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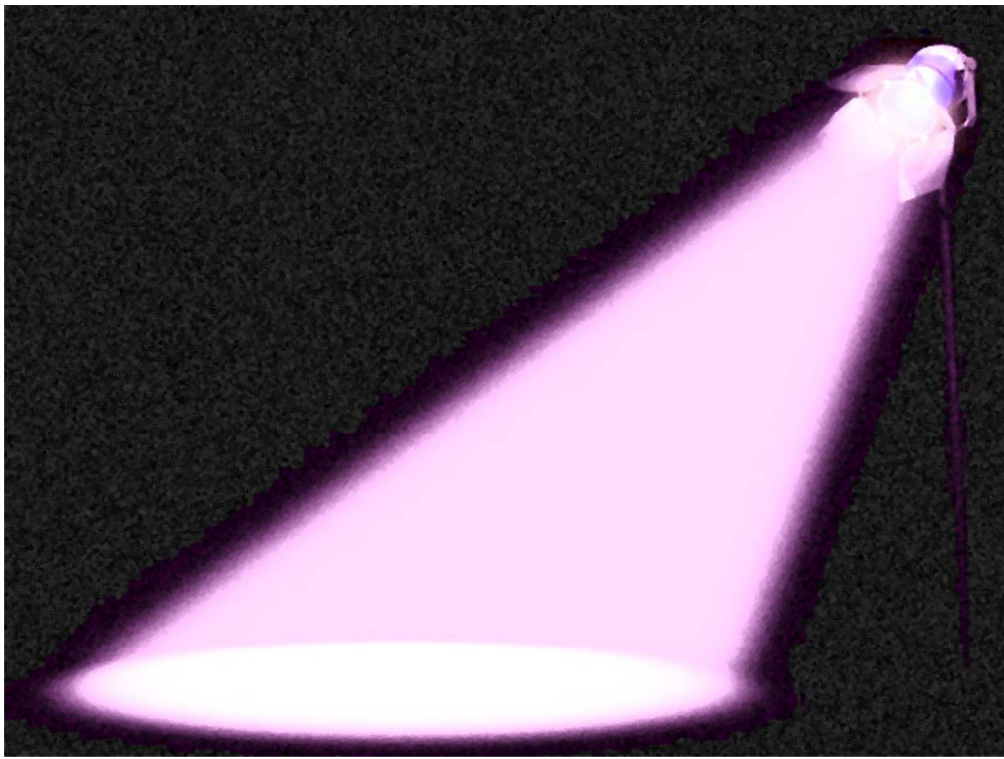
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Title:

There is light at the end of the tunnel - "Spotlight on..."

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Spotlight Editorial

Graphical Abstract:

as attached

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858

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3 25 There has been a lack of diversity in STEM academic positions, and minorities are still encountering
4 26 barriers to STEM academic careers even though there have been positive developments. The drivers
5 27 for this frequently originate in early childhood. It is crucial to both eliminate these root causes and
6 28 make academia more welcoming (Adamowicz 2017). Being committed to supporting equality,
7 29 diversity and dignity *FEMS Microbiology Letters* hope to inspire the next generation by showing
8 30 work and life of microbiologists at various stages of their careers. The Profile Article series "Spotlight
9 31 on..." of the Professional Development Section is coming up to one year now. Since June 2016 we
10 32 have already put five microbiologists from several countries around the world in the spotlight
11 33 (Jansson 2016, Cossart 2016, Palmer 2016, Pizza 2017, Lappin-Scott 2017) with very much interest
12 34 from our valued readership. We had planned to start off this series with some women and over time
13 35 introduce more diversity. It is therefore not only timely to celebrate an anniversary but also to reflect
14 36 on the context and direction of the series.
15 37 So I was wondering: Would reading these profiles have an impact on me if I was an Undergraduate or
16 38 Postgraduate student now? Would I be inspired? Would I think differently about my career planning
17 39 and development? Well, the honest answer is that I do not know. And that is not necessarily because
18 40 choosing my career is too long ago to remember, but because the context was very different when I
19 41 was young. I grew up witnessing equal opportunities for genders. Boys and girls had been taught that
20 42 everything was possible if one was prepared to work hard. I loved science, and scientific
21 43 achievements were generally highly regarded. Strong female role models were ubiquitous. Most
22 44 women worked, worked in all contexts and usually balanced a career and family. In fact most teachers
23 45 were female. Boys and girls took all the same subjects together in school. It never occurred to me that
24 46 I should not have all the opportunities my male counterparts had. Then at university I noticed that
25 47 male professors were in the majority. Yet many of the younger scientists were female and in my
26 48 Undergraduate course there were more female than male students. I assumed the imbalance was due
27 49 to previous generations, and thought that the gender ratio had started to improve and that at some
28 50 point a balance would be established. However, some years earlier the world around me had changed
29 51 politically and unexpectedly I saw some gender inequalities emerge over time. I personally
30 52 experienced this rather harshly when a reputable organisation made stipends available in support of
31 53 talented Undergraduate students. The money would have made a considerable difference to me at the
32 54 time but even more so having access to the stipendee network, because I was a first-generation student
33 55 in Higher Education. Following a selection process I was informed that the investment was put in the
34 56 male candidate given that -as a female- I was likely to leave academia. Back then I was quite shocked
35 57 but did not think too much about it assuming that it would not hinder my progress. I had experienced
36 58 a barrier I did not expect at all, and there were more to come. This raises another question: Is it
37 59 preferable to know the barriers and (be prepared to) face them or to unexpectedly encounter barriers?
38 60 Surely, there should not be any barriers.

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3 61 While there are still barriers, getting a better sense of perspective makes a difference to individuals.
4 62 That is where inspiration comes in. We may wonder whether what we are experiencing is "normal",
5 63 whether we just have to figure out how to operate in this context or find ways to change it.
6 64 Importantly there may already be alternatives we should know about. And at any time we face
7 65 additional challenges in life: e.g. we can become ill, physically and/or mentally. Does this change us
8 66 as a scientist? It makes us a different scientist, but certainly not less of a scientist. So coming back to
9 67 my initial question, I cannot put myself in the shoes of a student now or in anyone else's shoes for that
10 68 matter. However, by frequently being shown the world through someone else's eyes and from very
11 69 diverse angles we all get a much better sense of perspective for everyone's benefit including our own.
12 70 We see unexpected/unintended barriers and how they should and could be removed, and we are better
13 71 prepared when facing them while they are still in place. We find inspiration in various ways wherever
14 72 personal experiences resonate with us.
15 73 While all our "Spotlight on..." pieces showcase scientific achievements, they were also all different in
16 74 terms of career progress, family life, from running marathons to living in various countries. The
17 75 inherent "keeping going" aspect is inspirational. Our positive influences vary. Many of us are actively
18 76 supported by mentors or sponsors, yet for many others of us support means being enabled to cope
19 77 with negative experiences such as being blocked or even being held back (Morgan 2016). To show the
20 78 light at the end of the tunnel we will keep doing our best to cover much diversity and to offer
21 79 inspiring perspectives through this article series. And we hope you will enjoy the reading.
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33 81 Beatrix Fahnert, Section Editor Professional Development, *FEMS Microbiology Letters*.
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