Improving the workplace environment for female physicists

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Improving the Workplace Environment for Female Physicists

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Abstract. The ideal workplace is one in which women and men can work to their potential and are respected and recognized for their contribution. But what are the conditions that would create this environment, and how can we achieve this? This paper highlights some of the best practices, discussed in a single-session workshop, to improve the workplace environment for female (and male) physicists. While there are many actions that can be taken at the personal, local, and even national level, it is necessary to understand when the issues have broader societal implications. Likewise, working toward the ideal environment should not lead us to ignore the necessity of training and assisting women to work effectively in the existing environment.

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WORLDWIDE INITIATIVES

The workshop attendees heard from three speakers who presented some of the initiatives that are taking place in their country: Carol Thompson (Shell, UK), Haiqing Lin (Chinese University of Hong Kong), and Meg Urry (Yale Center for Astronomy and Astrophysics, U.S.). Discussions involved contributions from participants from many other countries.

There is no doubt that having legislation at the government level, such as the recently revised UK equity laws, is important to removing unequal gender barriers. Even more crucial is changing a culture in which people believe in gender equality just because the law tells them to. While it may seem ambitious to change laws and culture, government and societies are made up of individuals, and it should be possible for individuals to effect change. For example, a theater group in the United States has produced a successful sketch challenging perceptions by highlighting how women are ignored in meetings.

Networking brings women together to share problems and solutions and to support one another. The regional Asia Pacific Conference has held two successful workshops on Women in Physics, while many countries have national working groups. Women's networks in individual companies are another useful resource. Mentoring has been shown to be effective for women at all stages of their careers.

Awards such as the UK’s Very Early Career Woman Physicist of the Year Award are powerful tools both for enhancing a woman’s career and for highlighting the excellence achieved by female physicists. Videos, DVDs, booklets, and posters are also useful means to showcase role models.

Some institutes in the U.S. accommodate the hiring of dual-career couples. There are also several countries where supportive maternity leave and child care is provided. However, it should be cautioned that until child care is seen as a parental issue, even well-intentioned initiatives for mothers will continue to contribute to the view that it is a woman’s problem.

At the personal level, while we should have moved beyond trying to fix the woman to fit in, pragmatically we still need to ensure that we provide training, whether it’s for writing proposals or personal development.