

Commentary

A Blueprint for Gender-Equitable Conferences

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We are three women working across behavioural and social science, at different stages of our careers, who between us have spoken at, chaired, and organised a considerable number of international conferences. This piece grew out of a conversation between us at a recent conference, and it is written for people who organise or chair scientific meetings.

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When discussing why men are more prominent at conferences – as keynote speakers, raising their hands during Q&As and dominating panels – the solution often focuses on women’s behaviour, requiring them to be more confident, put themselves forward, be harder, say yes more often. This framing is somewhat mistaken. The imbalance we are describing is not primarily a confidence problem. It is a structural one, produced by how conferences are planned, who is asked, when they are asked, and what is assumed about their availability.

We are not going to make the case for why women’s participation in conferences matters. That case has been made, repeatedly and well, for decades, and it remains true regardless of whether it is repeated again here: equality is a right, and inclusion fosters better research^[1]. However, a common theme that we hear, and formed part of our feedback from [a Behavioural Research UK Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and Intersectionality webinar](#) (of which SC is a co-chair) was along the lines of, “*we know equality is important — what we need is practical help doing it*”. This is our attempt from our own perspectives.

Gender is not the only characteristic on which conferences exclude, and we do not intend these points to stand in for a wider conversation about inclusion, but gender inequality remains a major, well-evidenced

problem in its own right. Many of the points below generalise and we have not tried to write that broader piece here, but we do not think the two are in tension.

Including more women as keynotes and on panels – notes for organisers:

- **No all-male speaker sessions (“aka manels”).**^[2] There is no defensible reason for a panel or session with no women. Behavioural science, social science, medicine, and their related fields are women-rich fields. While some sub-fields remain more male-dominated than others, this is not a field-wide constraint, and organisers in those areas need to work harder to find women. Where women are under-represented as speakers, this typically reflects who is invited rather than a shortage of eligible women.^[3] Looking across the social and life sciences for greater coverage of a subject or topic area is one way to address this. Others are outlined below – such as invite women early in the planning process and expect to invite more.
- **Invite women early (and not after the men’s slots are already full).** It is a familiar experience to many women that by the time a programme is almost planned, they are invited after several male speakers have confirmed and the organisers reach out to “find a woman for the last slot”. These invitations can be dispiriting and can explain why women may reject invitations. All speakers want their research to be valued and being invited early in the process with an invitation which speaks to one’s research, credentials and value is what is required.
- **Expect a higher decline rate from women and plan for it rather than treating it as evidence of women taking the wrong approach.** Women are more likely to say no.^[4] This is often attributed to confidence, but we think this explanation negates wider societal factors. Women disproportionately carry caring responsibilities, not only for children but throughout their lives also for parents and other loved ones. Women also disproportionately take on pastoral care within higher education settings.^[5] Whatever the underlying cause — whether women decline more often, or men accept too often — the practical consequence is the same: if organisers want a balanced programme, they need to invite more women than the final number of slots requires, as a matter of planning.
- **A woman as session chair is not a reasonable substitute for a woman speaker.** Having women introduce male speakers is a short-term solution and one that is sometimes offered as a reasonable compromise. Speaking and chairing are not interchangeable roles, and they address two different issues. Having a woman as a chair makes her visually present but this is not the same as hearing about her research, her ideas, her trajectory, and it is this latter set of activities which provides inspiration for the next generation and other women in the room. Speaking invitations also carry

professional benefits, e.g., visibility, networking, and the opportunities that follow from them. A chairing, or a having women simply present, does not confer these same advantages^[3].

- **Consider the logistics that filter out women before the invitation stage.** Timing (early-morning or late-evening sessions), long-distance travel, notice periods (short-notice invitations penalise anyone with caring responsibilities to arrange around), and the availability of a genuine hybrid or remote option all influence who can say yes. These are organisational decisions. Invitations could include a statement that if you have any personal reason why you are not able to accept this invitation, we will welcome a chance to discuss this, with an option to provide more support or be flexible.

Ensure more women are included in the session activities – notes for session chairs:

- **If a woman raises her hand, go to her first.** Not exclusively, but noticeably and consistently — chairs shape who gets heard in a session far more than most chairs realise, and the pattern of who is called on first, and who is called on at all, is visible to the room. In our experience, when a woman has asked a question, this provides the conditions for more women to raise their hands.^[6]
- **Make sure women on panels have an equal chance to answer questions.** Topics can end up being dominated and women may not receive questions on panels. It is the chair's role to ensure women have an equal chance to answer a question and the chair should prepare questions in advance to make sure all panellists have the chance to contribute.
- **Introduce women with the same weight and detail given to men.** Titles, credentials, and achievements should be stated with equal care. Watch for the difference between “Dr [Surname]” and first names, or between a full introduction and an abbreviated one.^[7]
- **Manage the room's Q&A behaviour.** Where a small number of attendees consistently monopolise questions, or where women's answers are talked over or re-explained back to them, that is the chair's responsibility to manage.

Final thought

None of this is difficult to do. It is, however, easy not to do. We understand that many conferences are being organised by teams with other workloads, but this guidance can be easily adopted and instructions sent to session chairs and speakers in advance. Nor is it enough simply to make women visible: exposure to senior women has been found not to translate automatically into greater ambition among those who follow^[8], which is why genuine inclusion matters more than tokenistic presence. Inclusive conferences

improve experiences for all, and it is from conferences where we have felt welcomed and included — not merely present — that we have developed important and lasting academic collaborations.

Statements and Declarations

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Potential Competing Interests

No potential competing interests to declare.

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