7 Rules for Avoiding All-Male Panels

It doesn't take a genius to realize that gender diversity is a good thing. But getting there isn't always so easy.

BY JACQUELINE O'NEILL | MARCH 8, 2016

Tuesday is International Women's Day, which means that in conference rooms and auditoriums across the globe, panels of predominantly female experts will tackle pressing issues. It's a refreshing picture, to be sure. But we shouldn't have to designate a date to get women on stage.

In most fields, it's becoming harder and harder for event organizers to justify all-male speaker lineups. From tech summits to, yes, conferences on women's rights, the public is taking notice. A popular Tumblr blog, *All Male Panels*, documents XY-rich panels, stamping them with David Hasselhoff's seal of approval; meanwhile GenderAvenger.com showcases an ever-growing Hall of Shame (and, mercifully, a Hall of Fame).

Foreign-policy circles, however, have been slow to come around. While overall numbers are hard to come by, a *Washington Post* article noted that, at more than 200 Middle East-focused events hosted by six leading D.C. think tanks in 2014, a stunning 65 percent featured no women on stage. At this year's World Economic Forum, only 23 percent of the speakers and moderators were women, and 20 percent of the panels — on topics as varied as energy, global debt, refugees, and the European financial outlook — were composed entirely of men. Despite (or perhaps because of) this, "women" was the third-most tweeted topic at Davos with more than 10,000 tweets.

It's not only conferences or summits where representation is a problem. A recent study by Brookings looked at 45 congressional hearings on the Iran deal over the past year. Out of 140 named witnesses, only six were female. As analysts noted, this demographic breakdown is strikingly similar to that of Iran's parliament.

Women's representation seems to be a particular challenge in security-focused conversations. Even as the definition of what falls under security broadens — beyond nation-states and militaries to human and inclusive concepts — the pool of interlocutors has remained small and overwhelmingly male. This isn't only a problem of fairness. Speakers outside of the typical, narrow criteria bring a diversity of perspectives and experiences that are essential to tackling complex issues of peace and security. By relying primarily on (white, over 40) men, we are missing a broader pool of creative approaches and solutions.

Hardly a topic exists that isn't affected by gender. Peace talks? Agreements are more likely to endure if women participate meaningfully in reaching them. Epidemics? Women were on the front lines of the fight against Ebola and were three times more likely to die as a result. Violent extremism? Boko Haram has already used more female suicide bombers than any militant group in history. State fragility? The best predictor of a state's peacefulness is not its level of democracy, wealth, or ethnoreligious identity; it's how well women are treated. One last topic, because it's so stunning: natural disasters? Researchers assessed that hurricanes with more feminine names — think Katrina — inspire less fear and so prove **more deadly.**

Presumably, no one sets out to create an all-male panel. Some simply discount the importance of women's participation, saying, "This topic doesn't relate to gender, so it shouldn't matter." Or, "Not to worry, our moderator is female." More frequently, well intentioned organizers perceive insurmountable barriers. I hear often that "there aren't any female experts on X issue" or "we invited one, but she declined." My advice: Instead of trying harder, try smarter. Here are seven ways:

1. Understand why gender diversity matters. As people pay more attention to this issue — and call out nonperformers — organizers are taking notice. But public shame can't be their primary motivation. The fact is that a diversity of qualified voices and perspectives will enhance the caliber of the conversation, no matter the topic. As Foreign Policy's David Rothkopf (one of several men who've pledged to say "no" to speaking invitations when women aren't part of the lineup) put it, "you can't have a serious discussion or effectively influence outcomes without including the perspectives of women."

2. Define your objective, then track it. It's not enough to assert the principle. Event planners need to be explicit about the proportion of qualified women they want on stage and in the room generally. If they're having trouble reaching that goal, they can seek help from some of the many networks that maintain rosters of women experts, such as Foreign Policy Interrupted, the Women Waging Peace Network, or the recently launched website "Women Also Know Stuff." Most importantly, organizers must hold themselves accountable to the number they've set out to achieve. When attendees register, organizers should ask them to self-identify their gender, track these numbers, and course-correct as the event gets closer.

3. Engage women in the planning stage. It should come as little surprise: If you involve no women in organizing your event, you'll end up with no women on stage. Female speakers, like attendees, will likely only participate if the agenda, themes, and framing of the event feel relevant. The best way to ensure this is to broaden the actors involved in planning. A recent analysis of mathematics conferences showed that sessions which had women on their organizing committees were more than twice as likely to have female speakers.

4. Pay attention to how you invite women. The organizer's lament — "We invited women, but they all said no!" — deserves some unpacking. Imagine a political party doing an election postmortem. Would anyone say, "Well, we asked [insert women/Hispanics/African Americans] to vote for us, but they just didn't … so, not much we could have done there." No, they'd ask what messages didn't resonate, what channels didn't work. Similarly, it's critical to understand *why* women decline invitations to speak. Sometimes there's a scheduling conflict; it happens. But in some cases there's a more insidious reason: Women are often reluctant to declare themselves "experts."

Event organizers can make it easier for women to say yes. For instance, they can get a woman who has spoken at one of their previous conferences to nominate and invite another woman she knows, or invite several women and have them encourage each other to attend. Above all, make clear from the outset that invitees know that other women will be on stage. Consider the way you're framing the event itself: Do your marketing materials feature photos of diverse speakers? Are you using superlatives about the caliber of speakers you're seeking that female discussants might not deem applicable to themselves?

5. Don't take shortcuts. Repeat after me: "I will not construct an all-male panel and then tack on a woman as moderator." This is a classic move. Attendees (and female invitees!) see right through it. Panels are asked for their opinions and insights — their expertise — while moderators facilitate the conversation. Both are important roles, but they're not the same. Women can, and should, fill both seats.

6. Re-examine your criteria. Another common excuse is, "My very important event needs speakers from the *top* positions!" This is convenient, since the higher you climb in foreign-policy and security ranks — at least in government — the more men outnumber women. While there are often plenty of high-ranking female officials to approach, consider that positions aren't the only indicator of influence. I recently moderated a panel at an international security conference that included top generals from the Canadian and U.S. armed forces, as well as a remarkable speaker from Tunisia, Amira Yahyaoui. She leads an organization focused on government transparency and accountability and has more Twitter followers than her country's national football team. We must look beyond titles.

7. Be aware of subtle biases. I've often observed moderators or fellow speakers referring to male experts by their titles but to women by their first names. Even when they hold the same position. Similarly, as a moderator, if you get a question from the audience that relates to gender, don't just turn to the women on the panel to answer it. Men are a gender, too. Organizers can name these tendencies to those they include in their events and proactively share their expectations for avoiding them.

And what if you're attending a security-related event? You, too, have a role to play. If you're not willing to condition your participation on inclusivity, at least ask organizers how many of these steps they took. Respond to invitations saying, "Before I confirm, would you tell me the percentage of women you expect as speakers and attendees?" Let them know that there's demand.

With these steps, we can broaden the security discourse at our roundtables and on our stages. But more than that, the inclusion of more diverse voices at security-focused events will ripple out to other platforms, from the media to congressional testimony to negotiating tables. We need a multiplicity of perspectives — not just women, but youth, minorities, and more — to creatively confront global threats.

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