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Prof. Sues For Settlement From Discrimination Suit

Graciela Chichilnisky claims that Columbia did not honor the terms of a 1995 gender discrimination suit.

By Nat Jacks
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In a lawsuit now pending against Columbia, Graciela Chichilnisky, UNESCO Professor of Mathematics and Economics, alleges that Columbia retaliated against her for filing a sexual discrimination lawsuit by refusing to award her the terms of that lawsuit's 1995 settlement.

Chichilnisky said that she hopes her case will help to resolve Columbia's "longstanding problem of gender discrimination that is so painful and destructive for the University's spirit and its community."

Eileen Murphy, a University spokesperson, denied that Columbia ever practices sexual discrimination against its faculty. She also denied that Columbia breached the 1995 settlement to Chichilnisky's first lawsuit, and said that the University plans to bring counterclaims--as yet unfiled--against Chichilnisky for breaching the terms of the settlement herself. Murphy would not elaborate on the new allegations, explaining that the University is prohibited from discussing Chichilnisky's case in detail while it is pending.

According to court documents, Chichilnisky accused Columbia in 1991 of putting her at a disadvantage due to "egregious gender discrimination." In the 1995 settlement to that case, Columbia agreed to raise Chichilnisky's salary from about \$60,000 to about \$100,000. The University also awarded her the UNESCO Chair in Mathematics and Economics, promised to provide her with \$50,000 each year after the settlement for "duties of the UNESCO Chairholder," and agreed to continue supporting the University's Program on Information and Resources, of which Chichilnisky is the director.

Chichilnisky's current action against Columbia alleges that the University has not fulfilled the terms of that 1995 settlement. Chichilnisky claims that the University refused to pay \$320,000 owed to the PIR, dismantled office equipment and computers at the PIR, and threatened the PIR with eviction from its offices in Low Library. A court document also states that since 1997, "Columbia failed and refused to pay professor Chichilnisky \$250,000 for support of the UNESCO chair."

Chichilnisky's present case received public notice in October of last year when the American Association of University Women Legal Advocacy Fund awarded Chichilnisky \$15,000 to defray her suit's legal costs. The AAUW will likely provide Chichilnisky with more financial support in addition to ongoing legal advice, according to Amy Houghton, acting director of

the AAUW Legal Advocacy Fund.

"I believe deeply in upholding principles of professional ethics," Chichilnisky said. "Indeed, I have initiated procedures within the American Economic Association and the American Mathematical Society to adopt Codes of Ethics." She said she sees herself standing for all female scholars in her cases against Columbia.

Through her association with the AAUW, Chichilnisky has found an ideological partner in her cause to uphold professional gender equality. Houghton explained that her organization supports female scholars in sexual discrimination lawsuits only when their claims against a university are "strong" and only when their cases could significantly reverse a perceived trend in sexual discrimination.

Furthermore, she said that the AAUW Legal Advocacy Fund has "received a number of inquiries from people from Columbia, which suggests Columbia has not had a strong record in supporting women." The AAUW continues to support a sexual discrimination case against Columbia filed in 1995 by Shelley Weinstock, a Barnard chemistry professor.

Murphy said that one or two sexual discrimination cases have been filed against Columbia by faculty each year in the past 20 years or so. She said Columbia "successfully defended them all," meaning that the cases ended with dismissals or what she called "small" settlements.

Houghton said cases like Chichilnisky's are not uncommon at prestigious universities like Columbia. She said sexual discrimination is particularly prevalent in reputable schools because prestigious universities often have deeply entrenched values about sexual discrimination, large financial resources to thwart discrimination lawsuits, and the ability to dissuade female scholars from supporting their female colleagues in sexual discrimination cases for fear of compromising their prominent jobs.

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