

Including women on convening committees increases women speakers at scientific meetings

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Women are currently underrepresented among speakers at scientific meetings, both in absolute terms and relative to their representation among attendees, but a new study suggests one way to address this deficit. An analysis of 460 scientific symposia to be published in *mBio*, the online open-access journal of the American Society for Microbiology reveals that the inclusion of at least one woman on a convening committee increases the proportion of female speakers by as much as 86% and significantly reduces the likelihood the session would have an all-male list of speakers.

Despite making gains in representation among rosters of undergraduate students, graduate students, and postdoctoral positions in the sciences, women are still not proportionally represented in the higher echelons of academia, says co-author Arturo Casadevall of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in Bronx, New York.

If you're a scientist, speaking at scientific meetings can be an important feather in your cap - an achievement that can help you get ahead in your career, he says. "Hence, increasing the number of women who present their work at large meetings could translate into more women succeeding in science," says Casadevall.

Casadevall and Jo Handelsman of Yale University examined 460 symposia involving 1,845 speakers in two large meetings sponsored by

the American Society for Microbiology, the General Meeting and the Interscience Conference on Antimicrobial Agents and Chemotherapy (ICAAC). At these meetings, select groups of session conveners choose speakers for plenary sessions and individual symposia.

Casadevall and Handelsman classified sessions according to whether they had been convened by two men, a man and woman, or two women, then tallied the gender representation among speakers for each symposium.

Despite differences in the operating procedures for the two meetings, the results for the general meeting and ICAAC closely paralleled one another: in both there was a positive correlation between the participation of women as session conveners and participation by female scientists in those sessions. At the general meeting, sessions convened by all men had an average of 25% female speakers, and sessions where the convener team had at least one woman had an average of 43% female speakers - a 72% increase. At ICAAC, including at least one woman on the convening team was also associated with 72% more female invited speakers.

And at both [meetings](#), the participation of women on a convening team also reduced the odds the session would have all male speakers.

The increase in female speakers was not simply a result of the female conveners also speaking. Male and female conveners participated as speakers in roughly equal percentages and the percentage of female conveners who spoke at their sessions was smaller than the increase in female participation associated with the presence of a woman on the convening committee. This suggests that female conveners boosted the participation of women in other ways, write Casadevall and Handelsman.

"These are 'correlations'," not proof of causation, says Casadevall. He

emphasizes that further research is needed to explain why the presence of a woman on a convening committee is correlated with increased numbers of female speakers, but the data suggest that involving women as conveners could have a large effect on the gender distribution of the speakers and promote gender equity.

"Meeting program committees could carefully consider the gender composition of those assigned to pull together scientific sessions and make efforts to involve [women](#) scientists as conveners for sessions and symposia," says Casadevall.

Provided by American Society for Microbiology

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