Gender Imbalance at Brain Stimulation Conferences: We Have a Problem and It is Everyone’s Problem

Dear Editor:

In 2015 the First International Brain Stimulation Conference was held in Singapore and from a total of 39 invited speakers/demonstrators 2 were female. In Germany at the recent 6th International Conference on Transcranial Brain Stimulation, 7–10 September 2016, of the 55 invited speakers 9 were female. The Second International Brain Stimulation Conference is due to be held in Spain from the 5–8 of March 2017 and, according to the preliminary program, will have an all-male invited speaker line up (plenaries and workshop demonstrators; \( n = 17 \)). The data speak for themselves (Fig. 1). These are egregious gender imbalances at the largest international conferences for our discipline, presumably meetings that should be most representative of the field in which we work.

These imbalances have far reaching impacts, both tangible and intangible. Speaking invitations are critical for career advancement. They assist in the development of an international profile and collaborative research, thus strengthening applications for promotion, grants and awards. Not inviting female speakers to conferences has a detrimental effect on their careers. There is also a strong sense of exclusion that develops when, as a female brain stimulation researcher, you sit in the audience at your discipline’s largest conferences and watch invited presentation after invited presentation without female representation. You ultimately see no place, or pathway, for yourself within the field because of your gender. The high rate of loss of female scientists throughout the mid-to-senior career stages is a certainly a complex issue [1], but the persistence of gender imbalance at conferences, and its consequences, are contributory.

Gender balance is important, not as a PR issue, but as part of a fundamental tenet of good science: diversity. Diversity of ideas in research is critical for scientific advancement, which is even more important for a relatively young discipline like brain stimulation. Restricting the input of potentially half of the field at these conferences will invariably reduce the potential breadth and novelty of ideas presented – and that is everyone’s problem.

Achieving speaker gender balance at conferences is not difficult. Adhering to the recently published ‘Ten simple rules to achieve conference gender balance’ is a great place to start [2]. Indeed, following many of these suggestions for the 2013 and 2016 Australasian Brain Stimulation Meeting we were able to achieve 42.86 and 44.82% invited female speakers respectively (Fig. 1). Most important is the development of a visible speaker policy – a commitment to a gender balance that reflects the field as a whole. In order to achieve this the development and use of a database is strongly recommended (i.e. [3]). Womeninbrainstim.com is a database site, launching soon, that will allow female brain stimulation researchers to register their details, research interests and achievements. This open and searchable database aims to help conference organisers to identify appropriately qualified female speakers, as well as promoting female candidates for advisory groups, committees, editorial boards etc.

The brain stimulation research community has a plethora of talented male and female scientists. Our conferences need to reflect that.

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References

Figure 1. Gender Split of invited speakers from (top) two recent and one upcoming international brain stimulation conferences and (bottom) two recent Australasian brain stimulation conferences. Data taken from conferences’ published programmes.