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## Bright Futures Q&A: Anna Garry

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**OPN: Tell us a bit about your current position and how you got there.**

I work at ETH Zurich for a Swiss National Science Foundation-funded network whose research focus is on molecular and ultrafast science and technology. My job is to develop scientific outreach, which includes working toward the advancement of women scientists through equal opportunities, education and communication.

I have a biology degree, which included courses in the history, philosophy and politics of science. I also have a Ph.D. in political science with a focus on the politics of the nuclear industry, and I have worked on education projects at the university level. My job enables me to contribute to a topic I care about deeply: linking the scientific world to the society that supports it.

**OPN: You work with Ursula Keller and Anthony Johnson on OPN's "Reflections in Diversity" column. In particular, you've coauthored several columns on efforts at ETH Zurich to advance the status of women scientists. What first got you interested in these issues?**

I have always been interested in the status and visibility of women and minorities in all fields, whether it is science, politics or the general academic community. Historically, Western society was structured to exclude women from voting, owning property and working outside the home. Much has improved in recent decades, but the low number of women in science and engineering persists. I was very interested in working on this complex issue with Ursula Keller, the director of our network.

**OPN: There has been some significant progress for women in the workplace—enough so that some seem to view the problem of gender discrimination as “solved.” How would you assess the progress that's been made, and the challenges that women still face, in building scientific careers in particular?**

Enormous progress has been made for women in the workplace in terms of rights, opportunities and childcare. There are three issues that have not yet been resolved. First is the very low number of women studying the STEM fields, and the subsequent non-retention of these graduates in scientific careers. It makes economic sense to do all we can to improve STEM work environments to retain talented women and minorities.

A second issue is the dearth of women in leadership positions in all areas of science, engineering and industry. Having greater diversity in leadership would increase the range of viable strategies to address the gender imbalance.

Finally, there's still an unconscious gender bias in our culture. Three recent studies—from the [Columbia Business School](#), [MIT](#), and [Yale](#)-- have shown that both men and women, whether they are in academia or in industry, favor male candidates over female candidates for appointments, mentorships, salary increases, etc., even when their qualifications are the exactly the same.

**OPN: Your contributions to OPN have stressed the importance of role models and personal engagement, and events that get women speaking with women. Why is this so important? Do you have any advice on how people can help to combat gender discrimination?**

Being a member of a minority group in science can be a very isolating experience that leads to self-doubt about your place in the scientific community. Networking can counteract this and encourage retention and career advancement.



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### About Bright Futures

Bright Futures is a blog written by and for optics and photonics professionals who are looking to navigate career transitions. It is affiliated with *Optics & Photonics News*, the member magazine for the [Optical Society \(OSA\)](#).

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Another important way to combat gender discrimination is for women and men to talk and listen to each other in a genuine attempt to cultivate mutual understanding and change. It's vital to recognize that there are male scientists who have a commitment to bringing about progress in this area, and work with them to bring about solutions. For example, there are many young couples who both have careers in science and are finding ways to make a dual-career situation successful.

**OPN: Could you tell us about a role model that's been particularly important to you in your work, or in thinking about these issues?**

It's hard to choose a single role model, because when you want to change society it needs to happen on multiple levels. The writer Virginia Woolf is one of my many role models. She put into words, in works like "A Room of One's Own" and "Three Guineas," the changes needed in society to enable women to have space to think, work outside the home, and be taken seriously. Another is Nelson Mandela, for showing how one person's life and actions can bring phenomenal political change to a seemingly intractable situation.

**OPN: If you were given absolute power, and had free rein to do one thing to advance the place of women in the scientific enterprise, what would it be? What do you think would be the most effective change?**

This question was very difficult for me, because I don't believe anyone should be given absolute power! Effective change has to be based on a political consensus to increase the number of women in science, and value their intellectual and economic contributions to creativity and innovation in the area.

However, for the sake of discussion, if I had free rein to do one thing I would require a minimum of 30 percent representation of women on university executive boards, research and departmental committees, and boards of directors. I would bring together committed male and female scientific leaders and task them with creating an effective blueprint for achieving this target representation, along with a program to implement the changes.

Bringing more women into leadership roles has already begun to make a difference. In 2013 the United Kingdom's Chief Medical Officer, Sally Davies, announced that the National Institute for Health Research would only award research funding to medical schools if they held a "Silver" [Athena Swan Award](#). As a result, UK universities and their medical schools signed up to the established award system, which assesses standards for employing and retaining women scientists. Leaders in the scientific community need to support and promote the presence of more women at the leadership level to increase the pace of change.

For more information on other initiatives in this area, you can check out the [IOP Juno Awards](#), [NSF's ADVANCE Project](#), the [APS' Women in Physics](#), and [OSA's MWOSA](#).

*Anna Garry is the Outreach Officer for the Swiss research network NCCR MUST (National Centre for Competence in Research, Molecular Ultrafast Science and Technology), ETH Zurich, Switzerland.*

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