

Increasing diversity in conference speaker programmes



Better ideas emerge from interactions among diverse cohorts, so scientific research benefits from contributions from everyone. Diversity in gender, race, nationality, region of the world, and other orientations is essential to create an environment in which creative thinking thrives and in which scientific discovery finds a fruitful breeding ground¹.

However, this is not what you see if you look at many of the international conferences and workshops that are organized in the photonics field. They have solid lists of plenary and keynote speakers, but often these lists are not as diverse as they could be. Think back at the last three conferences you attended. How many of the talks you listened to were given by women or minority members of our photonic community? If you now think about your professional network, how many colleagues can you name that are women or are part of a minority group?

Indeed, in the recent past, several photonics conferences (originally) had a nearly fully male invited speaker programmes. Today, the academic staff in the photonics research field is still in majority composed of white or Asian men, and so their relative proportion in meetings and conferences is naturally high. But fortunately this is changing and there is now a much larger fraction of scientists, particularly at the early-career stage, that are female, of colour or from other groups or world regions that are currently minorities in our community.

These groups must be represented at the conferences that are organized. If we

have minimal participation of people from under-represented groups in conference speaker lists, we miss a major fraction of the scientific talent that is available in our research field. Moreover, often members of these underrepresented communities bring new topics to the photonics field. There are scientists from all backgrounds doing top-class research work around the world and there need not be any sense of having to invoke reverse discrimination when organizing an exciting conference programme^{2,3}. Moreover, if women and other less-represented scientists cannot see people like themselves represented in a conference, it is dispiriting, discouraging and can ultimately motivate them to leave the field or move out of science altogether. This reduces diversity and narrows the range of ideas and perspectives, ultimately harming innovation and progress for everyone.

We have some recommendations to share here. If you are a conference organizer, be an agent of change! Creating a space where everyone feels welcome to contribute is one of your main tasks. Do bring on board fellow organizers with networks different from your own. For increasing female representation, do ask for suggestions from the various women in photonics organizations. Do use prizes and recognitions given to members of underrepresented groups for inspiration. Indeed, for example, the Gordon Research Conferences and the Materials Research Society have diversity and broad representation as clear principles for conference programme development¹⁻³.

As three white men writing this commentary, we recognize that white and Asian men, often in positions of influence, have a unique responsibility to promote diversity on conference speaker lists and help amplify minority voices, aiming to raise awareness and drive meaningful change. So, if you are a white or Asian man, representing this majority, like the three of us, and you are invited to speak at a conference, do check the speaker list and get in touch with the organizers if you think it can be made more diverse. Do share with them this Correspondence. We are in the 21st century and we need this change.

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Competing interests

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