

# Network Session Report

2024

## Creating supportive fieldwork environments in marine sciences

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### Introduction

Fieldwork situations can act as mesocosms of the issues of discrimination in the workplace. Our experiences can differ largely in relation to the intersection of our identities (e.g., gender, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation etc.). Society and work environments expose us differently to discrimination in its variety of forms, going from stereotyped bias and prejudice to verbal, physical and/or sexual harassment and violence. Fieldwork situations, in particular, can act as concentrated mesocosms of these universal and pervasive issues. Considering the prevalence of these issues, we need supportive systems for when science participants are at their most vulnerable.

In this network session, we addressed the issue of discrimination in the context of fieldwork in marine science. We wanted to give the opportunity to share experience, build connections, and share national approaches put in place that aim at preventing discrimination at sea and in the field. As the feeling of being alone acts as a core barrier for people to tackle these issues in their working environments, we considered a network session to connect with each other.

The main desired output of this session was to empower marine scientists to make positive changes by forming a network of peers passionate about creating supportive work environments.

### Session synopsis

Before the session, we used the Whova app to ask a question to participants of the network session and wider ICES Annual Science Conference (ASC) participants: *"Have you ever experienced discrimination in fieldwork situations or onboard research vessels?"*.

From 40 replies in total, 19 answered that they experienced it themselves, 7 witnessed it, and 14 had not experienced or witnessed it.

At the beginning of the network session, we started with two small exercises to get to know the group (24 participants) and their experiences with conducting field work as well as potential experiences of discrimination. We then split into three groups, each discussing a case study.

#### *First exercise*

During the first exercise the following questions were asked, and participants would stand up if they agreed to it:

- Have you ever participated in field work/sea cruises?
- Please stay standing up if you participated in more than five trips.
- Have you been attending cruises/field work in more than one country?
- Has your longest cruise/field trip taken over three weeks? Over eight weeks?
- Have you ever been a cruise leader/field trip leader?
- Please stand up, if you generally enjoy field trips/sea cruises.
- Have you always felt safe during trips?
- Have you ever experienced what you consider sexist jokes?
- Have you ever experienced what you consider racist jokes?

- Have you ever felt humiliated or bullied during field work?

### *Summary of the exercise*

Most of the participants had previously participated in sea cruises or fieldwork, and approximately a third of them took part in more than five trips. In contrast, four attendees had never taken part in sea-going trips lasting more than a day. A quarter of the participants had attended cruises in more than one country and five participants were or had been cruise leaders. Over half of the attendees present have experienced or witnessed discrimination instances while working aboard vessels.

### *Second exercise*

During the second short exercise, we would read one of the following statements, after which participants would move towards one side of the room or the other depending on whether they strongly agree, rather agree, feel neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree.

- I believe that discrimination instances are more difficult to handle on research vessels compared to “normal life conditions”.
- When I feel uncomfortable / unsafe in a field work situation, there is a system in place to address it or raise a concern.
- I would prefer a personal vs anonymous way to report an incidence.
- I can honestly talk to my superior about the safety and issues in field work
- I find often find myself taking situations home, such as comments or specific behaviours during fieldwork I considered offensive.

### *Summary of the exercise*

- It depends on the case and whether there is already a support system in place to face different situations.
- For most participants, it seems there is a system to report incidents when they occur in office or everyday work environments, whereas the procedure, if there is any, seems more vague when incidents happen at sea.
- The responses varied with approximately half of the group on one side and the other half on the other: some participants emphasised that anonymous reporting could make it feel safer and improve confidentiality, whereas others preferred a personal way of reporting an incident. In those cases, they believed it important to be able to communicate directly with the people involved in the incident. Again, the preferred reporting methods depended on the situation itself and the type of incident. An interesting example was given on the methods to report an incident while onboard a vessel: in case of an incident, one could report anonymously, and the testimony would be dealt with by an external organisation, potentially informing the captain or cruise leader of the measures that need to be taken immediately, such as directly heading to port.
- Everybody agreed with the statement although not everyone had a superior onboard e.g., during commercial sampling.
- The answers varied substantially: participants with a neutral stance (people who had never been involved in a negative incident), as well as an equal number of people who agreed and disagreed with the statement. The factors impacting the participants’ answers included whether there is already a support network in place at the workplace, the severity of the incident, and how familiar their relatives/family/friends would be with working on a vessel.

### *Third exercise*

We then split into three groups working on three case studies and answering two questions:

1. How would we deal with this situation in an ideal world?
2. What do we need to reach the ideal world?

The three groups worked on these topics using broad introductory examples:

- Discriminating jokes are made by a colleague.
- Fieldwork infrastructure is discriminatory.
- The crew does not have the necessary licences to steer the ship 24 hours a day. This topic was not directly related to discrimination however, but rather with the safety of being onboard.

### *Summary of the exercise*

In the first group, participants agreed that, ideally, there should be no discriminatory jokes made. It was difficult to agree on a single procedure to follow in case such discrimination happened, as it could be very situation specific. The importance of a reporting system and support network was however emphasised. In addition to having these systems in place, a main solution put forward was using regular courses as tools to train both crew members and scientists about the procedures already in place in case of sexual harassment or any discrimination. Such courses could include refresher STCW courses for example, or any regular training that could be country-specific.

In the group discussing discriminatory infrastructures, differences between approaches in research vessels compared to commercial vessels were noted. Discriminatory infrastructure could include the need to lift heavier loads than safety regulations allow, or the absence of bins to place menstruation products. Generally, this leads to the feeling of not being valued as part of the team. In an ideal world, there are ability-specific requirements and protocols for different tasks that are communicated before the cruise. Although these might differ between countries and thus would likely demand institution-based solutions, building international guidelines on which countries could build would greatly improve fieldwork and research-vessel environments. Again, this might also be different when work is conducted on commercial vessels. Communication beforehand is especially valuable for people joining a vessel for the first time, who do not know what to expect, to give them more security. Finally, even a short training for cruise leaders could improve inclusivity in fieldwork and research-vessel environments.

Lastly, when focussing on certificates and qualifications related to safety on board, in an ideal world, attendees emphasised the need for trust from both sides (scientists and crew members). Several ideas were put forward to prevent incidents related to the absence of required certificates, such as by adding them to the mandatory checklist before going on board. Stipulating in contracts that vessels need to adhere to certificate requirements seemed archivable on research, chartered, and remunerated vessels. However, it would be more difficult to implement on vessels doing voluntary work, accepting to take scientists or students on board with no remuneration especially when there is no regular collaboration between the vessel and scientists. Additionally, reporting such non-compliance incidents is needed for everybody's safety but can be challenging when the anonymity of the vessel needs to be preserved.

### **Conclusion**

Participants in this network session ranged from different backgrounds and career levels and showed that there is a wide interest throughout the community. They contributed their experience and

perspectives working in the field and on commercial and research vessels. Although the topic itself is of a very personal and intimate nature, the group created an atmosphere of solidarity and constructiveness. One of the main takeaways was that guidelines for fieldwork mainly existed after incidences of discrimination came to light. Other participants were interested in implementing guidelines to prevent discriminatory fieldwork practices. Putting reporting systems in place might lead to a higher standard of security. Further, written protocols being shared before the cruise help people joining the fieldwork team for the first time to prepare. Generally, there was a wish to collect available templates and resources among member institutions so that country-specific regulations could be developed.

### **Feedback**

Participants in the network session expressed the wish to establish a workshop at ICES in which best practices from the individual countries are shared and available resources distributed. We heard from the group that best practices are often developed after a discriminatory incident, and thus a workshop would also be very useful for participants to share experiences and best practices, but also for countries where they are not in place yet. Including all stakeholders ranging from ship managers, fishermen, and technicians to cruise leaders would be key to building a successful and fruitful workshop, to approach this holistically.

Although discrimination would be illegal in (most of) the participants' research institutes under the applying national and supranational (for example EU) legislation, incidences of discrimination are prevalent in marine sciences, especially in fieldwork situations. Therefore, the need for guidelines to be applicable across ICES member states was emphasised.