

Analyzing the Foundation of Rhetorical  
Gender Inequality through Competitive  
High School Debating During Adolescence  
and the Connection to the Workplace

Megan Gole

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## I. Abstract

This project focuses on how prevalent gender disparity is in competitive debate, and how disparity affects how successful females are in the activity and how females are perceived in comparison to men in professional forums. Debate simulates the transition from academia to workforce to see if attributional rationalization prevalent in the field of law, exists in competitive Lincoln Douglas debate. Previous studies analyzing high school debate tournaments display underrepresentation of females as both competitors and judges at the tournament on the local, state, and national level where women were less likely to win against men and received disproportionately lower speaker points. Implications of these results, both theoretical and practical, are explored in the experimental debates conducted with 22 nursing students at Hunter Business School where debates are conducted and judges analyze the debate, where the two debaters are one randomly chosen male and female who. Judges must attribute characteristics to debaters to describe competence by deciding the winner of the debate round, ranking them on a speaker point scale of 1-30, and choosing one debater to hire at a hypothetical law firm. Judges also attributed 5 performance characteristics to each debater from a bank of gendered adjectives compiled. They also filled out 3 likert scales ranking each debater on their level of professionalism, persuasiveness, and aggressiveness. A correlation between women and being attributed more negative and more gender stereotyped words was found. Similarly, women received significantly lesser speaker points, wins, and were less likely to be hired. Debaters also had to rate their confidence from 1-10 after concluding the debate round, and female debaters ranked themselves as less confident. Likert scale analysis found professionalism as a gender

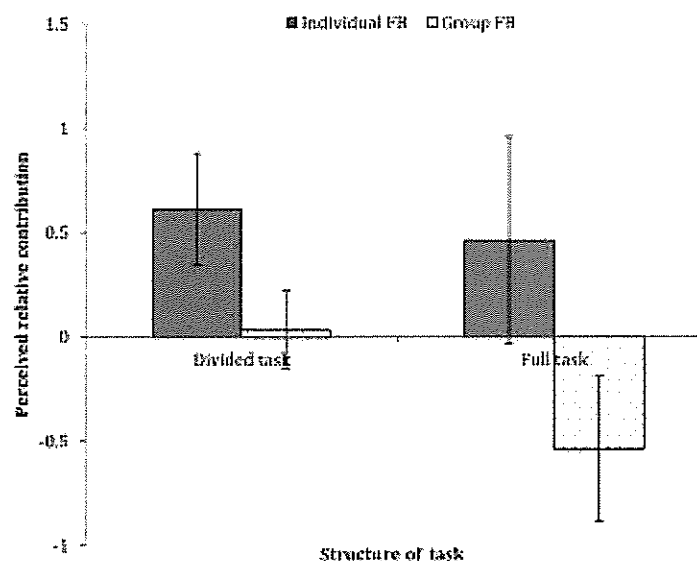
neutral characteristic. While aggressiveness and persuasiveness as both correlated and increase the likelihood of winning for male competitors and were significantly more attributed to men.

## II. Introduction

Despite there being a drastic increase in the number of women in the workforce, women are still decidedly underrepresented in male-dominated fields. These careers are generally those that require the highest level of education, compensate with the highest salaries, secure the most respect, and have the most authority over female-dominated fields (Lyness, 2002; Powell, 1999). These jobs extend from medicine and STEM related jobs, to engineering, law, and governing. When examining why women represent a minority in these roles and achieve less success in these roles, researchers generally pin gender stereotypes as the major culprit of the problem. In fact, biased selection of who is chosen for these jobs is largely attributed to stereotypes being mechanised as justifications to propel male success and domination in these fields (Heilman 2005). As women progress through their educational career, encounters of academic sexism increases, with over 52% of female adolescents noting experiences of sexism in academia and 76% noting athletic sexism in schools. Children are shown to be relatively egalitarian, developing the idea that spaces like professional-oriented extracurricular activities during adolescence develop the same bias against women that exists in the workforce (Leaper 2008). The research reported here inspects a way in which gender stereotypes may give rise to sexism and disproportionate success in High School extracurricular activities that model male dominated professions, namely competitive debate modeling the Law profession. Specifically, I addressed questions of whether, and under what specific conditions women disproportionately get less credit on the national, local and competitive arena of competitive debate.

Evidence continuously shows that stereotypes in male sex-typed activities and careers exists, but our research calls into question both the extent to which it exists in High School competitive debate, and what mechanisms allow its existence to be acceptable (Dodge 1995;

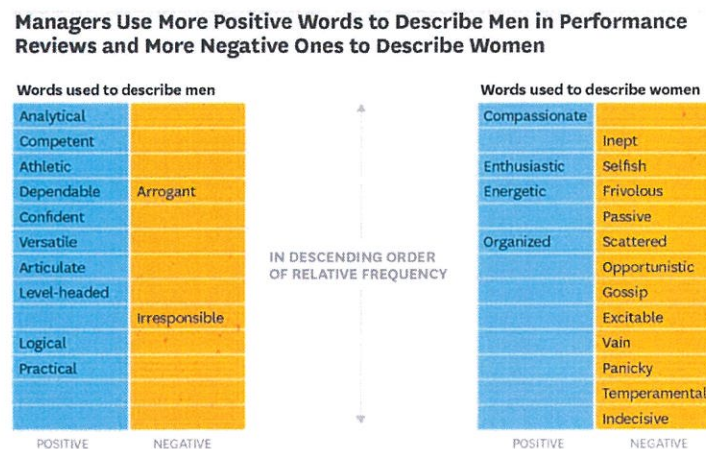
Heilman 1995; Heilman 1989; Schein, 2001). Empirics have shown that females are attributed as caring and passive, but not forceful and driven by achievements. By defining women as being deficient of these personality traits, assumptions are reinforced that women are not only unfit for the jobs, but are also losing arguments when in a competitive debate oriented sphere (Bakan, 1966; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001). This model is referred to as the “Lack of Fit” (Heilman 2005) and has largely impacted a female’s ability to attain equity in high school competitive academia, then extending to male-dominated fields. Characteristics of passive nature enforce a mentality that women are unfit as lawyers, identifying males’ arguments as of higher quality and more worth in the courtroom.



*Figure 1: Shows how women are perceived to have contributed in a group setting in a workplace environment. In both the divided task between the members and doing the full task as a group, women are perceptually seen as less contributive, even when in both situations they are doing the same work as their male group member counterpart. Source: Haynes and Heilman, Women's Attributional Rationalization of Their Contribution to Successful Joint Work Outcomes, 2013*

Subjectivity as a result of male domination in the role of performance evaluators helps to propel these expectations and the rationalization of using ‘passive’ and ‘caring’ attributes to

demoralize women in male-dominated activities, thus creating worse evaluations of these women. When this ambiguity exists, research shows descriptions of women being identified as having less merit (Heilman, 1995; & Heilman 2004; Nieva & Gutek, 1980). The general resulting trend, which we call attributional rationalization, is consistent with the tendency to avoid attributing positive outcomes and qualities of success to a woman's ability in professional spheres (Deaux & Emswiller, 1974; see Swim & Sanna, 1996, for a meta-analysis).



*Figure 2: Depicts the different gendered stereotypical adjectives used in describing a male's as opposed to a female's performance. Female characteristics that are positive focus on empathy and communal traits whereas male positive traits focus on being a leader or confident. Male negative traits focus on being too confident, whereas females differ in that their adjectives describe deficiencies in character*

In the following study, I investigate how female and male debaters at competitions are evaluated in terms of competence, argument intelligence, and success. Female success is compared to male success through many different performance evaluators. I sought to test the validity of the general proposition that female debater's performance effectiveness is generally valued more negatively than that of males competing under the same conditions in the activity.

Experimental debates were conducted at the Hunter Business School where a multitude of variables were tested. The subjects of the study were 22 Nursing Students at the Nursing School at Hunter Business School in a Clinical Course about drug administration and medical

care responses. In each round a randomly chosen male debated a randomly chosen female over the topic of whether or not medical marijuana should be legal in the United States. Speaking ability, professionalism, persuasiveness, and aggressiveness, and ability to be hired in a law firm were all analyzed to compare gender differences as perceived by the judges of the rounds.

Hypothesis 2: In a mixed-sex competitive simulated debate, female debaters will lose a significant number of the rounds and be rated as lesser speakers, largely being attributed to the use of attributional rationalization and gender stereotypes to minimize the success of the female in the debate round, even if presentation outcomes were equivalent.

### III. Methods

#### *Design*

For the experimental debates where students advocated for or against medical marijuana legislation and restrictions, students in the Hunter Business School were subjects competing in debates with one male and one female opponent, with the judges, or evaluators of the rounds consisting of a panel of again a member of each gender. The topic of discourse was whether medical marijuana should be legal in the United States, with each debater randomly being attributed either the affirmative side, being for the issue, or negative side, being against the issue. Judges and debaters were randomly chosen for each round and a participant could participate in more than one round by switching roles from judge to debater or vice versa, but could not participate in more than one round in a row. Each round consists of an affirmative prepared case followed by a cross questioning session, then a prepared negative case and response, another cross questioning, and one more rebuttal speech for each side. Each debate round was a total of 6 minutes long, where judges were then given a period of time to fill out their response sheets that they handed in anonymously into a folder for the given round they were observing. Judges were



then asked to decide the winner of the round, rate each debater's speaking ability from 1 to 30, choose one of the debaters to hire if they were the employer at a law firm, and fill out three likert scales that rate how aggressive, professional, and persuasive each debater was ranging from strongly disagreeing if they could not be attributed as each of these characteristics to strongly agreeing that the debater could be characterized using the attribute. Similarly, from a bank of gender stereotyped terms (Heilman 2005) found to be used in the workforce to either praise or critique the work of employees, judges were to pick 5 of the attributes in the bank for each debater. Neutral adjectives were also placed in the bank to have a basis of control when comparing how critiques and appraisals varied when comparing male and female debate performance. Finally, at the conclusion of each round, debaters themselves were also asked to respond to how confident they felt in their performance at the end of the debate from a scale of 1 to 10. With a series of 35 debate rounds, gender differences in performance and perception towards female debaters in positions of advocacy were analyzed.

### *Procedure*

35 debate rounds were conducted to acquire the results of the tournament and how the judges perceived and evaluated the debaters. There were more females in the class of participants than males. All subjects in the study received the same materials to prepare from and each opponent in the debate was provided with equally credible and logical references and arguments of which to present in the debate. This was meant to control any aspects that may bias any one side of the debate and lead to only those of say affirming the resolution of legalizing medical marijuana to win debates. Similarly, participants were involved in a session of preparation on the topic beforehand that would be typical of a debate tournament where debaters spend time preparing either cases or on the literature surrounding the topic. Doing so would allow any differences that are attributed to wins and losses of the debaters to be a result of judge perception

and response to their personal biases about things like male-gendered stereotypes of aggressiveness, competence, and confidence. During the debate round, only the debaters and the judges remained in the classroom so as to not create stress for the debaters when speaking and not to have outside influence on the judges by their classmates. After the debate round, judges received 5 minutes to fill out their response sheet where they then submitted it to a folder in the front of the room for the given round.

### *Dependent Measures*

When considering the second part of the study, dependent measures were divided into two categories, tangible differences in success (wins and losses) and rhetoric and stereotypes used to fuel these wins and losses. The first variable was measured through comparison of how often men and women won and lost rounds, average speaking rating given to each debater, and confidence rating of each debater by gender. The second variable was measured through likert scales that analyzed professionalism, aggressiveness, and persuasiveness to see how men and women were seen on the basis of presenting these traits. Finally, a test where judges attributed terms to describe the debaters' abilities were used and there was an analysis on how often positive and negative adjectives were used to describe male and female performance. This allowed an analysis behind biases present in academia and furthermore in the workforce when judges decided which debater they would hire if they hypothetically owned a law firm. Analysis to whether stereotypical language was used to diminish the performance of females was crucial to understanding why losses were justified and how attributional rationalization has been able to take root in work environments.

## IV. Results

### *Experimental Debates*

#### *Logistics*

<u>Debater</u> <u>Confidence:</u>	<u>Speaker Points:</u>	<u>Wins and Losses:</u>	<u>Workplace</u> <u>Correlation:</u>
$\mu_x = 9$	$\mu_x = 27.11764$	E = 17 wins per gender	E = 17 hired per gender
$\mu_v = 2.941$	$\mu_v = 19.64705$	N = 34 rounds	N = 22 debaters
$p = 4.33895 \times 10^{-14}$	$p = 3.648575 \times 10^{-10}$	$O_x = 29$ male wins	$O_x =$ male hires
		$O_v = 5$ female wins	$O_v =$ female hires
		$\chi^2 = 3.84145$	$\chi^2 = 3.84145$
		$16.941 > 3.84145$	$11.7647 > 3.84145$
<i>Figure 6a: Let x be the male population and y be the female population of debaters. Shows the average self reported confidence by female and male debaters, females are significantly less confident than males.</i>	<i>Figure 6b: Let x be the male population and y be the female population of debaters. Shows the average speaker points given to male and female debaters in all rounds, with females having a significantly lower speaker evaluation by judges</i>	<i>Figure 6c: Males won a significantly greater number of rounds against females where <math>p &lt; 0.05</math>.</i>	<i>Figure 6d: Males were hired by judges significantly more than females as lawyers in the judge's hypothetical law firm where <math>p &lt; 0.05</math>.</i>

The results found overarchingly that men disproportionately won rounds, with the majority of male judges voting for men in all circumstances and females voting slightly more for males, however not in a significant way. This difference was measured using a Chi Squared Hypothesis Test that found a p-value less than 0.001, making the results significant. Similarly, when analyzing speaker point rating out of 30, men were statistically significantly receiving higher scores when using a Two Sample T-Test that again found a p-value of less than 0.001. The average speaker point value for women was almost 10 points below the average of that of men. Similarly, when judges were asked to hire one debater as a lawyer in each round in their hypothetical law firm, results were analyzed using a Chi Squared Test that again found that men were significantly more chosen to be hired than women, with the p-value less than 0.001. In the

final test where debaters rated their confidence from 1 to 10, women were found to have significantly lower confidence than men in their abilities and performance as per the Two Sample T-Test that found a p-value less than 0.05, with all data for all 4 variables being recorded in the chart above. It is important to emphasize that debaters are reading controlled arguments and evidence in their speeches where neither side is being given better resources to read, showing once again that the male preference in these results is simply due to bias and perception of the judges about more subjective characteristics of the individuals like their perceived confidence or confidence rather than the logic of the argument presented.

### *Likert Scale Analysis*

When describing each debater in each round, judges had to rate them on a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree on whether the given individual had the specific characteristics. A likert scale was conducted for each of the following characteristics: aggressiveness, professionalism, and persuasiveness. Professionalism is used as a control in that it was found as lacking gender stereotypes behind it or having a significantly greater usage to favor one gender over the other. The results of each sub-characteristic were individually analyzed to compare the ratings for each gender under that characteristic using Chi Squared Analysis. As expected, professionalism did not show a statistically significant average rating between men and women, again revealing that there is a baseline when entering the round that both debaters were found as equally professional and any factors attributing to wins and losses were due to biases based on stereotypes rooted in professional spaces. Understanding this, both aggressiveness and persuasiveness were statistically significant variables with p-values less than or equal to 0.05 which showed there was a clear difference in men being perceived as both more aggressive, while simultaneously being more persuasive.

<b><u>Aggressiveness:</u></b>	<b><u>Professionalism:</u></b>	<b><u>Persuasiveness:</u></b>
$\chi^2 = 10.5$	$\chi^2 = 10.5$	$\chi^2 = 9.1238$
$p = 0.0327$	$p = 0.18762$	$p = .05$

There was a correlation found between being aggressive and being the most persuasive debater, and thus winning the debate round throughout the tournament. Where aggressive is clearly found as having a negative connotation, generally in the study this propelled greater outcomes for male debaters. In the following rhetorical analysis section of the study, men identified as aggressive or forceful, were simultaneously being described as intelligent and confident more likely than women who were disproportionately described as ‘whiny’ when judges strongly agreed that they were aggressive. This proof of existence of attributional rationalization shows that even though a word like aggressive was disproportionately strongly agreed to describe male debaters, it coincided with them receiving positive outcomes because of it. When women were less often described as aggressive, the probability of also having the judge strongly agree that they were persuasive was a fraction of the latter, as compared to males who were found to have a correlation between their aggression and their persuasiveness.

### *Rhetoric Analysis*

When asked to attribute 5 adjectives to each debater from a bank of terms describing performance in professional settings that involve discourse, the results were astounding: (the adjectives came from a bank of terms that were on a scale of how frequently they were used to describe different genders’ behaviors in both positive and negative connotations. The extremes of this scale show terms that were much more significantly used with describing one gender (i.e.

a positive term on the female extreme was compassionate and enthusiastic; a negative term on the male extreme was arrogant).

Frequency of Association of Negative Stereotyped Words to Gender

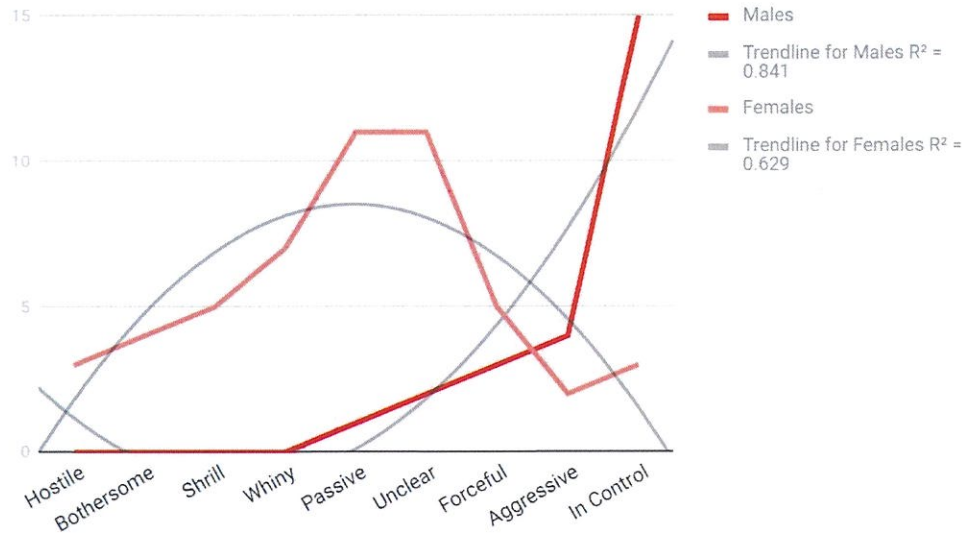
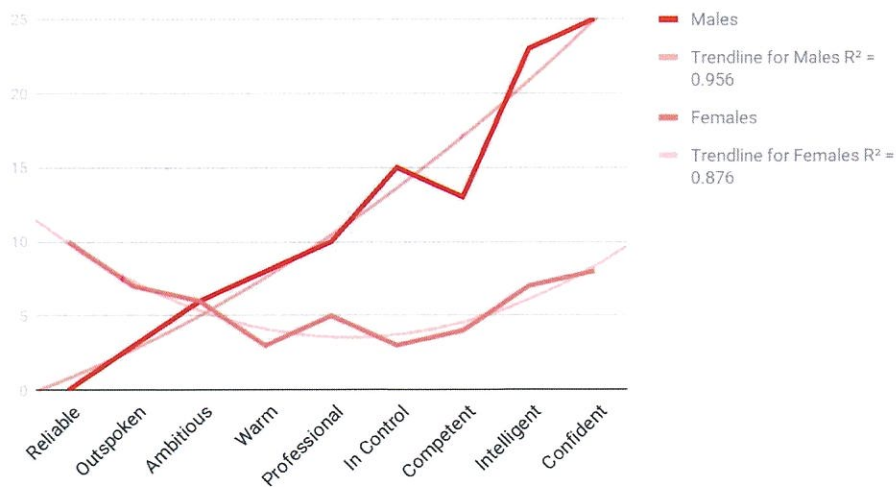


Figure 7: Looks at the correlation of negative adjectives to describe performance to gender. Four female stereotyped words are chosen in descending order of correlation to that gender from left to right and four male stereotyped words are chosen in increasing correlation to males. These adjectives are attributed to debaters by judges based on their performance. One neutral positive word is also in the center of the graph.

Frequency of Association of Positive Stereotyped Words to Gender



*Figure 8: Looks at the correlation of positive adjectives to describe performance to gender. Four female stereotyped words are chosen in descending order of correlation to that gender from left to right and four male stereotyped words are chosen in increasing correlation to males. These adjectives are prescribed to debaters by judges based on their performance. One neutral positive word is also in the center of the graph.*

It was clear to see overall that men were more likely to receive positive adjectives, while when women received positive adjectives, for the most part, they were descriptions of having communal or nurturing characteristics as opposed to receiving characteristics that would be more likely to be associated with a win. Similarly, these characteristics were not what it took to win the debate, as assertion and perceived dominance was missing by women but was correlated to persuasiveness for men. Women were more likely to receive negative comments, and also a greater variety of negative comments with some no longer commenting on their persuasiveness or presentation in the debating but rather entering into the more personal, using adjectives like “bothersome” and “shrill.” In comparison, men were not described as either of these characteristics even once throughout the entirety of all 34 debate rounds. However, when men did receive negative comments, they largely ranged from words like forceful and aggressive, again characteristics attributed to leaders that are far less negative than the ones attributed to females as shown in the chart above. Similarly, as men disproportionately won rounds and were seen as both more persuasive and simultaneously aggressive in the likert scale model, it was these perceived characteristics that won them the round.

## V. Discussion

Overall, it was clear to see that women significantly lost more rounds than men and received significantly lower speaker point scores, meaning their presentation skills were lesser than that of males according to the judges. This allowed the rest of the data to explore why judges may have these beliefs about the debate round and the basis upon the rationalization of who was the better speaker, who won, and most importantly - who they would hire. The solution

to why this was occurring arose in looking at how male judges were voting, clearly significantly more for male debaters. Female debaters too were slightly more likely to vote for male debaters, but not in a statistically significant way. This highlighted that simply having an equal number of each gender of judge was not enough to fix problems of workplace and academic sexism, internal reform of mentality had to be shifted. There was a clear rooting of gender stereotypes infiltrating into the debate arena where for men they were used to praise arrogant behavior and award confidence but for women similar, however less common, confidence was idealized as something more negative, most frequently identified by judges as “bothersome”, “shrill”, or “whiny” in the rhetorical analysis tests. The likert scale tests reaffirmed these results in showing a correlation between aggression and persuasiveness among men where confidence, even when bordering arrogance, was promoted as judges disproportionately rewarded this sort of behavior. Female stereotypes were oriented in punishing this same sort of confidence, and even though logistically men and women performed similarly on the basis of their speeches being controlled, women were still consistently on average much less confident than men. The challenge ahead is to not only solve male bias, but to discuss this perception and unfair devaluation of some but celebration of others exhibiting similar performances. In doing so and creating better environments for females, there is an avenue for also raising female confidence and propelling a future where women can assert their voices in the workforce and academia.

## VI. Conclusion

In the simulated debates, women were overall on average much less confident than males in rounds against a member of the opposite gender. Women seen as lesser speakers and given the loss more often by judges too, despite reading the same arguments as a male in a previous round who in turn won the previous round. Although both debaters both enter the debate equally as professionals, ingrained stereotypes formed by societal pressures led to identification of women



as “whiny” or “shrill” when performing the same tasks as men, the phenomenon we referred to as attributional rationalization. There is a perceived correlation in being a male and being more persuasive and aggressive than women who were more likely to be seen as passive and warm in the debate rounds according to judges. Although these are not bad characteristics to have, ultimately the driving force for success (whether in winning the round or being chosen as the hypothetical hire) was ultimately a sense of confidence and bravado that truly was not connected to intelligence level, as again the articles, contentions, and logic of each debater’s presentation was controlled to be equally valid. In furthering female success in these competitive professional environments, whether it be academic debate as early as high school or trying to find a voice in politics or business, a combination of empowering women to feel more confident, while more importantly addressing and confronting the “judges” outside these debate rounds in the workforce and academia when they are using stereotypes to diminish the abilities of a female are both needed.

## VII. Future Research

Change is more likely to occur when women are given a way to respond to this phenomenon, all while including men in the process. Primarily, discussions about these biases can serve great importance to solving the issue of stereotypical rhetoric used to devalue female work in professional environments. After the conclusion of the study, judges were finally informed of the actual motive of the study in analyzing gendered sexism and a discussion was conducted about the use of terms like “whiny” and “bothersome” to describe women. What was remarkable was that overarchingly men were the ones describing women using this stereotypical language, but in the succeeding discussion most identified themselves as having a sense of believing in gender equality and had subconsciously identified men as the more confident debater and thus the most successful one. Having discourse about how women disproportionately

felt much less confident in their skills and performance after the debate also helped spark a conversation about where this insecurity may stem from and it all boiled down to a simple factor, devaluation from those in power in the past. It would not be fair to place the blame solely on men as both sides of this debate, both male and female opponents have been ingrained in patriarchal notions that enforce these stereotypes and this insecurity. However, where growth can occur is creating a space where these conversations are accepted and working with men to point out these implicit biases that everyone has. It is clear to see that women have found a place at the table in places like academic debates in high school, to law firms, all the way to public office with the recent growth in diversity in the 2018 Midterm Election, but now the goal is to discuss the stereotypes that created obstacles in coalition with men and creating a brighter future. If these debates were simulated after a discussion into the background of biases and the use of rhetoric to minimize the voice of women, there is a possibility that the outcome may have been different, and this should be studied in the future. Oftentimes, men do not even know they hold these biases and future research can be used to confront and dismantle them and see the outcome of these discussions on the propagation of sexism.

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