



Creating Space for Growth: My Takeaways from the Mass. Conference for Women

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As I was preparing to attend the many fascinating sessions at my first ever women's conference, the [Massachusetts Conference for Women](#), I started to ask myself, "what will I gain and learn from a women's conference?" Though I felt strongly about the much-needed acknowledgement that the creation of such a space enables, I wondered if this could be more than a space for validation and representation. Could it create change? Could it inspire me towards something I had not considered before? Could it give me hope for a different reality? Through the course of the day, some of these questions were answered, while others emerged.

In an interview, as the conference's first keynote Nora Lum (a.k.a. Awkwafina) spoke about her "imposter syndrome," I had the subtle realization that one could be a Golden Globe winner and still feel undeserving. While such a point of connection between us is not a happy one, it did help me reflect on the systemic and structural nature of how certain bodies are made to feel like they do not belong. When there are only a few examples of people who look like you and succeed in the same space as you, it comes as no surprise that many of us feel this way. I felt a sense of being connected by that feeling to the 17,000 others that were virtually present at the conference. It is my hope that such feelings of connectedness may help reduce feelings of isolation for the many women who work in male-dominated spaces and cannot easily find or create networks of support. The conversation at the conference also made me recognize that we are not alone in wanting a more equitable future and that this is not the beginning of such struggles, as they have always been ongoing.

Further, hearing speakers at the conference who occupy different positions than the ones I do reminded me that not all women share the same experiences. The varied backgrounds and perspectives present at the conference helped to create a platform for learning and support, enabling us to move beyond our individual experiences to ones informed by the various intersectional positions that we occupy. When anti-racism activist Rachel Cargle spoke about Radical Empathy, I felt she gave us all the right vocabulary for allyship. According to her, we need to move past the feeling of "I see what you're experiencing, and I feel you" and start looking into "How do I play a role in your experience?" I feel it is important for women to understand what to expect of allies but also, and significantly, how to be allies.

Lastly, I was struck and impressed by the sense of community I felt from this event. One of my most significant learnings during and following my MBA studies has been the importance of networking and building relationships. The idea for a space, such as the Mass. Conference for Women, that unites women and helps them share information seems like an obvious positive. However, this year has been a difficult one, and amongst the many challenges has been the lack of a physical presence and the move to a virtual one. As many of us aim to network virtually, we soon find the process more and more dizzying as we navigate the black hole of social media and (for me, at least), question just how valuable this virtual union is. In part, my skepticism also stemmed from the idea that simply validating our experiences as women isn't enough to solve the systemic and structural problems surrounding gender. However, as the conference proceeded, I began to reflect on the importance of feeling a sense of community and how imperative that itself can be in allowing for change to happen.

This is the hope that such conferences create, and hope is a very important element to unlocking a brighter future. The optimism that stems from hope is often an underrated benefit of such events. So, although this was my first women's conference, I know it will not be my last. Whether in person or through virtual networks, the sense of belonging that these conferences create, the practical knowledge that is shared, the dialogue that they establish, and the critical thinking that they invite, all add to a sense of empowerment that, though not visible in a day, will make a difference in the long run. The question is no longer, "What would I gain from a women's conference?" but "Would I participate again?" and the answer is a resounding "Yes!"