Dee Lawlor:
Hi everybody, my name is Dee, and you are very welcome to my talk today on the semantics of equality. So grab a coffee, get comfy, and let's get started. So I work in Science Communication, I'm a writer. So I love words and I love the meaning of words. I'm also a biologist, and one thing that biologists really love, is we love defining things. So I'm sure you can imagine that I'm a bit of a nightmare, when it comes to analysing statements and thinking about how we phrase things. Now just before I start this talk, I just want to clarify something. I don't hate the concept of equality. I don't hate anything, my goal with this talk is that I want to, I want to get people to start opening up the statements that we make and the statements that we see online, really breaking them apart and seeing what's inside. Because I think sometimes there are better statements that we could be making, and, and maybe better words that we could be using. One particular area that I'm really passionate about is accessibility in STEM and especially accessibility for women. So it's wonderful to see all the groups and organisations online who are promoting this and who are actively trying to encourage more young women into STEM, it's such a positive thing. And it's probably one of the few good things about the internet and social media. However, I often feel that the messages that we put out are a little bit vague. I often feel like they're lacking in any kind of really clearly defined goal in any kind of measurable goal. And my concern with that is when our message is vague, does our goal, our real goal become lost in the words? So an example of this and I see this one so many times is I see statements like, 'we want to encourage more women into STEM', which is brilliant. Yes, absolutely! A positive message. But I always want to ask, what do you mean by more? So define more? Because if I have one extra woman in my lab this year than I did last year, you know, technically that's more, so does that count? Did I succeed? Can I now tick the box, saying, you know, I made a positive change? 'Is that enough?' is the real question. So, you know, the message is great. But again, when we look inside it, you know, is there actual something going on? Is there something actually positive happening? Or are we just saying really nice things. Now one word that I have a particular beef with, and one word that I think is particularly guilty of this problem is the word equality. You know, we brandish this word so easily. Because, you know, we see it as the ultimate goal. It's this ideal that we should be aiming for, it's the the cookie jar up on the shelf, you know, that we can see and that we want, and that we're reaching for. And that's a good thing to want. It's good to want equality. But my concern is that we've become so focused on the jar itself, that we haven't stopped to think that what's inside it, is what's inside it going to be worth it once we get? So, so let me explain that. Excuse me. I see so many messages promoting equality in STEM. And again, wonderful. And a couple of times, I've pushed back a little bit. And I've asked you what do you mean, when you say equality? What is the actual thing again, the checkbox thing that you want to achieve? And lots of people actually don't have an answer. But the ones that do very often the answer that they gave is that they want to see a 50/50 split of men and women across the STEM fields. So so let's get our cookie jar off the shelf. Let's open it up, and we look inside. And we find these 50/50 split cookies. On initial inspection, they look good. You know, they're very neat, they're tidy. It's a nice measurable goal, I can see it, I can count it. But there's a couple of problems with this 50/50 cookie and this idea of a 50/50 split being the ideal, or the equality. So the first issue that I see is that, well there are very few industries where we actually do see a natural 50/50 split. So this issue isn't unique to the STEM industry, every industry has a gender skew on some level, obviously some are worse than others. Now in any biological system, which is what we are, you find natural variation. So variation in like size, age, activity rates, things like that. And natural variation is okay, and natural gender variation is okay. Now, I don't see it as the real problem. Now, before you all start tearing me a new one.
Let's just put a pin in that statement, because I'm going to come back to that in a minute. The second issue that I see with the whole 50/50 thing is what's that mean for industries where women are already in the majority? So in the STEM world, I think pharmaceuticals and medicine are probably the best examples of where we actually already have a near 50/50 split. And very often women are in the majority of that. So you know, what do we do? Because, you know, we say we want a 50/50 split. But the industries where women are already majority, that's not a 50/50 split? That's not equality, is it? And so what do we do with them? You know, do we take the extra women out of these industries? And do we put them in other STEM fields to kind of help, you know, smooth out the numbers? Or do we just ignore them? And say, well, look, you know, you guys are doing fine, you know, off you go carry on, we'll be over here, with the problem areas. And the third, and, and for me, the biggest problem with this, this deceptively good looking cookie, is that equal numbers is not equality. So any HR department can go out and hire five women for every five men. But that doesn't say anything about the quality of career that they're going to have. You know, it doesn't say anything about the experience these women are going to get. It doesn't say anything about the visibility they're going to have. All it says is that they were physically there. So is it really enough? Is that really a good goal? You know, technically, we achieved the thing that we wanted, and we got the cookie jar. But the value of what was inside, it wasn't as great as maybe we thought it was going to be. So again, on the surface, it looked great. But when we really tore it apart, what was inside wasn't really all it cracked up to be. Now my issue with the use of the word equality, and I'm trying really hard not to sound very negative about all this because I don't want to be negative. But no, I want us to, to really start thinking, you know, because I don't think this word is the perfect goal that it set out to be. If we if we encourage and if we enforce and if we want this idea that everybody is equal, and that everybody should have equal things, we are assuming that everybody wants the same thing. Because equality is absolute, you know, two things, either are or aren't equal, there's no middle ground. And there's also lots of different types of equality, career equality, educational equality, health, reproductive, financial, economic, although financial and economic it could possibly be the same thing. But whenever I see these statements about wanting equality, I always want to ask equality of what, and this is where we'll pin that comment that I made about natural gender variation. Again, in biology, in living systems, which human beings are, you always find natural variation. So again, variation, size, age, activity, you know, but these are all the things that make us different, these are all the things that make us unique. So think of everything that you have everything that you do, that makes you different to the people around you. Technically, those things are inequalities, or at least their variation. So if we removed variation, and if we replaced it with this ideal of perfect, are we removing the things that makes each of us unique? So again, you know, if we get this perfectly equal world that we say want, you know, is it at the expense of all the little ins and outs and ups and downs that makes each of us different? The idea of kind of homogenous equality is also terribly close to communism? And what that's that's a conversation for another day. Okay, so back to our cookie jar. So what would be good things to find? What would I want to find? Now, again, it's going to be different for everybody. But the things that I would want to find, are choice, and opportunity, to have equality of choice. And to have equality of opportunity, even in this day, and age is a privilege. There are so many, many women, so many people around the world, who didn't get to have the education or the career that they wanted, or to keep the career that they had, because they don't have choice. And because they don't have opportunity. Actually something I would love to look into. And this is a PhD for anybody who's interested, lets go and gather lots of women who left
their STEM career early. So go and find women who left their career before retirement. I want to ask them, when you left your career, was it your choice? Or did you feel you had to because, you know, I think we're doing a better job of getting women into STEM in the first place. But I don't think we're really doing much, or rather, I don't think we're doing very better, very much better rather, at plugging the leaky pipeline. So for anyone who's not familiar with the concept of the leaky pipeline, it's how we have women coming into their careers. But over time, they're moving away, they're leaving, so they're leaking out of the system. Because one of the main issues and this is of course, the classic example is that women still have to choose between having a family and having a career. Now, I'm 35. And I can tell you that this is still very much a real issue and very much a real thing that you have to think about. You know, we're still doing this. Because we still look at women as primary caregivers. Now, I know plenty of men who would love to be stay at home fathers, but they don't feel that they really have the choice. Now when we hear something like that, we all love to jump up on our soapbox, we say 'Oh, don't be silly, of course, he has a choice, he could do it if you wanted to'. But we have to remember, and this is an important point, especially for the younger people here. The things that we think and say, as individuals, are very different to the things that we think and say, as a society. So go and Google mother and baby groups in your area. And of course, depending on where you live, you might come back with say 10, 12, 15 results. Then go and Google father and baby groups in your area. And when I did it, I found one. So you know, as a society, we don't value the father-child relationship the same way we value the mother-child relationship. That's a huge contributing factor to inequality for everybody, men and women, you know, and this is one of the just, just one of the many, many, many things that need to be fixed. That need to be solved before we can come anywhere close to anything like equality. And in this case, parental equality, equality for men, women and children, and also career equality. Because, you know, for all our good intentions and all our good wishes, everybody in some way, is being denied choices or being denied opportunities for a whole myriad of different reasons. And so the, the equality in STEM issue is, it's considerably bigger than just numbers in the lab, you know, it's not something that's going to go away easily. And it's actually not something that's going to come naturally to us. Again, like every living organism that exists in the world, or that's trying to exist in the world. You know, we're subject to different forms of competition and competition breeds inequality. You know, it was an important trait for survival in our early evolution. But of course, we're trying to survive and evolve in a very very different habitat, to the one that we started in. Excuse me. So the take home message that I hope you take from this talk, I've actually managed to get through it quite quickly, when I was writing this, I probably had enough to rant for about two or three hours, anybody who knows me will tell you, that's quite normal. So the take home message that I hope you take from this, is that, you know, having the cookie jar to focus on is fine. And equality is a good goal. But we have to remember that it's not the jar, but it's what's inside it. That's the thing that has real value. You know, it's, it's all well and good for us to be taking tallies of women in lecture halls and in the workplace. But the real issue is the ones that never made it there in the first place. So it's the ones that aren't there, that we should be counting really. You know, and they're not there because of lack of choice, or because of lack of opportunity. You know, when we when we have an important message to say, when we have important statements, the words that we choose, are really important, words are permanent. And if we don't communicate the right message, we don't get the right support. Without the right support, we don't reach the solution that we want, the solution that we really need. So you know, never be afraid to really pressure test a statement or a goal, even a positive one, you know positive things should be open to scrutiny too. Again, because if we don't,
we only ever stay sitting on the surface of the issue. We never really get to the core of it. And if we don't get to the core, we don't get a solution. So that's my talk for today. Like I said, I had so much more that I could have ranted about for hours. But the lovely people at Biodiverse insist that everything stays below 30 minutes, which is good and good to contain the ranting. So yeah, I really look forward to hearing back from all of you. I look forward to your questions and your feedback. Hopefully, between the time that I've recorded this and the time that I'm talking to all of you. I've thought of some really deep and profound answers to your questions. But we'll have to wait and see. So thank you very much and I'll talk to you soon.