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A question of balance

The working group on women set up by the International Union of Pure and Applied Physics (IUPAP) met for the first time in Paris this spring and came up with 29 recommendations to promote sexual equality and to increase the number of women scientists (www.iupap.org). These recommendations were collected into seven categories, such as balancing career and family, getting women into leadership positions, and attracting more young females into the field.

But really, the list could have been split into two — discouraging discrimination and promoting affirmative action. Discouraging discrimination, by having a blind initial review of job applicants, for instance, is not too controversial. But promoting affirmative action — through quotas on women in tenure-track positions and on committees, for example — leaves many men and women uneasy.

But a report on sexual discrimination at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), which came out at about the time that the IUPAP panel convened, indicates that such steps might be necessary — and not just in physics. The MIT report showed disparities in salary, high-level appointments and grant money from the school. In the wake of the report, MIT has made commitments to recruit more women and to appoint existing female faculty members to high-level positions. For example, the engineering department wants women in 20% of its faculty positions by 2012 (the figure reached 10% last year, up from 5% in 1990).

Other institutions seeking to follow MIT's lead, perhaps with an eye on IUPAP's list, would do well to pay close attention to some of its advice — try to present reforms as positive for both men and women. This is because the problem with affirmative action is not the good intentions, it is the resentment that pursuing such a goal can unintentionally generate.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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