

# We are all made of stars

September 2 2014, by Tanya Hill

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Observing the stars above and the stars within. Credit: Tambako the Jaquar/Flickr

Astronomers spend most of their time contemplating the universe, quite comfortable in the knowledge that we are just a speck among billions of planets, stars and galaxies. But last week, the Australian astronomical community came together to turn their collective gaze from looking outwards to looking inwards.

Professional astronomers alongside other scientists, engineers, technical

and administrative staff, examined what we as a profession can do to improve gender, racial and sex-based equity within our field.

I spend most of my time encouraging people to explore the [night sky](#), but I have been so inspired by my colleagues that I'd like to share what I've learnt from my profession as strives to create a vibrant and inclusive working environment.

## Meeting to make a difference

The platform for the discussion was the [fourth annual conference](#) for Women in Astronomy, an event instigated by the Women in Astronomy ([WiA](#)) chapter of the Astronomical Society of Australia ([ASA](#)) . This organisation brings together those working in the field of astronomy across the country.

Why do we need such a meeting? Well consider this, when I mentioned the conference to a few male colleagues you could see in their immediate reactions that they didn't appreciate how this event could be of any relevance to them. They would understandably feel out of place in what they imagined would be a conference full of [women](#).

But for many women, particularly within [STEM](#) occupations (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), that's exactly what it is like fronting up to work each and every day. When these women walk through their offices, attend meetings, participate in working lunches and go out for after-hours social work functions, they are surrounded by men, and it only gets worse the higher up the organisation you go.

Within Australia, the astronomy profession is male-dominated, with men making up 76% of Members and 87% of Fellows of the ASA. What's most distressing is how the number of women rapidly drops off at more senior levels.

As Dr Lisa Harvey-Smith, the chair of the WiA Chapter [points out](#):

[...] a system that fails to accommodate highly skilled and talented scientists (regardless of gender) after they take on new responsibilities [such as raising a family] is spectacularly broken.

## Male champions of change

Take a look at the astronomy institutions across Australia and almost all their leaders are male. But what's inspiring is the number of those males who understand and are willing to do something about gender issues.

In the words of Elizabeth Broderick, Australia's [Sex Discrimination Commissioner](#) and a highlight speaker at the conference, these are our "[male champions of change](#)".

Gender equity will not come about by women working alone. These male champions, in their positions of influence, are standing up alongside women to give voice to these issues.

Michaelia Cash, [Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Women](#), summarised it distinctly when she opened the conference:

75% of astronomers are men, so 75% of the solutions on gender in your field need to be coming from men [...] because women's issues are men's issues and in the end, they are just people issues.

## It's not in our minds

[Dr Cordelia Fine](#), an academic psychologist and Associate Professor at the Melbourne Business School, University of Melbourne, introduced us to the term "neurosexism". She explained how scientific studies on brain

functionality have been used to reinforce gender stereotypes in ways that are often not scientifically justified.

The harmful effect of neurosexism and trying to limit male and female differences to a neurological cause is that it diverts us away from the real issue. We stop seeing the dominant role that culture plays in conditioning us to think differently about each other.

Images all around us and the language we use leads us to associate men as leaders and women as nurturers. Confronting studies have shown both women and men will [judge a job application differently](#) if the gender of the person is switched.

Over the past four years, Women in Astronomy conferences like the one held last week have opened astronomers' eyes to this unconscious bias and the means for [fighting it](#).

Cultural shifts are what we need to work towards achieving gender, racial and sex-based equity and it requires us all to challenge ourselves.

[Malcolm Fiahlo](#), from the University of Western Australia's [Equity and Diversity Office](#), took conference attendees out of their comfort zones. He asked the right questions to enable us to recognise the privileged parts of our society.

## **The Privilege Checklist**

Consider the following scenarios, which represent a few of the many examples that highlight the place of the privileged in our society.

Male privilege: "If I do the same task as a woman, and if the measurement is at all subjective, chances are people will think I did a better job."

White privilege: "When I pick up the local paper, I can be sure to read a positive story about someone from my cultural background."

Heterosexual privilege: "I can speak openly about my relationship and do not need to worry about disclosing (or not) my sexual orientation in EVERY new social situation."

We were reminded of how easily what we say and do, however unintentionally, can cause others to feel excluded. But there is power in having courageous conversations like these and knowing there are steps we can take to transform behaviours and establish inclusive workplace cultures.

When you have a minority of any kind, that group has a weaker voice. Dr Megan Clark, [Chief Executive of CSIRO](#) explained it well - when your group represents just 10% of a population all you can do is try to survive, increase that ratio to 30% and support now exists to make a difference.

Dr Clark recognises the positive outcomes this can lead to and aims to have every leader within CSIRO be responsible for ensuring diversity within their team and is setting targets to achieve this.

## **The power of personal stories**

Four years ago, I was one of four women who shared our personal experiences of life, work and family, with our colleagues. Perhaps in some small way, this helped establish a space where two incredible women at this latest conference were able to tell their deeply moving and humbling personal stories.

[Dr Minh Huynh](#) shared her experience as a Vietnamese-Australian, having come to Australia as a Vietnamese boat person when she was just

a year old. In one generation, Australia has enabled her family to go from no education to someone with a PhD but the road has not always been easy.

[Dr Lisa Harvey-Smith](#) spoke openly and courageously about her experiences as a gay woman in astronomy. She shared the marginalisation she felt growing up and the support she has found in positive role models, networks and allies who have helped to turn that around.

At the end of the day, I am most proud of my colleagues and their organisations for giving us the opportunity to see the people behind the scientists, with all the complexities, differences and beauty that involves.

Maybe there's something about appreciating the awe of the universe that helps us see the wonder that is within all of us as well. So I encourage you to take a look around your workplace to consider what can be done to establish equity and diversity as the norm.

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