When men ask more questions—a glimpse of ordinary sexism in the academic world

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Men ask more questions then women in academic conferences and are more visible. Roads Academy Masterclass, Warwick University, November 2010. Credit: HA1-000602/Flickr, CC BY-SA

It's a man's world when it comes to work: women are paid 20% less than men; men with equivalent experience are promoted over women; women with children are hired less, while men with children are paid more; successful women are viewed as less likeable than successful men. Although conditions for women have improved compared to several decades ago, the rate of improvement has slowed in recent years, suggesting that gender bias in the workplace will persist for a long time to come.

Academia is not immune to sexism

In Academia, women acquire 59% of undergraduate degrees, but only 21% of senior faculty positions, an observation frequently referred to as the "leaky pipeline". Many factors have been proposed to explain the attrition of women as academic career progress, including innate differences in ability; differences in the career preferences of men and women; parenting; differences in the assessment of women's CVs for hiring, tenure and promotion; differences in males' and females' salaries for equivalent positions; imposter syndrome; and a lack of appropriate role models and mentors for women. However it happens, the result is low visibility of successful women in academic science.

Why should we be concerned about this gender imbalance in visibility? Much evidence suggests that having models that one can identify with is important to how people perceive their possibility for success in any given career.

Women are less visible

That there is an imbalance in men and women's visibility thus poses a problem in the context of the wider issue of the attrition of women in academia. Unfortunately, women are not only less visible than men in terms of later-stage career positions, but they are disproportionately less visible in other spheres of academia, too.

For example, men are more likely to hold more "prestigious" first or last authorship on papers; men's papers are cited more frequently than women's; men give disproportionately more invited talks at conferences than women; and men ask more questions after conferences than women. However, these forms of visibility tend to be more apparent to individuals further along in their careers, and, in the case of

conferences, are relatively infrequent events.

The formative role of seminars

For many students and early career researchers, the departmental seminar is the first exposure to "real" research and researchers. It is an opportunity to witness, and participate in, the academic dialogue.

The humble seminar is more than just a speaker's opportunity to share their research and the audience's opportunity to learn about it; seminars play a formative role in exposing potential future academics to the environment and culture of their field. It can shape young academics' impressions of who is successful in their field and what it takes to be successful. So, it may matter who is seen to participate in academic seminars by asking questions of the speaker after the seminar.

We collected data on question-asking behaviour in 10 countries including nearly 250 seminars. Most audiences were, on average, made up of equal numbers of men and women, at least for the sample of biology, psychology and philosophy seminars that we and our helpful colleagues attended. But any given question was 2.5 times more likely to be asked by a male than a female audience member. Male audience members were disproportionately more visible than female audience members.

Perhaps this imbalance in question-asking behaviour could be explained by demographic inertia. It reflects that there are more senior men than women, and senior academics ask more questions than junior academics. But in an online survey we asked academics of all career stages how frequently they asked questions in seminars. Men self-reported asking questions more frequently than

women irrespective of career stage; senior men ask more questions than senior women, just as earlier-career men ask more questions than earlier-career women.

We also controlled for this in our analyses of the seminar data, but the proportion of female faculty at a particular institution did not predict the imbalance in the questions asked. Men just ask more questions than women.

What's going on?

Where does this imbalance come from? There are two ways that women could end up asking fewer questions than men: either they put their hands up less frequently to ask questions, or they are overlooked when they do so. Both mechanisms could be in play, and there were certainly some blatant occurrences of the second in our observations. But our survey data suggest that the first mechanism plays a major role – remember women report asking questions less frequently than men – and they also provide some insight into why.

When asked what prevented people from asking a question when they had one, women rated internal factors, such as working up the nerve or being intimidated by the speaker, as more important than men, whereas there was no difference for external factors, such as having enough time.

The survey suggested that internalised gender stereotypes are at least partly responsible for the observed imbalance, both in men's participation and women's lack of it.

Why does it matter? And can anything be done?

If men want to ask more questions than women, it's not necessarily a problem. However, given the formative role of the weekly seminar and the context of wider problems regarding the attrition of women in academic careers, the gender imbalance in question-asking suggests a problem.

The issue is not that anyone ought to feel pressured to ask questions at public events. Neither is our goal to pressure women to be more assertive or to suggest that men refrain from asking questions at these events. But that the various psychological and sociological factors influencing question asking behaviour feed into a larger problem of gender imbalance in the profession.

Addressing women's visibility at a local level early in the career pipeline could, hopefully, help to address the larger problem of gender imbalance in academia at later stages. We would all benefit from more voices being heard. However, until that time, small changes in behaviour might make a big difference.

Small changes in behaviour

Our data suggested two interacting factors that could ameliorate the imbalance: a longer time for questions and the first question being asked by a woman. However, these data are correlational and although it's tempting to think that there could be an easy fix by manipulating these variables, we haven't yet tested whether these factors do indeed change the imbalance.

The best practice I observed during seminars involved an active moderator who constantly scanned the audience while previous questions were being answered, recording who wished to ask a question and then calling on questioners in the observed order.

This avoided questions taken out of turn and missing questions at the back of the room when a sea of hands is raised after the previous question was answered. A brief pause after the seminar before questions start may also help audience members (and the speaker) gather their thoughts before asking (or being asked) questions.

For now, our best advice is for speakers, moderators and audience members to be aware of unconscious bias during question time. But more importantly, moderators and audience members could follow the golden rule: ask questions of others as you would have them ask questions of you.

Don't speak out of turn, don't use question time to show off, and moderators: don't overlook patient people with their hands up in the back row.

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