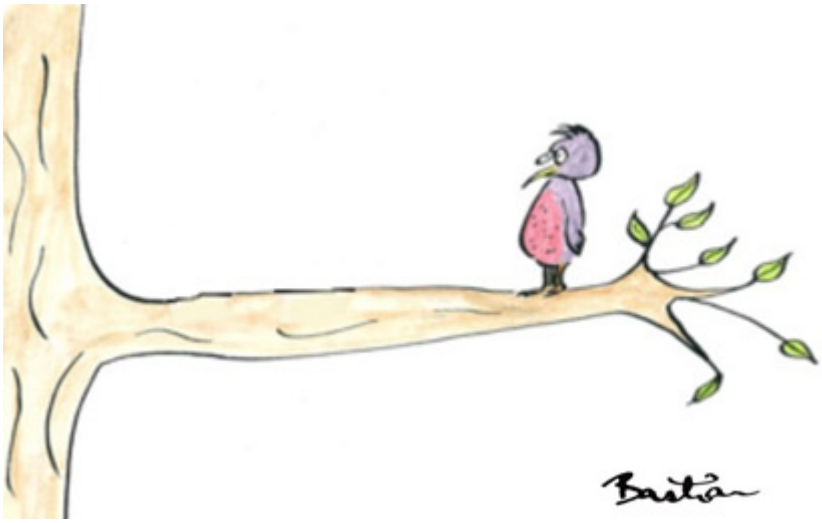




# 7 Tips for Women at Science Conferences

Posted January 18, 2015 by Hilda Bastian in Listicles, Science Communication




Women are really losing out at many science conferences.

Large chunks of our lives are spent listening to men talking – often unbroken by a female voice for hours at a time – especially from the podium for major speaking sessions and the discussions that follow.

It's a glaring outward sign of women's relative disadvantage in many areas of science – and one of the factors contributing to it, too. When scientists congregate, our thoughts form, shift, and re-align. Our collaborations do, too. The Brownian motion can strike up new opportunities and recognition – lynchpins for progressing ideas as well as careers.

Equal respect for women and other non-dominant groups shouldn't be a touchy subject: it should be a given. Science is international and it has developed many distinct cultural norms for itself. The presence of women is one of them.

But our experiences are strongly affected by the variation in the status of women in individual cultures and sub-cultures. We've still got a *long* way to go collectively.

There's a lot we can do to tackle the internal and external barriers, though – even though it takes baby steps and practice for many (most?) of us. Here are my top seven tips for when you're starting out – and a collection of reading that covers a rich array of other advice (including for men and organizers).

**1. It's worth crafting questions – and encouraging other women to step up, too.**

Granted, this can be as intimidating as giving a talk yourself – or even more so, in many settings. After 30 years, there are times I still find this stressful. But I started out as an activist, and one of the main tactics we promoted was to make sure you figured out something important and snappy to raise during the first plenary you possibly could snag.

None of us want to be "that guy," though.


I jot down and polish several potential questions during plenary talks, so I've still got one if someone in the queue before me covers one or two.

Another good source of worthwhile things to contribute is to draw in relevant insights that came from a breakout session. In those sessions, it's even more important that a wider range of voices be heard, because it's at least marginally less daunting and there should be more time.

There's Twitter, too. Live-tweeting isn't just a growing way to spread the word **outside the meeting**. It can be a way to make real-life connections with people at the conference you didn't know before. But if you have a great thing to say, try not to only tweet it: getting the mic and letting others tweet what you said is still better.

Asking questions is also key to supporting others. It can be discouraging to say the least if you give your 10-minute talk in a breakout session, or stand next to your poster, and there's not a single nice question other than the obligatory face-saver from a

moderator.

*[Update 11 November 2015: **Tips on asking questions at conferences**.]*

**2. Always start with your name and where you're from.**

Unless it's a meeting where everybody truly does know everybody else, it's presumptuous *not* to say who you are. Make it easy for the people who want to know who you are: they shouldn't have to drum up the nerve or time to track you down and ask. It's not only polite, it's in all our interests for women not to model self-effacement to other women.

And notice how people cross-reference others too. When you've got the mic, you can use it to draw attention to others who don't get enough of it. Breaking down the GOBSAT status quo ("good ol' boys sitting around a table") needs to happen at every level that creates those networks in the first place.

**3. Use cards as well as printouts with links to your poster to help follow through.**

Business cards are cheap to get online now if you don't get them already from your institution, or those don't have all your details on them (like social media handles). They're essential to courtesy in some cultures, too.

It's not enough though. Follow through – at least with an email. Just because people don't get on top of things after a conference, doesn't mean they're not interested. If I take someone's card, I write myself a note on it about what the interest was (if I should send them something, for example). You can write a note to the person you give your card to, if you really want something from them ("Interested in your paper on….").

If you're presenting a poster, having handouts and a link to it online is great, too.

*Image credit: Pixabay*

**4. Breaking eye contact with your notes and slides is worth it when you give a talk – even if it means you forget some details.**

Performance anxiety is a slayer of women's science progress. Don't avoid giving talks. You'll need to sooner or later, and practice helps.

It is performance, but you don't have to be blazingly brilliant at it every time you open your mouth. The most helpful advice I got once when I was terrified before a talk was from a colleague who had trained performers in the past.

She said to think of the audience as a single organism, having a communal experience: you don't have to try to satisfy every single one of them. It left me free to let my eyes roam around the room without worrying about trying to connect the way you do one-on-one.

The main notes I think we need are the ones that remind us of our timing ("half time is 11.10 and you have to be at slide 6 at least") – and any reminders about traps we fall into ("Look up!" "Slow down!"). Make sure key data and facts are on the slides – don't cram them full of less important things.

**5. Don't just say something – *stand* there!**

This was an epiphany for me. I heard it in a documentary about the wonderful choreographer Bob

Fosse: he said it to performers in rehearsal. (**Fosse in turn apparently got it** from Sanford Meisner, of Meisner acting technique fame.) “STAND there” used to be one of my big “notes to self” when giving a talk.

We don’t want to emulate the posturing of dominant people with excessive self-regard. But many of us have a problem with our body language and other physical aspects of “presence.” Confidence has physicality. And it can be the easiest part of a “fake it till you make it” approach, with the biggest pay-off. At the heart of it, it seems to me, is not apologizing for your presence, for taking up your fair share of space.

**6. Your personal style is going to be the most effective one for you, but look widely for inspiration.**

Discard tips and advice that just don’t work for you, or don’t fit with the person you want to be. “Fake it till you make it” only counts for things that are genuinely a good fit for you: it’s authenticity and personal integrity that matter the most. Trying to be someone you really are not means you’ll never truly be comfortable in your professional skin.

Whether it’s expressing opinions, what to wear, handling bullies, maintaining your boundaries, standing up for others, or anything else, there are many, many ways to do it well. If you’re lucky, you’ll be surrounded by plenty of examples of ways of doing things that work *and* feel true to you. But they don’t have to be scientists – anyone who you really admire could have clues for your professional life.

**7. Holding back for yourself is fine – but solidarity for others is non-negotiable.**

And I don’t just mean solidarity for women. Others are in the same boat – and many will face even more daunting social obstacles than we do, especially those juggling multiple sources of disadvantage. Don’t assume they’re too confident to need support, no matter what it looks like.

Women are, by and large, the biggest group facing these hurdles within each community, though. Encourage women to speak up – and encourage science culture that’s more courteous and generous; kinder on the human scale.

You’ll see scientists drowning in anxiety about public speaking. Times that women want to speak, but aren’t called on. There may well be low-level (or worse) bullying. There’ll be inappropriate jokes and demeaning, unprofessional conversations. **Women will be harassed** – especially at social events. We need to get better at preventing this, and seeing and addressing it effectively when it does happen. That’s a shared responsibility. A while ago, **David Morrison** put it bluntly, “The standard you walk past is the standard you accept.”

Science is deeply social. We create its culture. We all need to complain – at the very least on the conference evaluation form – when we see, hear, or experience unfairness. And email organizers asking where to find their gender and diversity inclusion policies. (As **Athene Donald discusses eloquently**, this doesn’t just apply to conferences.)

One of the strategies now to try to change conference culture is by discussing and implementing anti-harassment policies, policies on gender balance and other diversity issues. We can all push for that, too. There are links to key reading about this below. Changing culture is not only achieved by

too. There are links to key reading about this below. Changing culture is not only achieved by encouraging individuals to beat odds that are stacked against them. Inclusiveness is a moral and practical imperative. And it requires work all round.

*I look forward to hearing your thoughts, especially about what I've missed, in the comments here, on **Twitter**, or email (hildabast at Gmail).*

**MORE READING:**

***The Science Opinion Games:*** a post I wrote on the conspicuous under-representation of women's voices and opinions in science.

David Shiffman's ***10 Tips for grad students to make the most of a scientific conference*** – and look below for the "comments" button with more great tips.

Christina Richey's ***Tips on anti-harassment policies***, including how to try to reduce your risk (scroll down to slide 5 for those).

The Ada Initiative's advice on **conference anti-harassment policy**.

Chris Bourg on **Stanford University Libraries' policy** on expecting conferences to have anti-harassment policies.

Jennifer Martin's ***Ten Simple Rules to Achieve Conference Speaker Gender Balance***.

Jonathan Eisen's ***Some suggestions for having diverse speakers at meetings***.

Natalie Cooper on using high profile of women at science conferences for ***Bringing perceptions on gender equality in the sciences closer to reality***.

Eric Anthony Grollman's ***Think Like a Drag Queen***.

Ivan Oransky's report of a study (including Janet Stemwedel's thoughts), ***How to Get More Women Speakers at Conferences***.

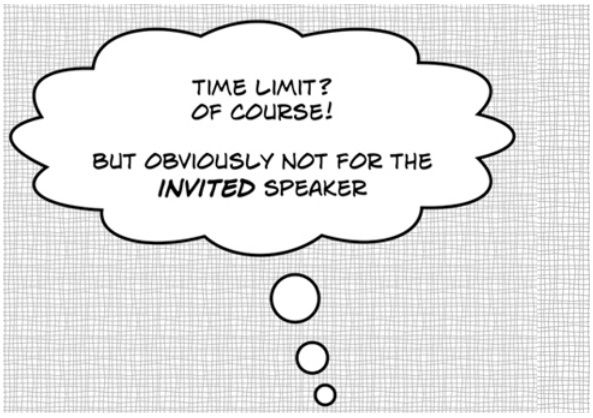
Colin Purrington's detailed guide, ***Designing conference posters***.

***"What about tips for men? Isn't it up to them, not women?"***

That was a response by some to the first version of this post.

The links above – including those in my previous post – cover much of that ground. Critical posts below.

Key to change now is anyone organizing a conference, or a session – including chairing one. Given we need



change, that means policies are needed – on gender balance and diversity, childcare, keeping time, and anti-harassment.

The biggest message for individual men is in this “bonus” cartoon: give up time to women and don’t take more than your fair share – or let others do so. Check out the slide deck below for a slide on measuring your actions: I can’t recommend that highly enough.


Eric Anthony Grollman’s ***101 big and small ways to make a difference in academia***

Leslie Hawthorn’s slide deck ***Checking Your Privilege: A How-To for Hard Things***

Denise Graveline’s **advice on speeches by men**

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***Notes on updates to the original post:***

*Thanks to Fabiana Kubke for the pointer to Hawthorn’s slide deck. Thanks to Lee-Ann Coleman for her comment: it reminded me to include using conference evaluation forms to register your complaints and calls for change. Thanks to Ivan Oransky for pointing out the* ***study of meetings*** *of the American Society of Microbiology. And thanks to Melissa Vaught for sharing Graveline’s advice.*

*The cartoons in this post are my own* ***(CC-NC license)****: more at* **Statistically Funny***.*

*\* The thoughts Hilda Bastian expresses here at* **Absolutely Maybe** *are personal, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Institutes of Health or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.*
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Hilda Bastian

## 10 comments

**Anon**
May 17, 2016 at 8:46 am
As a deeply shy person, I find seminars traumatic – I tend not to go to conferences as I find them overwhelming. I love listening to speakers and their research/ideas. Quite often I have questions, but I won't ask in front of the audience. I also think other women have questions, but don't want to ask – this is particularly obvious as I wait in a line after a session to talk to a presenter. I used to think that I was intimidated by more senior men in the audience asking clever questions. However, I have now sat in lecture theatres were the audience/panel is >90% women and now we just have silence.

I think we need to come up with creative solutions to enable the audience to connect with the speakers. This is not about twitter/facebook/other social media (doesn't work for shy people!).

I was thinking perhaps a webpage that opens purely for the duration of the session, which people can post live questions (1st names used), as the talk is occurring and then these are presented one at a time by the host. This would work well when a panel is in place. It might seem rude to the presenter if people are busy typing away, but people on their phones is the norm these days.

What do people think?

Reply

**Hilda Bastian**
May 19, 2016 at 11:07 am
I think meetings having websites that can do that is a good idea, anon. But the important issue of learning to be less anxious about speaking up remains: it's not just conferences, it's meetings and other key work/science-related situations, too. If silence in groups becomes the accepted norm for particular groups, like women, it's a problem.

Reply

**Oliver Carter**
January 22, 2015 at 5:19 am
This is nice to see. I have been keeping my eye on this for several years now, and it is always nice to see information getting out. I will take note of this and share. I wish to encourage the good work, and thank you. (In Japan it is possibly even harder, with more roadblocks.)

Reply

**Caroline Struthers**
January 21, 2015 at 10:33 pm
Thank you Hilda. Looking forward to hearing more from you on the topic, and to accelerated change!

Reply

**Susan Molchan, MD**
January 21, 2015 at 5:22 pm
Thanks for these. When I made a go of a science career — I'd had no idea, and the trope was -women just need time to progress through the ranks . . . that was 27 yrs ago. Had no idea of the roadblocks, esp when my daughters came onto the scene.
Anyway–accumulating data that organizations are being held back and would do better with a few more female brains thrown in the mix, for ex http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/18/opinion/sunday/why-some-teams-are-smarter-than-others.html
Also re the culture in science in Science! Leslie et al., Jan 16 2015 vol 347:262 : )

Reply

**Hilda Bastian**
January 21, 2015 at 9:42 pm
Me, too, Susan! That said, there are more of us now. We can't let up, really. It'll take even more concerted efforts to make this easier for other women and the other non-dominant groups who face similar hurdles. That said, while ever the context has the scales tipped in favor of a non-diverse dominant group (who that is can vary, from sub-culture to sub-culture), there are particular challenges for professional development. And we're all so different: the more of us who share what we've learned, the more choices other women will be able to see, and find something that fits for them.

Reply

**Caroline Struthers**
January 21, 2015 at 4:35 pm
Thanks so much for this post Hilda. Interesting about Cochrane meetings having improved, albeit slowly. I struggle to imagine then what it used to be like as I have always found it a paralyzingly intimating forum, even in the smallest breakout sessions. The lack of integration (verging on disrespect) of consumer contributors (mainly women) is particularly woeful. I agree with you about the fact that many either don't see or acknowledge the problem. And agree also that solidarity is crucial.

Reply

**Hilda Bastian**
January 21, 2015 at 9:32 pm
Thanks, Caroline. If it helps at all, even many of the people who you think aren't intimidated at Cochrane, actually are, but are hiding it successfully. It's changing too slowly. Partly because people pride themselves on Cochrane being different to other societies, which it can be. But in this respect, it's still lagging behind many other places, although it's masked culturally by some things. Have had a fair bit of correspondence/discussion the last few days, and will no doubt come to this topic in another way soon. (So delighted to see the wonderful things you're doing at Equator, by the way – so very important!)

Reply

**Lee-Ann Coleman**
January 19, 2015 at 6:59 am

Some useful suggestions here and I have followed many of them when at conferences – but you can still be ignored. At a European scientific publishing conference last year I was one of the first with my hand up following a very long all-male panel discussion. I was sitting near the front wearing a bright red jumper – so I wasn't playing the wall flower. Other people (all men) were asked to comment. Many were off topic, more were long-winded. I persisted and eventually an organiser (a man) came over and whispered to me that if they gave me the microphone I would have to make my question short, as they were running out of time. I did get to make my point but by that stage many had left the meeting and it felt like a grudging gesture. Regardless of gender, it is the role of the chair to ensure that those wanting to engage are noticed, asked to speak in turn and given equal time. So I very much agree that conference organisers need to understand, introduce and follow good practice. Then everyone can feel they've had their 'fair go'.

Reply

**Hilda Bastian**
January 19, 2015 at 2:05 pm
Agree, Lee-Ann: we can do everything right, and still not get a chance. I think your comment highlights another point that I raised – that there are cultures and sub-cultures where it is worse. I don't know if it's the sub-culture of that group, or related to a particular country, but this sounds like it might be a good example of that.

I think we need conferences to have policies, with mechanisms for registering complaints. I've added that we should at the very least use conference evaluation forms to complain about experiences like this (with note of thanks to you). It's a long hard road, although it still shocks me that it is. For one scientific organization that I was involved in for many years (the Cochrane Collaboration), the annual conference rotates from country to country, as so many do. It was never good, but there were some particularly egregious years. It was only when the unrelenting annual volume of complaint rose to very high levels that it slowly began to improve. Still has a long way to go, yet many still can't see that. It's why tip #7, solidarity, is the only one in my list that I think is non-negotiable for everyone.

Reply

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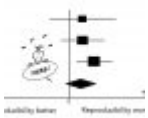

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