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Women in Physics in a Rapidly Changing China

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Despite the upheavals of the 20th century, physics managed to survive quite well in China, where the first woman president of the American Physical Society was born and bred. During the 1950s as a result of policies that emphasized science and engineering, declared equal rights and equal pay for men and women, and assigned jobs to college graduates irrespective of sex, the number of women in physics increased rapidly, many of whom made notable achievements. Since China's opening up over the last thirty years tremendous changes have taken place, and women now face new opportunities as well as challenges in all aspects of society. Whereas physics used to be regarded as the most elite of the sciences, new fields such as computer science, biotechnology and business are now competing for the best students. Compared with other countries the statistics are not bad; in schools and many physics departments the ratio of women teachers may be 30% or higher, but the numbers drop drastically with rank. Moreover, in some research institutions the ratio of female physicists is actually declining, due to retirement of the older generation and fewer successors. Compulsory retirement for women at an earlier age than for men is also a new factor. Conversely, in recent years the ratio of female graduate students enrolling in physics has increased, even reaching 40% in some universities. However, the reasons for this do not bode well: men are not performing so well as women in entrance exams, while the latter are facing increasing discrimination in employment so they have to seek higher degree qualifications. With the further development of China's economy there will be abundant demand for qualified personnel including women with a physics background. It is imperative to actively support the upcoming generation of women physicists and not lose them in the leaky pipeline. The Chinese Physical Society has taken certain positive steps, such as the recent establishment of the Xie Xi-De Prize for Women in Physics. However, there is complacency and a general lack of awareness of the special difficulties and discrimination that women in physics face, and this needs to be brought to the attention of all sectors at all levels.