The number of women pursuing academic careers in astronomy has increased dramatically since the 1970s. Women now account for 40% of Bachelors degrees in astronomy and 25% of PhDs. However, due to the time it takes to climb the academic ladder and the progressive attrition of women at every step, women make up only 15% of astronomy faculty. The Department of Astronomy at the University of Arizona is similar to the national average in this regard: 4 out of 38 (~10%) astronomy professors are women, while 35% of the graduate students are women. As a consequence, young women lack female role models and mentors. While there are organizations at both the national and university levels that are working diligently to address these issues, the Steward/NOAO Women’s Science Forum (WSF), established in 2005 by a group of female graduate students and postdocs, takes a grassroots approach to creating a more equitable local scientific environment.

Our goals are:

(i) to address retention of women in astronomy and other gender-equity issues through aggressive involvement in scientific discourse, scientific networking both within Steward/NOAO and in the greater astronomical community and informal peer mentoring among members of the group;

(ii) to provide a positive, supportive, non-confrontational environment to develop and regularly practice scientific speaking, leadership, and general assertiveness skills;

(iii) to increase the participation of female grad students and postdocs in mixed-gender group meetings, such as the weekly journal club, lunch talks, and colloquia;

(iv) to increase the number of women colloquium speakers and provide broader contact with female role models in astronomy through our Colloquium Speakers Program; and

(v) to reduce attrition of female astronomers at all levels thereby increasing gender-parity in the scientific workforce.

Several WSF members have won prestigious postdoctoral fellowships over the past several years, and the WSF itself has been awarded a mini-grant from the AAS Committee on the Status of Women. The WSF hopes to contribute to the academic success of our current and future members and to help increase gender-parity in the academic workforce by effecting change locally.