

The Black Star News

Vol. 11 No. 20

www.blackstarnews.com

March 23 - March 29, 2006

This Professor Fights For Her Peers

(Syndicated News)—March is a national celebration of women's history, and of those women who successfully blazed the trail in prior generations. But battles are still being fought in the name of gender equity.

One constant battle is to rectify the gender pay gap. Women are still being paid less money for the same work and credentials. Surprisingly, the nations' universities have emerged as hotbeds for sexual harassment and discrimination. The recent unprecedented resignation of Larry Summers as president of Harvard followed his controversial public statements that men are better than women in science because of genetics.

One person with first-hand experience is Dr. Graciela Chichilnisky, the UNESCO Professor of Mathematics and Economics at Columbia University. She authored the Kyoto Protocol main feature, its Global Markets for Emissions Trading. Despite her worldwide reputation, Dr. Chichilnisky has been fighting a battle at Columbia for many years trying to bridge the pay gap between men and women.

"There is a serious problem within the university system across the country," explains Dr. Chichilnisky, "and I'm working to try to help improve those conditions. The glass ceiling damages many women and their families, and we all need to work together to change that."

The American Association of University Women (AAUW) finds that two thirds of all female students

Dr. Graciela Chichilnisky suffer sexual harassment, and the American Association of University Professors ranks Columbia University as the second worst Ivy League in terms of gender discrimination in salaries. According to their data, while male professors at Columbia are earning around \$143,000 per year, their female counterparts are earning \$128,000, and the gap is still growing.

The issue of sexual inequities at the nation's top universities was reported in a January 2001 issue of The New York Times. The article stated that a group of nine University presidents held a meeting and produced material showing gender inequities. M.I.T. was prompted to admit that they had unintentionally discriminated against women. That same article reported that professors at the meeting said that the problems were not limited to the science field. Howard Georgi, a physics professor at Harvard, was quoted as saying "I've been serving on a committee of women mostly in non-science fields, and they're desperate about many of these same things."

Promotions for women faculty has been an issue at Columbia, as reported in a 2001 issue of the Columbia Daily Spectator, the University newspaper. In 2005 another article in the Spectator stated that very little progress had been made at Columbia during those years.

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Dr. Graciela Chichilnisky

Chichilnisky thought she had won the battle when a 1995 federal court case settlement awarded her \$500,000 in damages, and almost doubled her salary. The University promised to provide Dr. Chichilnisky funding and space for her research center. One would think that the settlement would have corrected the problems and it would be the end of the issue. But that's just not the case.

"The University breached every term of my 1995 settlement," explains Dr. Chichilnisky, "including \$350,000 lack of payment of my compensation, and deliberately froze millions of dollars of my own research grants under false pretenses." A 2002 press release by the AAUW announcing their backing of Dr. Chichilnisky's case, stated that Professor Chichilnisky is a tenured full professor at one of the most prestigious universities in the world, internationally recognized for her research and publications, and yet she still faces a hostile working environment and has to fight to be compensated and treated fairly in comparison to her male colleagues.

During 2003 an article ran in the Columbia Spectator about the discrimination lawsuit. In that article it was reported that a University spokesperson, Eileen Murphy, denied that Columbia ever practices sexual discrimination against its faculty. They also report that she denied that Columbia breached the 1995 settlement to Dr. Chichilnisky's lawsuit, but said that one or two sexual discrimination cases have been filed against Columbia by faculty each year for the past 20 years or so.

That same article offers information from Amy Houghton, acting director of the AAUW, who is giving support to Dr. Chichilnisky's legal battle. They report that she said AAUW supports female scholars in sexual discrimination lawsuits only when their claims against a university are strong. They also report that Houghton said she had received a number of inquiries from people at Columbia, which suggests Columbia has not had a strong record in supporting women.

According to Dr. Chichilnisky, the University dismantled the seven offices of her research center in February 2000, leaving her center and its researchers without a place to operate. In the process she reports that they damaged crucial equipment, and destroyed academic files and records that were used for the Kyoto Protocol.

In an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education following the incident, the reporter asked about the damages and reports that the lawyer for Columbia, Patricia Sachs Catapano, responded to by saying "There is no answer to that. I know she claims that. I have never been able to discover exactly what happened." In March 2000 the Supreme Court of the State of New York granted Chichilnisky an injunction to stop Columbia University from dismantling further her research center's offices and related illegal actions.

Last September Columbia removed Dr. Chichilnisky from her only campus offices without any warning. The Spectator then reported that administration officials insist the situation only underscores the University's desperate need for more academic space.

"Space is always a problem, but I am the only professor without a University office. The working conditions of many women at Columbia are a living hell," adds Dr. Chichilnisky, "when all we are trying to do is create a fair and equal playing ground between men and women."

In early March 2006 her case for gender discrimination, retaliation, and breach of contract was in the Supreme Court of the State of New York, and a trial is planned in late 2006. She is still in the making of great women's history. In years to come, women around the country will respect and celebrate the struggle that she continues to fight today on behalf of women everywhere.