

Mathematicians for Equal Opportunity

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Abstract Personal recollections and musings on the goals, mission, programs, and newsletters of the Association for Women in Mathematics.

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Princeton's AWM Newsletter wars

I first started reading newsletters of the Association for Women in Mathematics in Harvard's Cabot Science Library when I was an undergraduate in the late 1970s. I wasn't an AWM member, so I read the library's copies of the *AWM Newsletter*. Harvard's history of sexism and discrimination (see for example (Silverberg, 2006)) was blatant and persistent (in fact, though I attended Harvard, I wasn't admitted to Harvard College, which only admitted men; women applied to Radcliffe College, which had a complicated and evolving relationship with Harvard), so the subjects covered in the *AWM Newsletter*, and the AWM's efforts to end discrimination and counteract prejudice, struck a chord with me.

When I was a grad student at Princeton in the early 1980s, the sexism and discrimination were worse and the formal barriers to women were more recent and more extreme, compared to Harvard's (see for example (Malkiel, 2016)). Since the rent that Princeton charged me for graduate student housing was greater than the income from my graduate fellowship, I decided that I couldn't afford the AWM dues (\$5 a year for students, back then) that would have given me a free subscription to the *Newsletter*.

I got the bright idea: "Harvard's science library got the *AWM Newsletter*. Surely Princeton's could too. That way, everyone can read it."

I went to Princeton's math/physics librarian with my plan. He was furious. "The AWM is a union!" he exclaimed. He told me that subscribing to the *Newsletter* would support a union, so he wasn't going to do that.

Taken aback, I pointed out that his library received the *Notices of the American Mathematical Society* and all the AMS journals, and I argued that the AWM was no more a union than was the AMS. Perhaps overreaching (hey, I'm from Queens), I claimed that the AMS at the time was a union for men, in that speaker invitations, committee memberships, prizes, etc. favored men, so it was only fair to also subscribe to the *AWM Newsletter*. And the *AWM Newsletter* is much cheaper. I might have pointed out that it's "for" and not "of" in "Association for Women in Mathematics," and anyone can join. My arguments probably increased his anger. He was unswayed.

Not giving up, I next went to the department chair with the suggestion that the math department get an institutional membership in the AWM and contribute its complimentary newsletters to the library. Some months later I saw him in the hallway and asked for an update. He told me that the faculty had decided against it, on the grounds that the department didn't want or need it, and it was too expensive.

In my last year at Princeton, a "visiting committee" of mathematicians came to the math department to gather information and advise the department. The department had to give grad students an opportunity to sign up to meet with the committee. (Afterwards, I learned that the chair sent some grad students to the meeting to report back to him

on who complained.) Among my suggestions for improvement, I asked that the library or department get the *AWM Newsletter*, so that everyone would have access to it. When they said I should ask the department, I told them I already had, and explained why the request was denied. When they asked how much an institutional membership costs, I replied, "\$25 a year." They laughed at the low price, and several of them spontaneously and flamboyantly opened their wallets and threw bills on the table, in a symbolic gesture. But they soon picked up their money and placed it back in their wallets.

I learned later that the Princeton library received the *AMS Notices* and *Transactions* not through a library subscription, but by piggybacking off the individual member subscription of a professor who gave his complimentary copies to the library (a practice frowned on by the AMS). Someone on the faculty was an AWM member and there was some talk of his giving his newsletters to the library, but I don't think it happened, and I can't imagine that the librarian would have accepted it.

Encouraging fairness, transparency, professional behavior, and accountability

Sometime in the 1990s, a colleague told me that she decided not to nominate me for a position in the AWM leadership because I didn't support some of what the AWM does. Indeed, while I am very supportive of the AWM's mission to promote equal opportunity, I have qualms about AWM programs that are restricted to or favor women or girls.

When I recently was made an AWM Fellow, I came across the citation for me on the internet. It began, "For her outstanding research in number theory and deep commitment to the promotion of women in mathematics . . ." My immediate thought was, "But that's not accurate and I don't want it on the website!" I asked for "deep commitment to the promotion of women in mathematics" to be replaced with "deep commitment to the promotion of fairness and equal opportunity." Everyone graciously agreed to change it.

The explanation I gave for my request was:

I very strongly believe in and I have devoted much of my attention towards the AWM mission "to promote equal opportunity." I have always had qualms about "the promotion of women and girls in mathematics," and I have qualms about many women-only initiatives, since I don't believe that two wrongs make a right, and I don't believe in "separate but equal." I'm also concerned that such initiatives will hurt women in the long run.

I would like professional organizations and communities to be more welcoming and inclusive, not less so. And does the AWM really want to be in the business of deciding who is female and who isn't? The AWM's programs and prizes that are restricted to or favor women or girls seem incompatible with the AWM's commitment to equal opportunity and equal treatment, and incompatible with the AWM's Statement of Welcoming Environment, announced in 2013, which says in particular, "the AWM is committed to the promotion of equality of opportunity and treatment for all AWM members and participants in AWM-sponsored events, regardless of gender, gender identity or expression, . . . , or any other reason not related to scientific merit."

How does favoring women hurt women? It breeds resentment that will eventually backfire against women, and it devalues women. It reinforces the pernicious stereotype that women are intellectually inferior, and can't achieve at the same level as men without extra help.

Especially problematic is when one favors one's own group. Favoring people who remind us of ourselves has been part of the problem. It's something that the AWM in its early days fought against. I think that all of us should be wary of promoting policies or advocating for programs that favor our own group, or that disproportionately favor ourselves.

One justification for programs that are restricted to or favor women is that such initiatives will help women achieve a "critical mass" of at least 30% of the community, which will enable women to have a voice. However, there will always be groups that (unlike women) are only a small minority of the population as a whole. Shouldn't we learn how to treat everyone fairly, even when they belong to a group that is too small a percentage of the general population to expect to achieve a critical mass? Small groups are at a disadvantage when larger groups get favored for whatever reason.

I strongly believe in fairness. I support efforts to eliminate discrimination and artificial barriers, to make people aware of unconscious (and conscious) bias and help them counteract it, and to hold people accountable. When I give (wanted or unwanted) advice to people in positions of power, I sometimes say:

- Many problems could be avoided if people simply behaved professionally.¹
- Train faculty in best practices for hiring, promotion, admission of students, and teaching.²
- Put in place good practices, policies, and rules, and hold people accountable when they violate them.³
- Make the rules of the game clear, don't change the rules in the middle of the game, and ensure that we all have an equal opportunity to play the game and win (whether the game is a promotion, position, prize, grant, or other professional reward).⁴

The AWM and other organizations play an important role in helping the mathematical community achieve these goals. I would like such efforts to continue and to increase.

By the way, despite my friend's concerns about my compatibility with the AWM, in 2005 the AWM Nominating Committee informed me that I was "enthusiastically suggested as a candidate for the AWM Executive Committee." I ran in the election, with the following statement:

I believe that the reason I was asked to run for the Executive Committee of the AWM is my strong interest in working towards equal opportunity. We can work to accomplish this by increasing fairness and openness in our profession. We are not there yet, and have a long way to go. I believe that making information widely accessible will help the mathematics and academic communities move away from the traditional old boy network way of operating. I hope that the AWM will play a supportive role in helping the people in our communities learn to behave professionally, fairly, and legally. I would like to see the AWM become a helpful resource for departments and universities that would like to change the way they do business so as to insure that (1) the best people are selected, and women and minorities are not overlooked, and (2) all of their members are treated fairly, supportively, and with respect.

I was elected, and served. The AWM has been welcoming to diverse viewpoints, and I hope it stays that way!

Mathematicians for Inclusion

The 50th anniversary of the AWM might be an appropriate time to think deeply about the AWM's purpose and goals, and revisit its programs, and perhaps even its name, as it moves into its next phase.

With the proliferation of gender identities, I wonder whether "women" is still a useful label for a professional organization, and whether a more inclusive title should be considered. Should the name "Association for Women in Mathematics" eventually be replaced with "Mathematicians for Equal Opportunity"? Or "Mathematicians for Inclusion"?

I would prefer that the AWM be about fairness and justice, not about being for one group. Is the AWM a union, or a social club, or a professional society? Was the Princeton librarian right?

I'm not objecting to freedom of association. But I don't think that government funding should go towards discriminatory practices, and I would like the universities, communities, and organizations that I'm a part of to be welcoming.

Rather than making professional decisions based on who our friends are, or on who reminds us of ourselves, or on quotas, let's figure out what we're trying to achieve, and what will get us there.

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¹ We like to think that our colleagues are our friends. But we have a professional relationship with our coworkers, and we have an obligation to behave professionally. Sometimes, all it takes for people to improve their behavior is to ask themselves "Is this professional? Is this ethical? Is this legal?"

² My university has "best practices" for hiring, but there are faculty, hiring committees, and department chairs who aren't aware of them.

³ People need to have good options for how to get problems fixed. And they need convincing evidence that if they report a problem, things will get better rather than worse.

⁴ There is often an "inner circle" with access to information that the rest of us don't have. The people in the inner circle know the rules, and know which rules they can break and which deadlines they can miss and get away with. That gives them an unfair advantage. I've often seen this with hiring, when the public criteria given in the job ad are quite different from the secret criteria, or the real criteria for the job. People in the right circles know the real criteria and have an advantage.

References

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