

A statement by women of the Group 31 conference

This is a letter written on behalf of a group of women scientists present at this event, coming from different countries and cultures.

On Tuesday June 21st approximately 20 women participants in the Group 31 conference met, and discussed their experiences as women working in Theoretical Physics and Mathematics.

First of all, we would like to thank the organizers of the event for the invitation, and for making our presence here possible. We also want to thank specifically the TWAS (The World Academy of Sciences) and the ICTP (International Center for Theoretical Physics) for the financial support enabling many women to come. More generally, we would like to thank every organization that supports and encourages women scientists around the world.

In the meeting we started by sharing experiences that we considered had happened to us due to our situation as women working and studying in a predominantly male dominated academic area.

The first experiences we shared were related to sexual harassment: women are often assaulted both physically and mentally, most of the time in the hidden form of jokes or what some may call "flattering comments"; these are not flattering, they are sexual harassment.

In the scientific community this kind of problem occurs much more frequently than many of you can imagine.

Sexual harassment, career backlashes, and prejudice are so common that we were not surprised to hear many women at the meeting report on one of these issues, if not all of them, that they personally experienced.

Many of you, including women, may think that such problems, often reported by women, are an overreaction or even nonsense, but as a matter of fact, they are very real.

Sometimes discrimination takes place in what might seem like small details, which we nevertheless experience as means of exclusion. To name one example, the T-shirts made for this event – like most events in science and mathematics - were all designed for men: there are no small sizes for women to be able to wear them.

We also shared the experience of more effort and more achievements being required of women, on the average, than are required of male colleagues to obtain the same grants, scholarships, positions, etc. This

sometimes is expressed in a hidden form such as the statement that all should be judged according to the same criteria. But most women do not start out under the same conditions as men: most of us do not have the same opportunities to pursue scientific careers as men, since from childhood we were not encouraged to embrace challenging careers, especially scientific careers, as men would be. Often we are encouraged instead to focus on housekeeping and raising children. So women who want to have a scientific career are expected to be devoted and good at everything: family care, teaching, administration, as well as research. Women have internalized this message and indeed often are very devoted colleagues. Women scientists therefore have to be superwomen.

The fact that more women are working in science today is not a sign that this problem is tending toward a solution: the highest academic or decision-making positions in academia are still out of reach for most women. In those European countries, where the proportion of women in science is higher, one observes that the salaries are lower, the prestige of being a researcher is lower, and the teaching load is higher than in countries where men are still the absolute majority in academia. Women often tend to underestimate their capacities and to withdraw when the competition increases, since they feel they don't really belong to the male dominated scientific world and have internalized the idea that they are not up to such challenges.

In the meeting we all considered that in order to improve this situation it is necessary to implement women-encouraging policies involving grants, scholarships, and programs that can help women stay and develop their careers in academia.

We believe that discussions and meetings among women should be encouraged at every scientific meeting or event, as well as in physics and mathematical societies. Such discussions are essential for women to be able to share their experiences, identify the mechanisms of exclusion, and work toward improving their situation.

We end this declaration by expressing our concern about the decision taken by the Sociedade Brasileira de Física Council, of closing the Comissão de Relações de Gênero (Gender-Equality Commission), created in 2003 and asking for the SBF Commission to be restored.