It's been 53 years since a woman won the Nobel Prize in physics. What's the holdup?

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FULL TEXT

Update, Dec. 26, 2016. Vera Rubin died Dec. 25 in Princeton, New Jersey, at age 88. In October, Speaking of Science wrote about why she was overdue for a Nobel Prize. The original post is below.

When the winners of the 2016 Nobel Prize in physics were announced Tuesday, some folks in the science community were disappointed that the honor had not gone to the researchers behind this year's historic detection of gravitational waves. It would have been a big, splashy prize for a remarkable discovery -- and the rare case of a nearly immediate Nobel nod.

But because the results of that study were not published until after the deadline for 2016 nominations, the committee has a valid excuse. The people behind the detection (or three out of about a thousand of them, anyway) will no doubt be honored for their work eventually. Next year, perhaps, or whenever black-hole-related research is reaching a fever pitch thanks to their groundbreaking work.

Don't weep for the gravitational-wave guys. They'll be fine. But let's take a second to talk about Vera Rubin.

Rubin and her colleague Kent Ford provided the first real evidence of dark matter -- yes, dark matter, the unseeable, unknowable, mysterious stuff that makes up more than a quarter of the universe, which is kind of a big deal -- decades ago. Her time in the Nobel spotlight is overdue.

"The existence of dark matter has utterly revolutionized our concept of the universe and our entire field; the ongoing effort to understand the role of dark matter has basically spawned entire subfields within astrophysics and particle physics at this point," Emily Levesque, an astronomer at the University of Washington in Seattle, told Astronomy.com. "Alfred Nobel's will describes the physics prize as recognizing 'the most important discovery' within the field of physics. If dark matter doesn't fit that description, I don't know what does."

Although Rubin, a D.C. local who earned a PhD in astronomy from Georgetown University, has been a favorite to win for the past several years, she has repeatedly lost out -- to blue light-emitting diodes in 2014, neutrinos in 2015 and now to studies of exotic states of matter.

The Nobel Prize is not fair. Plenty of men who deserve the honor will never get that early-morning call from Stockholm, either. But someone (or sometwo or somethree) has to win it each year. It would be nice if the committee had honored a woman just once or twice in the past half-century.

More Davids since 2004, Johns since 2005, and as many Peters since 2007 have won the Physics #NobelPrize than women ever. #NobelforVeraRubin

Yes, there are more men than women in physics -- especially in older, more experienced cohorts with greater quantities of grand discoveries under their belts. But that does not mean there are not well-deserving women waiting out in the wings. In 2014, Slate asked around physics and science communication circles and came up with a list of women no less deserving than men honored for diodes or strange matter.

As Matthew Francis wrote in Forbes in 2015, the Nobel Prize is bad, and we should feel bad. It condenses discoveries that took dozens or hundreds or thousands of researchers into the breakthrough achievements of a

few brilliant men. In an effort to place three or fewer laureates on the podium, the prize committee glosses over the contributions of other scientists. Personally speaking, I would rather we just did away with the whole business and kept the love of Nobel-worthy science in our hearts every day of the year. But the Nobel Prize isn't going anywhere, and it would be nice if we could at least see a few women tapped for the honor.

Some might argue that Rubin, an obvious and timely Nobel candidate, should have to wait until dark matter is officially detected until she is given her due. But Rubin is in her late 80s, and the Nobel Prize cannot be given posthumously. Her work on dark matter has spawned entirely new branches of scientific inquiry, and time is running out. This should have been her year.

Rubin's health isn't good enough for her to grant interviews. But as of a couple decades ago, she was in good spirits about all of the Nobel snubbing. "Fame is fleeting," Rubin told Discover magazine in 1990. "My numbers mean more to me than my name. If astronomers are still using my data years from now, that's my greatest compliment."

If you have something to say about Rubin -- or another woman who has been left out of the Nobel laureate pool for too long -- check out the hashtag #NobelforVeraRubin on Twitter and join the conversation.

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