

Committee on the Status of Women in Astronomy **by Susan Simkin**

*from: "The American Astronomical Society's First Century" (American Institute of Physics/
Springer Verlag, 1999) - David DeVorkin editor*

I. Introduction

It is difficult to satisfy everyone's perceptions and still write an "official" history of an event - such as the creation of the Committee on the Status of Women in Astronomy (CSWA) of the AAS, which was launched in response to political controversy. Much of the background for this activity is not in the AAS minutes and resides only in the (imperfect) memories of the active participants. Since my personal involvement in the events leading up to the creation of the CSWA was limited by geography (I was resident in the Netherlands and then Australia at the time), I have had to rely on firsthand accounts from those who were directly involved. My success in eliciting these accounts has been limited, at best. Thus, the summary reported here is sketchy but may (I hope) serve as a starting point for those who have greater access to historical documentation.

II. Prologue

Although most elementary astronomy books emphasize the early history of such women as Annie Jump Cannon and Cecilia Payne-Gaposchkin, the number of women actually engaged in astronomy during the years leading up to WWII and after was very limited, in number of course, but mainly in their ability to achieve elite, independent roles in research. As with other scientific disciplines, the lack of male graduate students during WW II led to a relative increase in female astronomers but this was rapidly wiped out in the 1950s.[1]

Those of us who were graduate students in the 1960s and refused to believe that women were not suited for employment at major universities had a few examples such as Cecilia Payne-Gaposchkin at Harvard (who was well known nationally, but inaccessible to most of us), Helen Dodson Prince at the University of Michigan (whose students were referred to as "Helen's girls" by our male professors), Elizabeth Scott at Berkeley (who wrote papers about galaxies but was "really" a statistician), Helen Sawyer Hogg at Toronto, and Margaret Burbidge (who was, directly, or indirectly, responsible for most of the women doing work on galaxies in the 1960s). Although all of these women (with the exception of Margaret Burbidge, who was a "lady" with a very outspoken husband) were trivialized in conversation (behind their backs) by many of our senior male colleagues, their very existence served as proof that it was possible to be female and still do good astronomy.

Although the number of female PhDs rose in the 1960s, the percentage of women in the AAS dropped to an all-time low of 8 percent by 1973. [2] The possibility of finding a job was particularly poor for those women who were married (we joked that we needed a certificate of infertility as part of the job application and were told to our faces that "the director didn't want to take a chance on a woman" or that we might be able to "work part-time (teaching 2 or 3 classes)

until we started a family"). Amazingly, most of us accepted this attitude as "normal" even though we resented it and joked about its illogic.

This was all challenged in 1971 when Margaret Burbidge declined the Cannon Prize, giving as her reason that "the prize, available only to women, was in itself discriminatory."^[3] At the time, the impression one gained from eavesdropping on the (male) elders of the AAS Council was that Margaret Burbidge's refusal was a disaster "because it would insult Cecilia Payne who was the first recipient of the Cannon Prize."

The council's response was to set up a committee! (The Special Committee on the Cannon Prize). As recalled by Anne Cowley: "..when Margaret Burbidge refused the old Cannon Prize the AAS set up a committee on what to do about this. I was on the committee - I can't remember who else was, but I am pretty sure George Preston was either on it or chaired it. There were probably about 5 or 6 people on the committee ... so the committee was charged with recommending `what to do' about what was then the Cannon Prize. Our committee recommended that it be given to the American Association of University Women (AAUW) (I think that there was some stipulation from the donor that it be used for women, which meant the AAS couldn't open it to men and women). We further recommended that it be a research award for which women in the early stages of their careers could apply for (I recall being careful not to stipulate an age limit as some prizes had/have). The Council bought this, and hence that is how the Cannon Award came into being. You will see that in 1974 and on the award then went to much more junior women."^[4] According to Sidney Wolff:

"I was a member of the committee that made a recommendation about what to do with the Cannon prize. We had to recommend something that was consistent with Cannon's bequest but took Margaret's feelings into account. We decided that women started with a number of disadvantages early in their careers and that it was appropriate to offer an award that would assist them when they were just beginning to do research. Hence the structure of the award as it is now and its management by the AAUW.

I don't remember that I went to the council in person, although I may have. . . I also remember being struck by the fact that the situation of women had not improved at least in terms of numbers throughout much of the 20th century. At about the time we were meeting, a number of the very senior women were at or nearing retirement (Hogg, Prince, Gaposchkin), and they had not been replaced by the next generation."^[5]

Although these recollections seem rather mild, in fact Margaret Burbidge's message acted as a clarion call. At the AAS meeting in Lansing Michigan in August, 1972, the Special Committee on the Cannon Prize faced the primary issue directly and recommended that the Council set up a group to review the status of women in astronomy. According to Donald Osterbrock (who was an AAS Council member at the time):

"I was present at what I think must have been the first formal recognition of women as needing or deserving an organization of their own within the AAS. . . A

delegation of women members of the AAS, about 4 or so as well as I can remember, but all the details are hazy in my mind, appeared, I believe at their own prior written request.

Their message was that women weren't being considered for nomination to office, Council member, etc., nor for invited speakers, chairs of sessions, appointments to AAS committees, etc. Of course some women had been in all these slots, but not enough of them, these women who were there said. They wanted a formal statement that the AAS had done wrong in the past, and they wanted improvement in the future.”[6]

This group of women was, in fact, the "special committee" appointed by the AAS Council in 1971.

III. Origins

In response to this request, in 1972 the Council set up a second committee, the "Working Group on the Status of Women in Astronomy." The report of THIS working group (represented by A. Cowley, R. Humphreys, B. Lynds and V. Rubin with the help of 19 other AAS members) was accepted by the AAS Council on 3 December at the meeting in Tucson Arizona and is published in the Bulletin.[7] The report contains a wealth of statistical information culled from questionnaires, AAS membership lists, journal indices, and NSF records. It concluded that:

- The percentage of women in the AAS is now (1973) the lowest that it has been in the history of the Society;
- Women have been generally under-represented as Society officers, committee members, prize recipients, invited speakers, session chairman, and journal editors; and
- The US ranks seventh in the percentage of IAU members who are women... [7]

Although the Working Group formed in 1972 was quite specific in its recommendations, matters moved slowly and the AAS Council again voted to establish an ad hoc Committee on the Status of Women at the 152nd AAS meeting in Madison Wisconsin in June 1978. Ivan King made the motion which was seconded by Harlan Smith.

This committee (consisting of Martha Liller, Chair, Anne Cowley, Paul Hodge, Frank Kerr, and Nancy Morrison) was charged with updating the 1973 report. Its principal conclusions were that: "the status of women (in the AAS) has changed very little since 1973" and that "the Council authorize the appointment of a standing Committee on the Status of Women." [8] The long-sought standing committee (the present CSWA) was established in June 1979 (with A. Cowley, Chair, Frank Kerr, Martha Liller, Bruce Margon, and Catherine Pilachowski) and was asked to draw up its own charge, which was adopted by the Council in June, 1980.

IV. Progress? For several years after its inception, the CSWA members were appointed on a haphazard basis with the chair serving for only one year (often learning of the appointment in September with very little time to organize events for the annual meeting of the AAS in January).

The author served as chair of the CSWA in 1985/86 and decided to take a fresh look at the latest statistics on the post PhD employment of women in astronomy. Lacking a venue for this ad hoc analysis, I started a hard copy newsletter, STATUS, styled after the advice columns of the national dailies. The meager statistical analysis in the first edition of that letter suggests that there had not been much improvement in the percentage of female astronomers in academic, non civil service jobs.[9] Unfortunately, the newsletter's attempts at humor were deemed offensive by many of the younger women in the society and it faded into limbo sometime after 1988 (but was renewed again in more serious form in 1995 with Kathy Mead as editor).

In recent years the committee has achieved more long- term stability, with Debbie Elmegreen serving as chair from 1990 to 1997. A more successful effort at communication became possible with the widespread introduction of email in the late 1980s and Elmegreen started the CSWA NEWSLETTER (electronic) in 1992. This has proved to be an excellent vehicle for both the dissemination of information and interactive discussion.

A major advance in international recognition for women in astronomy was achieved in 1992 with the meeting "On the Status of Women in Astronomy" held at the Space Telescope Science Institute (September 8-9, proceedings edited by C. M. Urry, L. Danly, L. E. Sherbert, and S. Gonzaga). Out of this meeting came the "Baltimore Charter" whose goal is to promote a culture in which both women and men can realize their full potential in scientific careers. The AAS Council formally adopted a resolution of support for the Charter at the January 1994 meeting in Washington D.C., which read in part:

Recognizing the principle that the inclusion of women and other under-represented groups in the ranks of professional astronomers is important and highly desirable, the American Astronomical Society is committed to addressing issues of attitude and procedure that negatively impact any groups. The American Astronomical Society supports the goal of the Baltimore Charter, which is to promote a culture in which both men and women can realize their full potential in scientific careers. We recognize that there are many differences in the institutional structure of astronomical organizations, and that no single strategy is likely to be suitable to all of them. We do, however, urge all astronomical programs to formulate strategies that will enable them to realize the goal of the Baltimore Charter.[10]

The Council also modified the AAS bylaws to reflect its "commitment to this goal." [10] The Baltimore Charter was distributed by Goetz Oertel to the presidents of all the AURA institutions. In the spirit of the Charter, the CSWA began to hold open meetings to explore issues such as job interview and hiring practices in astronomy and "what questions are illegal or legal." In this manner the Committee acts as both a network and a forum to air concerns that touch every life in the Society.[11]

V. What Next?

When the CSWA met during the January 1997 AAS Meeting in Toronto, two discussion topics emerged which suggest different paths to progress. The first was a call for a new survey to help determine the current status of women in astronomy. This has been a recurring topic at CSWA meetings since the origin of the committee and the results of the surveys have shown only marginal progress. One hopes that an updated survey will be more encouraging.

A different theme at the 1997 January meeting, however, was a detailed discussion of educational outreach (particularly at the K-12 levels). This is a topic which has received increasing emphasis at recent CSWA meetings and may eventually lead to a new generation of students and scholars who will finally redress the imbalances which so far appear to have resisted major change.

VI. Acknowledgements

I am particularly grateful to E. M. Burbidge, A. Cowley, D. Elmegreen, I. King, D. Osterbrock and S. Wolff for sharing their memories with me (and in the case of I. King, supplying valuable documentation). Naturally, the author alone bears all responsibility for any errors or misinterpretations which may occur in this article.

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Side light: Actually, we never distributed the Chrater to "university administrators and eventually to every department of astronomy chair active in the AAS." I wish! Meg (Urry)