

# FGSR Professional Development

## Student Life Module



## Challenges Facing Female Students

Women face some challenges that are different from men. Not all women students will face these situations however the goal is to increase awareness and provide tips on how to deal with issues to ensure graduate students have a better experience during graduate studies.

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### Tips

#### 1. Methodology

Disagreements concerning a legitimate topic and methodology for research projects may occur. There are some feminist methodologies that may not be supported by your supervisor. \*Gender issues can also be faced by men, such as exploring homophobic relationships.

#### 2. Problems regarding communication and feedback

Male supervisors of female students may not give as detailed feedback on their work as with male students for fear of the response to the criticism. Some supervisors may feel that women are too emotional and fear they may need to cope with the student crying in their office. If you think you do not have adequate feedback you should tell your supervisor directly. Be clear in your expectations and be prepared for criticism and feedback. If you do not receive a response from your supervisor after being persistent, contact your department graduate program coordinator.

#### 3. Communication with your supervisor

Sometimes supervisors may be unintentionally patronizing. Talk to your supervisor in an assertive manner if you feel you are being patronized. Expect to be treated professionally and treat others professionally.

#### 4. Personal information

You do not have to disclose personal information to co-workers and supervisors. If you are asked personal information you can refuse to answer or ask why they want to know that information. If you know that you cannot attend a conference at a specific time because of personal commitments you should decline to attend. Reveal information as a sign of trust. You do not need to reveal the specific information however sometimes it is better to give some indication to avoid people making incorrect assumptions. For example you can say you need time off due to a health issue or a family matter.

#### 5. Professional Conduct

Keep conversations professional to avoid misinterpretation. Remember even joking may be misinterpreted. Be aware when dealing with anyone that they may hold you to different standards of behavior based on your gender. Different actions may be considered acceptable or unacceptable for different people.

#### 6. Scarcity of academic role models

The lack of women role models makes it more difficult to develop an appropriate self-image. Meet the female professors in your department. You may want to join a women's group on campus to expand your network of female graduate students and academics.

## 7. Exclusion and isolation

Some female students may be excluded from social or informal activities. A female student in a department with strong male representation may feel outnumbered. Do not let these feelings discourage you from completing your degree.

## 8. Avoid sexual innuendo

People will interpret situations based on their personal experiences, values and cultural background. It is important to be aware of this and beware of the consequences. For example, if a female student goes for a drink with her supervisor she may be seen as flirtatious or acting inappropriate by some people. Sexual advances and jokes are two more things to which female students may be subjected. Set social boundaries for your comfort level and personal safety. Note that this can also include student to student encounters. Set boundaries for yourself. For example, be aware who has access to your personal information such as telephone numbers. If you feel uncomfortable meeting a professor or other colleague in a suggested meeting place, be assertive and change the meeting to a more public area or an area where you are more comfortable.

## 9. Sexual harassment and exploitation

Both of these issues are a possibility since the supervisor is in a position of authority over the student. Usually harassment is not a topic that is openly discussed. Keep a record of each incidence of harassment. Discuss the problem with others and you may discover you are not alone. Talk to someone at the Sexual Assault center, OmbudService or your graduate coordinator if you feel harassed. You do not have to prove harassment to talk to someone if you feel uncomfortable about something that has happened between yourself and your supervisor or colleague.

## 10. Equality

Males and females should be treated equally by your supervisor. If you suspect you are being treated differently because of your gender, talk to someone about the situation such as your graduate coordinator or OmbudService. For example, if you are expected to make coffee and perform specific duties because you are the female student in the lab, you can discuss sharing these roles with others in the lab with your supervisor.

## 11. Bullying

Do not tolerate bullying or gender harassment. Consult your graduate coordinator if you feel bullied by someone in authority or a co-worker.

## 12. Pregnancy

Students should know their rights regarding maternity leave. Students at the University of Alberta can request for financial assistance in some cases if going on maternity leave. Contact the Human Rights Office if you believe you are being discriminated based on your gender and needs regarding your pregnancy.

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## Activities To-Do On Your Own

- Develop a support group that has female members. This way you can share experiences with other female graduate students.
- Consider joining a women's association on campus.
- Attend seminars given by female professors. Learn how they present conflicting research and how they present themselves.
- Ask a female professor to act as your mentor to give you advice on gender related issues in your field.

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## Other Resources

- “How to get a PhD”, Estelle Phillips and Derek Pugh, (2000) Open University Press.
- OmbudService (<http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/OmbudService/>)  
5-02 Students' Union Building, 8900 - 114 Street, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta
- Office of Human Rights: <http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/humanrights/>
- Sexual Assault Centre: <http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/SAC/>