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Report on the Conference of Latin American Women in Exact and Life Sciences

Solange Bessa Cavalcanti,¹ Rita M. Zorzenon dos Santos,²
Marcia C. Barbosa,³ and Elisa Baggio-Saitovitch⁴

¹*Department of Physics, University of Alagoas, Brazil;* ²*Department of Physics, University of Pernambuco, Brazil;* ³*Institute of Physics, University of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil;* ⁴*Brazilian Center for Research in Physics*

After the 2002 IUPAP International Conference on Women in Physics in Paris, Elisa and Marcia invited a small group of Latin-American participants to promote a similar event in Brazil. The *Latin American Women in Exact and Life Sciences* (see web page at <http://www.cbpf.br/~mulher>) took place in Rio de Janeiro November 17–19, 2004. During three days, 102 participants, consisting of women scientists (mathematicians, physicists, biologists, and engineers), journalists, sociologists, policy makers in governmental funding agencies, and representatives of scientific societies, discussed the difficulties faced by women when building a scientific career in Latin America. One of the purposes of the conference was for conference participants to become the start of a Latin American network of women in exact and life sciences what will enhance interaction across the continent not only in physics but also in other research areas.

The meeting was composed of plenary sessions, round tables, a happy hour session, and discussion groups. Following the Paris meeting structure, conference participants discussed topics such as:

- How to attract young women to the various areas of science in the face of stereotypes fostered in the media and education;
- Career and family;
- Difficulties in the work environment; and
- Relationships between the power structure and progression in one's career.

Some topics related to the specifics of the meeting were also discussed, such as the contributions of women in science to the development of Latin-America, and differences among the various areas of science. Myths regarding femininity and science were discussed with specialists in the fields. Topics included:

- The impact of technological transformations on women's condition; and
- Feminine biology: genetic-evolutionary and cultural differences.

During the three days many aspects of the difficulties faced by women in the exact and life sciences were raised and discussed by the participants. The discussion centered on barriers such as:

- The male-dominated atmosphere of institutions;
- Prejudices created by the scientist stereotypes, which can contribute to a lack of family and societal support for females to follow a scientific career;
- Gloomy perspectives in the workforce as a consequence of discrimination;
- Male-only positions or positions conditioned to childless females;
- Tensions in the conjugal relation whether or not the couple shares the same career;
- The double burden of home and work;
- The glass ceiling;
- Sexual harassment, both implicit and explicit; and
- Regional inequities in the availability of modern technology, both among different regions of the same country and among the poor and not-so-poor countries on the continent.

This last point, of course, affects men and women alike.

Various recommendations were made in the direction of popularizing science, increasing the visibility of female scientists, and promoting programs that permit the new technologies to be accessible to researchers working in underdeveloped areas. For government, the recommendations were to:

- Establish an inter-sectors initiative to tackle gender policies in science and technology, such as extending the duration of scholarship support period to allow maternity leave for the students.
- Provide child care facilities at the institutions and at scientific meetings.
- Retrieve women from home: those women who might be willing to return to their careers.
- Enhance the visibility of women scientists by promoting, financing, and publicizing the results of a study on the participation of women in the life and exact sciences that compares the situation among women within Latin America.
- Establish in each country of the region national chapters of the Third World Organization of Women in Science.

Recommendations for affirmative actions were to:

- Guarantee the representation of women in funding agencies and government bodies as well as in institutions.
- Establish quota systems for women regarding funding of research projects and scholarships within the countries and abroad.
- Assign the responsibility for resolving gender problems to the institutions and funding agencies.
- Require government agencies to make available and transparent statistics about the share of women working on projects that receive national research financing.

The conclusions drawn by the discussion groups can be found on the conference webpage. All participants agreed to disseminate the conference conclusions to scientific societies and government bodies responsible for scientific policy in their regions.

This event that brought together exact and life scientists, as well as sociologists, was very fruitful and hopefully helped to clarify myths and beliefs that are the basis of the problems faced by women scientists in Latin America. We believe that by promoting such events we can help to change policies, prejudices, and stereotypes, awakening and advancing the whole society to create a healthier future for men and women alike.