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nature jobs

The long road to equality

A recent report from the Institute of Physics (IOP), *Women in University Physics Departments*, details a survey during which researchers visited the physics departments of UK and Irish universities. They were assessing how female-friendly these departments are, and the results make interesting reading (www.iop.org). But as I was perusing the report, I found myself reminded of an advertising campaign for a cigarette aimed specifically at women.

Why? Well, the campaign debuted in 1968 with adverts that ran under the tagline: "You've come a long way, baby". This line contains anachronisms and contradictions that can be related to both women smokers of the late 1960s and women physicists today. The adverts purported to celebrate women's progress, but by using the word "baby" they instead denigrate it. And the site visits, which were aimed at improving the lot of women physicists, instead show just how little progress has been made.

Volunteers from the IOP went to about 40% of all physics departments in Britain and Ireland. Although they did see some signs that women physicists have come "a long way" — the number of women undergraduates has increased, for

example — they also saw signs that the sexist, unspoken "baby" still pervades. These signs included offensive posters in some labs, few, if any, women speakers at colloquia and seminars, and little formal efforts to recruit women physicists.

This might point to why women physicists are not well represented at the higher levels — especially compared with other disciplines such as the life sciences. None of the labs visited had female department heads and only 4% of tenured physics professors in Britain and Ireland are women. Such under-representation, perhaps combined with institutional sexism, might give young women scientists pause in pursuing physics as a career.

The IOP report carries its own tagline: "Creating female-friendly environments". Perhaps there should be a second note saying: "You've got a long way to go..."



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