

TENURE, SHE WROTE



7

JUL
2016

Where are all the award winning women scientists?

posted in [Professional Development](#), [Women in Academia](#) by [sciwo](#)

With increasing numbers of women completing PhDs in science, it's only a matter of time before major scientific awards reflect the gender diversity of our world, right? Not so much, when **women still earn much less than 50% of PhDs in some fields**, so we have a whole lot of progress to make to even get a candidate pool that truly reflects the world around us. (Here and throughout the problems are even worse for women and men from other under-represented groups.)

If we shift our standards to having scientific award winners reflect the gender diversity of their scientific fields, we still fall significantly short of that benchmark. Nobel Prizes still go dominantly to men, in the past two decades, **newly elected members of the US National Academy of Science are only 10-20% women, and the UK Royal Society does even worse**. Look at the list of fellows for your favorite professional society, and you'll probably find similarly dismal statistics. These overwhelmingly male roll calls aren't just because of the long lag times built into that sort of late career recognition, **but all of the large and small barriers and slights that women accumulate over their careers**. Seemingly small things like **women being less likely to be asked to speak at conferences** and having **lower rates of self-citation** accumulate over time to produce less impressive CVs and lower H-indices for women than men at similar career stages.

But even for awards designated for young researchers or for specific achievements, women are often substantially under-represented. NSF's Waterman Award, its pinnacle award for an early career scientist and one which comes with a \$1,000,000 award, **has been given to women <13% of the time since 1975 and no woman has won in over a decade**. Again, check your favorite professional society or division/section for evidence of this in the discipline closest to your heart and see how they are doing. In my world, my professional society division gives an award for the "best paper" published within the last few years. This award has only gone to one paper with a woman first author in the entire history of the award, and that was over 10 years ago. This is despite women publishing many wonderful papers in our field. Also in my world, in another society, in one division, 1 woman has won the early career award in the 8 years the award has been given, while in another division, 2016 mark the first year that a woman has won an early career award in the 7 year history of the award.

Why do we see the under-representation of women award winners even at the early career stages? Early career women are already accumulating those slights that slow them down relative to their male

careers. Women whose timelines differ from their male peers because they had children during or after their PhDs may “time out” of eligibility for early career awards before they recover from any productivity dips associated with pregnancy, childbirth, and any maternity leave they may be able to take. **And implicit bias is working against women at both the nomination to award stage.**

Increasing the number of women nominated for awards is absolutely critical for increasing the number of women winning these awards, which means that when we think of “award winning scientists” we need our colleagues to picture women (and people of color) and not just older white men.

How do we increase the number of women nominated for and winning awards at every career stage? Here are some of the things I’ve been doing and I’ve seen others promote as best practices.

Nominate someone. If you are able to nominate a woman for an award, do so! For many of these awards, the nomination process involves writing a nomination letter saying how great your candidate is, gathering some supporting letters of recommendation, and maybe including some other supporting materials (their CV or papers). The hardest part of this process is finding other people to write letters on behalf of your candidate. But if you have identified someone worthy and are sufficiently in advance of the deadline, most people you ask are happy to write a letter in support of someone they like.

Start a whisper campaign on behalf of a deserving nominee. For things like Fellowship in professional societies, nominees may have to come from other fellows. And if those fellows are mostly older white men, that’s probably not you. But you probably know some fellows amongst your PhD advisor and professors or senior colleagues or collaborators. When the call for Fellows nominations comes out (or even before), mention that to your local Fellow and how surprised you were to discover that Awesome Woman X is not yet a fellow. Depending on your relationship to your local Fellow, maybe be more blunt in suggesting he nominate Awesome Woman X or even offer to help with the leg work to make it happen.

Use your formal and informal networks to develop “binders of women” to be nominated for awards and to encourage people to nominate diverse candidates. For example, the Earth Science Women’s Network has an awards group that keeps track of potential candidates and award opportunities, offers help to its members in preparing awards packages, and provides peer support for efforts to nominate women.

Call attention to under-representation of women and people of color in awards. The professional society division that had its first woman early career winner this year? This was also the division that noted in its email to members calling for applications that it had yet to award a woman. That caught my attention and I’m sure I’m not the only one who thought long and hard about deserving woman as a result of that email.

Get on a nomination or award committee. Influence the process from the inside. If you are on a nomination or award committee, there are some good guidelines here <http://sites.agu.org/honors/files/2014/11/AWARDS-SUGGESTED-BEST-PRACTICES-MAY2011.pdf> for minimizing the effects of implicit bias.

*In July of 2016, **Tenure, She Wrote**, discussed ESWN’s efforts to increase the number of women in science being nominated for and receiving awards. **Tenure, She Wrote** is a collaborative blog devoted to chronicling the (mis)adventures of women in academia.*