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Countering gender bias at conferences

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Re-structuring presentation programmes could make meetings more accessible

Conferences are the most prominent meetings for scientists and being invited to present one's findings greatly supports visibility: it helps you become known in the community, find collaborators and generate new research ideas. All of these are essentials in the highly competitive field of science, where effective networking and international collaborations are important for academic success.



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However, there is a clear gender bias when it comes to those who present at conferences. An analysis of speakers over 10 years at a European natural science conference found that only 9–23% of invited speakers were women. The problem was not only that fewer women

were asked; the study found that 50% of women invited to speak declined to give a presentation, compared with only 26% of invited men.¹

This gender difference could be explained, in part, by family obligations. Conferences are already addressing these problems with the addition of childcare facilities, reimbursing babysitting fees and timing conferences outside of school holidays. But this is only part of the reason: women may simply feel less eager to give a monologue on stage, which makes them decline such great self-marketing opportunities.

A matter of convention

This idea is supported by work done by Deborah Tannen at Georgetown University, US, an expert on gender-specific communication.² Tannen argues that trends show that men aim for status in their speech, women for interpersonal relationships. This means men are happy to hold monologues, sharing facts without interruption (casual and empathetic interjections can even feel like a threat to their status), while women thrive on dialogues with constant (often non-verbal) feedback from listeners. During their interactions, they actively work on establishing or solidifying a connection.

Public speeches and scientific presentations follow a different set of conventions than normal conversations. These are monologues during which direct feedback is uncommon or even unwanted. They provide status and visibility, but hardly allow for meaningful interaction with the audience – taking Tannen’s theories into account, this means they are more generally suited to men than women.

Changing the game

The solution to this imbalance isn’t obvious. Introducing quotas – actively pushing women to speak – is a questionable solution. However, there could be a way to restructure conferences so that contributions receive weight solely depending on their excellence and not preferred communication styles.

Increasing the status and visibility of poster presentations could be a first step to flatten the hierarchy. Furthermore, part of the monologue presentation time slots could be replaced

by different formats: for example smaller roundtable discussions of four to eight scientists, in which a chair presents their research. The chairing slots could be distributed similarly to those of traditional oral presentations, but the roundtable format would put scientists into a more intimate, interactive setting that provides space for personal interaction in addition to the transfer of knowledge. Alternatively, scientific ‘speed-dating’ formats could be arranged to facilitate targeted one-on-one discussions, making renowned scientists more approachable.

Such new formats would be more complex to organise than a traditional conference programme. However, modern media techniques could support such a novel conference structure. Discussion groups could be put together by matching the individuals using algorithms derived from social media platforms. Information about the researchers’ interests could be provided to a conference app or derived from integration with professional networking and social media sites. In addition to their research interests, promising other categories could be included for the grouping – such as their previous network, capacities for new projects or their career trajectories.

The elegance of such formats is the lack of coercion to force either gender in or out of speaking slots: a better gender balance might not have to be mandated by a quota, it might happen by itself.

Would steps like these indeed help to level the playing field and improve gender equality? We can’t tell until we try it. But whatever the outcome, more interactive structures than currently seen in conferences can potentially enhance the quality of networking and information flow between participants – and that will benefit everybody.

References

1 J Schroder *et al*, *J Evo. Bio.*, 2013, **26**, 2063 (DOI: [10.1111/jeb.12198](https://doi.org/10.1111/jeb.12198))

2 D Tannen, *You just don’t understand*, HarperCollins, 2010