the institute still owes a debt to those scientists who went through these treatments and did not get a protocol of denunciation and effective action.

The current director of the ISTR, Joshua Tewksbury, assures that they will not tolerate any abusive or harassment behavior within the institution. "We take this responsibility seriously and have clear protocols on site to investigate and attack concerns that may arise from people," explained the director who refused to give statements about specific cases of harassment and abuse within the institution.

