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## The physics imbalance

Last week, at a meeting of the Institute of Physics in London, a team of senior women physicists addressed the question of why women are underrepresented in physics worldwide. Their resulting report, *Women Physicists Speak*, proposes a number of ways in which the balance might be redressed and careers in physics be made more flexible.

For example, women who take time off to start a family are unintentionally penalized, through a tougher path to tenure. By introducing flexible age limits for positions and providing funding sources for women who want to return to physics after a career pause, the report suggests that women physicists could make some inroads. And because there are fewer women in leadership positions, such as heads of departments or of physical-science societies, the team proposes that some of these positions could be split between women and men.

Finally, for couples who are both involved in physics, securing jobs in the same geographical location can be hard, and the physicists say that universities could help by recruiting both spouses or offering them shared academic posts.

These proposals all seem like sound starts, but perhaps restricting them to physics is too limiting. Although women are better represented in biology, more re-entry grants would be welcome for scientists thinking about leaving the bench to start a family. Schemes to help women crack the glass ceiling of management would also be helpful.

But why restrict sound quality-of-life initiatives to women? If a male physicist wants to take time out to tend to young children, or ailing parents, why not give him the option to do so without fear of risking his career? And mentoring young scientists — male or female — is something the ‘seniors’ could do in all disciplines.

**Paul Smaglik**  
*Naturejobs* editor



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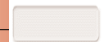
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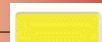
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