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Does the persistent lack of female recipients of academic awards have to surprise us if few scientific prizes and medals are named after women?

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The persistent lack in diversity and gender equality amongst the recipients of academic awards and recognitions such as scientific prizes and medals is widely recognised. It is not only still very rare for women to receive the highest research awards (representing for instance only 3% of the Nobel laureates, including only one woman of colour) but female scientists are also severely underrepresented as recipients of the awards of many of our scientific societies. The increasing efforts for award distributions to be more representative of the diversity of our scientific community, start with stimulating inclusivity and broad recognition of talent diversity from the nomination stage. Given the continued lack in female award recipients, the question arises what role the current titles and names of existing awards, and the history of their previous recipients may play for the identification of potential nominations and whether they qualify to inspire more diverse nominations and prize awards.

We therefore examine the origins of the names given to ~300 academic awards of major scientific societies (including in the Earth and Environmental sciences and European Geoscience Union) and compare award names to the history of their recipients. The results of our analysis reveal an astonishing dominance of awards that are named after male scientists. Less than 10% of all awards were named after women, with almost all awards named after female scientist only being established in the last two years. It therefore must be questioned if such lack of recognition qualifies to inspire nominations for awards that reflect the diversity of achievements (and achievers) in our scientific communities. In fact, women were persistently under-represented as recipients of the analysed awards, with ~15% of awards held by female scientists, including awards that have been running for 40 years without a single female recipient. Not different to other scientific fields, women were slightly better represented in some of the service awards and early career awards. An analysis of the more recent history of awards made since 2000 reveals a diverse picture with differences in the progress towards more equality and diversity between research areas. Some promising developments include the establishment of awards named after outstanding female researchers by several EGU subdivisions that will hopefully provide broader recognition of the diverse talent base in the future.

This leaves the question how to deal with such legacy of gender bias and unequal representation of talent in the naming of awards as well as their recipients. We recognise that there are no simple quick fixes and, that the gender inequality highlighted in this analysis represents only one aspect of the lack of diversity in our recognition of scientific excellence, with also other groups of scientists being underrepresented. We discuss potential explanations for the observed underrepresentation, including unconscious bias (of the proposer), importance of role models, ability to identify with awards, gender differences in defining a successful career and present some initial suggestions aiming to stimulate a discussion for how we can improve inclusivity and thus, equality and diversity in academic awards.