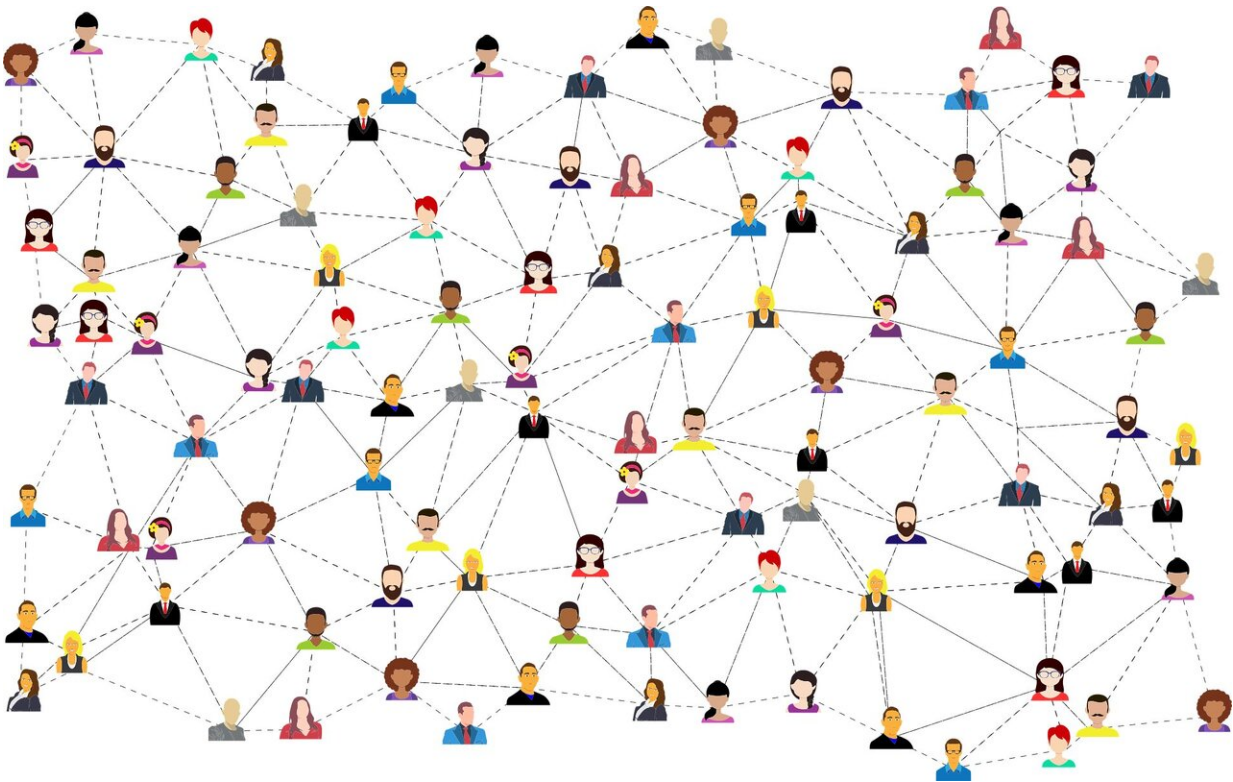


Women participate less at conferences, even with gender-balanced delegates

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Women are less likely to participate at medical and scientific conferences, yet simple interventions could have a big impact, a new study has found.

A new study, published in *The Lancet Diabetes and Endocrinology* and led by Imperial academics, examined [women's](#) participation at a medical conference and offers solutions for widening it. The team, who say this study is the first of its kind, suggest that even small changes to the organizational design of conferences could have a big impact on women's inclusion.

The research, led by Dr. Victoria Salem from Imperial's Department of Bioengineering, was undertaken over two years at the UK Society for Endocrinology's annual national conference.

Lack of representation

Despite representing around half of medicine undergraduates in recent decades, women remain underrepresented in senior medical faculty positions. Medical and [scientific conferences](#) are important platforms for clinicians and academics to increase their professional visibility and gain influence—as well as act as role models for junior academics. If women are not visible at conferences, the team say, they cannot act as these role models, thus creating a self-perpetuating cycle.

Dr. Salem and the team analyzed questions and comments from a variety of sessions at the Society for Endocrinology's conferences in 2017 and 2018. The conferences were attended by around 1,000 delegates each year, of which half were women. For the 2018 conference, the team carried out an intervention with the aim of improving women's inclusion.

Despite a gender- and seniority-balanced delegacy at the conferences examined, women asked fewer and shorter questions at the 2017 conference, with only around one in five questions or comments coming from women. Questions from men lasted a combined total of two hours 54 minutes over the course of both conferences, versus 56 minutes for women.

In sessions that were only chaired by men, only 9% of questions came from women audience members. Yet if the panel was made up of all women, they become equally likely as men to contribute. When the opening question in a session came from a woman, this significantly increased the likelihood of subsequent audience contributions from women.

Improving women's inclusion

As part of their study, the team showed that tweaking conference design in these areas made a significant impact on audience participation from women. For the conference in 2018, the team worked with the organizers to encourage more sessions to be chaired by women, increasing audience questions from women. All invited chairs were also reminded to offer the opening question to a woman audience member if there was the option to do so—which increased the odds of subsequent audience contributions from women.

Dr. Salem says that "despite a glaring under representation of women's voices, over 30% of people surveyed after the conference perceived that women were contributing the same as or more than men, which highlights this interesting phenomenon of a dissociation between fact and perception regarding the behavior of women."

Organizational changes

As well as the quantitative analysis of women's participation, the tone, style and content of their questions were analyzed and found to be demonstrably different to that of men. Women were more empathetic in their questions and more interested in the gendered implications of scientific findings. Men were more than twice as likely to open their question with a statement of scientific fact.

Dr. Salem added that "this speaks to me about the true nature of some of the questions and comments at conferences. Women seem much less likely to use these opportunities as platforms to self-promote or assert their expertise. I think that creates a bit of a vicious cycle, as this kind of grandstanding puts people—especially women—off."

While focus groups following the conferences stated that women as individuals should offer more contributions, the team behind the study say that organizational changes that promote inclusivity are just as important, if not more, than encouraging women to "lean in."

Real-world impact

Professor Stephen Curry, Assistant Provost for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, says that "Dr. Salem and her colleagues brilliantly typify Imperial's capacity for high-quality research that has real-world impact. These important findings mesh well with our recently-introduced Conference Policy, which also aims to increase the visibility of women and other under-represented groups at scientific meetings."

More information: Victoria Salem et al, Scientific medical conferences can be easily modified to improve female inclusion: a prospective study, *The Lancet Diabetes & Endocrinology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/S2213-8587\(21\)00177-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-8587(21)00177-7)

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