

Improving The Workplace Environment For Women Physicists

Gillian Butcher

Space Research Centre, Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Leicester. Leicester,
UK

Abstract. The ideal workplace is one in which women and men can work to their potential and are respected and recognised 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 practice discussed in a single session workshop, to improve the workplace environment for women physicists (and for men). While there are many actions that can be taken at personal, local and even national level, it is necessary to understand when the issues are broader societal issues. Likewise, working towards the ideal environment should not lead us to ignore the necessity of training and assisting women to work effectively in the existing environment

Keywords: women in physics, scientist couple problem

PACS: 01.10.Hx, 01.75.+m, 01.78.+p, 01.85.+f

WORLDWIDE INITIATIVES

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

There is no doubt that having legislation at government level, such as the recently revised UK's Equity Laws, is important to remove unequal barriers. Even more crucial is changing the culture, where people believe in gender equality, not just because the law says so. While it may seem ambitious to change laws and culture, government and societies are made up of individuals so it should be possible for individuals to affect change. A theatre group in the US 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. Individual company women's networks are another useful resource. Mentoring has been shown to be effective for women at all stages of their career.

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

Some institutes in the US. cater for hiring Dual Career couples. There are also several countries where supportive maternity leave and childcare is provided. However it should be cautioned that until childcare is seen as a parent 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.