



February 11, 2026

Statement by the Coalition for Academic Freedom in the Americas (CAFA)

Women in science: academic freedom for gender equality

In the Americas, scientific production and academic life continue to be profoundly shaped by gender inequalities that limit women's access, participation, and recognition within research and higher education institutions. These inequalities directly affect women's lives and careers, including their ability to do research, to teach and to produce knowledge and science. This affects their rights to academic freedom.

Discrimination, moral and sexual harassment, precarious working conditions, the unequal burden of care responsibilities, and exclusion from decision-making spaces continue to shape the trajectories of women researchers, educators, and students—especially Black, Indigenous, migrant, rural, and gender-diverse women. Scientific environments are not neutral spaces: these reproduce social hierarchies and power relations.

This situation is further exacerbated by growing attacks on education and science that seek to censor debates on gender, diversity, and human rights, undermining women's intellectual authority and restricting their academic autonomy.



Today, February 11, 2026, on the International Day of Women and Girls in Science, the Coalition for Academic Freedom in the Americas (CAFA) presents this statement as the first action of the campaign "Women in Science: Academic Freedom for Gender Equality" reaffirming that there can be no academic freedom, critical knowledge, or democracy without the full, safe, and recognized participation of women in science and academia. Defending women in science is defending the collective right of our societies to produce free, plural, and socially just knowledge.

Women, science and academic freedom: context and challenges

Academic freedom is the right to teach, research, learn, and disseminate knowledge with scientific rigor, free from censorship, intimidation, or discrimination and is a fundamental pillar of democratic societies. Yet this right is not exercised equally. When academic freedom is weakened, women are often among the first to be targeted, particularly those whose work challenges entrenched power structures.

Persistent gender inequalities continue to shape scientific careers worldwide. UNESCO data from 2019 show that women represented only 29.3% of researchers globally, and that disparities widen sharply at the highest levels of academic leadership and recognition. To date, only 3% of Nobel Prizes in scientific fields have been awarded to women.

While Latin America and the Caribbean has come close to parity in overall representation, with women accounting for around 45% of research personnel, horizontal and vertical segregation remain deeply entrenched. Women continue to be underrepresented in senior academic positions, in engineering and technology fields, and in scientific leadership bodies such as national academies of science, where they represent fewer than 20% of members in most countries.

Gender gaps are also reflected in scientific publishing, innovation, and patent systems. Women remain significantly less represented as authors in key STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) disciplines and are still largely excluded from the highest levels of technological development and intellectual property production. According to WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organization), fewer than one third of patents globally include at least one woman inventor, with even lower rates across parts of the Americas.

These patterns are not only a matter of representation: they reflect structural inequalities that restrict women's autonomy, limit the diversity of scientific knowledge, and undermine societies' collective capacity to confront social, environmental, and democratic crises.



Beyond the numbers: cultural and structural barriers

Gender disparities in STEM are rooted in patriarchal cultural norms that shape expectations and opportunities from an early age, influencing girls' educational choices and career pathways.

Gender bias transmitted through families, schools, and the media discourages girls from pursuing STEM fields. Toys, books, films, and everyday cultural practices remain strongly associated with socially constructed gender roles.

These cultural barriers are compounded by institutional mechanisms: bias in hiring and evaluation processes, unequal access to mentorship networks, motherhood penalties, and both symbolic and material forms of violence within academic spaces.

In adulthood, despite some progress in the division of domestic labor, women continue to shoulder the majority of care responsibilities. Even when engaged in professional and scientific work, women often receive less recognition and face persistent intellectual and professional discouragement.

In many countries, this also manifests through coordinated online harassment, smear campaigns, threats, and intimidation—particularly against women who occupy visible public roles in scientific production and debate.

CAFA commitment

The Coalition for Academic Freedom in the Americas reaffirms its commitment to defending women's rights in science, protecting academic freedom, and strengthening democracy and human rights across the region.

This campaign is a call to collective action to transform historically exclusionary structures, confront gender inequalities in academia, and build teaching and research institutions that are more just, plural, safe, and free.

Without the full, recognized, and protected participation of women, there can be no critical science, no rigorous knowledge, and no academic freedom. There is no democratic future without gender justice in science.



CAFA calls for

Within the framework of this campaign, the Coalition for Academic Freedom in the Americas calls on States, higher education institutions, multilateral organizations, and the scientific community to make urgent and verifiable commitments to guarantee gender equality in science and the full exercise of academic freedom. In particular, we call for:

1. Robust institutional policies and effective mechanisms for prevention, accountability, and redress in cases of sexual harassment, gender-based violence, and all forms of discrimination in universities, laboratories, and research centers.
2. Equitable funding, decent working conditions, and measures to support the retention and professional advancement of women researchers, especially Black, Indigenous, migrant, rural, and gender-diverse women.
3. Firm guarantees of academic freedom and protection against censorship, intimidation, and anti-gender backlash campaigns that seek to silence critical scholarship and restrict women's intellectual autonomy.
4. Structural transformations in evaluation, promotion, and scientific leadership systems to eliminate patriarchal bias and ensure women's full participation in decision-making and knowledge production.
5. An active defense of science as a public good—in all its disciplines, including the social sciences, humanities, environmental sciences, health sciences, and STEM—as an indispensable condition for democracy, social justice, and sustainable futures.



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