



Seen, Heard, and Included: My Experience at the Mass. Conference for Women

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By Carolyn Chong

I recently had the opportunity to attend the 2020 [Massachusetts Conference for Women](#), my first time attending this conference. I usually find myself walking away from events like this feeling a bit disappointed. In my experience, the speakers aren't compelling, the content is lackluster, and the topics are unoriginal. I always say "yes" to the opportunities because, well, frankly, that's what I've been told to do as a woman in tech. This conference, in particular, came highly recommended by Cerence's CIO, Bridget Collins. I've respected Bridget since the day I met her. Bridget travelled to our Montreal office – during a very Canadian week of weather, as it were – and hosted a roundtable where she diplomatically addressed questions and concerns related to our Global Technology Services. Respect. Fast forward to today, and Bridget is now the sponsor of our new Women in Tech group at Cerence. As one of her first orders of business, she got us ladies into one of the season's hottest networking events for women.

The Mass Conference for Women was virtual this year, and I became skeptical about committing to a full day of "Am I on video?" and "Can people hear me breathing?" as I hopped around the animated booths a few hours before the opening keynote. No smiley person to greet me, no cute freebies. Just me, my messy bun, and my mouse clicking on buttons that screamed, "Click me!"

But my biggest takeaway from the conference day? I got to experience what it feels like to see people who look like me in seats where I want to be. I, Carolyn Chong, saw Lisa Ling interview Nora Lum (aka Awkwafina) about success, setbacks and strength. Observing two independent and accomplished Asian women, one a respected journalist, the other a talented actress, share a conversation is just not something my eyes are used to seeing. Not in meetings, not often on television. I felt intimately close to these two speakers on my screen.

I'm not sure if it was a mixed dose of employing Covid empathy for someone who has also been racially attacked, witnessing Lum's sweaty armpit as she fist-pumped following Ling's statement that her daughters were also Chinese Korean, or cringing at Awkwafina's unimpressive interviewee skills that made me root for her. It could have been her rush to say she was "hungry for more" after admitting her Golden Globe meant a lot to her. Whatever it was, I liked her. She seemed so normal. So relatable. So reachable. It was how she presented herself - her whole self unapologetically, wearing full-on imposter syndrome, and never knowing quite just where to rest her hands - that made me think, "Oh... that's me."

It was refreshing and energizing to be a part of a video call with two people who were so far away yet made me feel like we were only 6m apart.

I'm not going to go into acting, and probably neither journalism. But I can be successful as I am. My dad always told me, "If they can do it, you can, too." This fireside chat was the gentle reminder I needed.

Sure, this conference would have been way cooler in person. But I don't think I would have had the same takeaway had I been sitting in a chair watching this keynote 86m from the stage. There would have been no sweat stains visible, no messy buns tolerated, and no feeling of connection.

Thank you, Cerence, for the opportunity to be inspired by incredible examples of accomplished, authentic, and resilient women.