

Striking a gender balance among speakers at scientific conferences

August 4 2015

Increasing the number of female speakers at a scientific conference can be done relatively quickly by calling attention to gender disparities common to such meetings and getting more women involved in the conference planning process, suggests a Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health researcher.

Reporting online Aug. 4 in the journal *mBio*, Arturo Casadevall, MD, PhD, professor and chair of the W. Harry Feinstone Department of Molecular Microbiology and Immunology at the Bloomberg School, lays out how the American Society of Microbiology General Meeting was able to increase the percentage of female speakers from 27 percent in 2011 to nearly 50 percent in 2015. This comes at a time when [women](#) make up a significant majority of scientific trainees and oral presentations at important conferences are seen as one key to academic advancement.

"Invitations to speak at major meetings are prized by scientists because they provide visibility and the ability to present their work to an audience of their peers," says Casadevall, who is also the editor of *mBio*. "When you have an underrepresentation of women as speakers and many panel discussions made up only of male researchers, you're sending the message that perhaps the field is not welcoming to women. That isn't the message we want to send."

Casadevall says that in 2013, the committee charged with planning the 2014 American Society of Microbiology general meeting was presented

with data from 2011 to 2013 outlining the low numbers of women who spoke at those conferences. They were also shown data suggesting that when at least one woman was in the group that invited panelists to appear, there were 72 percent more female speakers in those sessions and there was a 70 percent reduction in the likelihood of an all-male panel. After being presented with the data during the planning phase of the conference, there was a 43 percent uptick in female speakers at the 2014 meeting, up from an average of 30 percent for the previous three years. However, there was no significant impact on the number of all-male sessions.

Before 2015's meeting, the planning committee was reminded of the underlying issue and urged to do even better. At the 2015 conference, gender equity was achieved, with 48.5 percent of the speakers being female and the percentage of sessions with all-male speaker rosters dropping dramatically to 4 percent. This meant that roughly 100 more women presented in 2014 and 2015 than would have been expected based on the averages of the prior three conferences. Casadevall was the chair of the American Society of Microbiology General Meeting's 2014 and 2015 program committee.

Casadevall says that the number of all-male panels fell from 20 percent to 4 percent between 2011 and 2015. In 2015, no planning group that included at least one woman picked an all-male panel.

He says the issue of gender inequity among conference speakers is not unique to his field, but has been a well-understood issue across a number of academic areas, despite increases in the percentage of women scientists.

He says he believes that including women in the groups charged with choosing speakers increases the chances of getting female speakers because women are more likely to have women in their networks and

they are more likely to notice during the planning process that women are underrepresented.

"We all have our biases - intentional or unintentional - and we need to find a way to overcome them," he says. "Maybe this won't be a problem in science in the future, but now it is and here we found a way to ensure that our conference doesn't leave anyone out on the basis of gender."

Provided by Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health

Citation: Striking a gender balance among speakers at scientific conferences (2015, August 4) retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2015-08-gender-speakers-scientific-conferences.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.