

Still Missing: The Women Wonks

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In August 2018, Mexico's Ministry of Health convened a high-profile conference on the benefits of breastfeeding. It was part of a long-standing effort to boost the nation's breastfeeding rate, among the lowest in Latin America. But what drew the most attention was a photo of the keynote panel: six dour men—presumably incapable of lactating themselves—arrayed under a banner reading “Uniendo esfuerzos por la Lactancia Maternal,” Spanish for “Joining Forces for Breastfeeding.” The photo sparked viral outrage on social media and instantly established the event as a prime example of all-male panels—also known as “manels,” “colloqui-hims,” or “him-posiums.”

I first wrote about the preponderance of testosterone at think tank panels and policy events—particularly in Washington—in a 2012 *Washington Monthly* article titled “Where Are the Women Wonks?” The imbalance is about more than appearances. “Without greater representation from women, maybe it's not such a surprise that so many of the policy debates in Washington seem to be missing half the picture,” I wrote at the time.

When the piece came out, I was thrilled to hear it was generating greater than average buzz for a *Washington Monthly* article. But, as it turned out, it wasn't my sparkling prose drawing eyeballs. The *Monthly*, whose staff I had yet to join, had chosen to illustrate the piece with a stock photo of a lush, bespectacled beauty with bedroom hair, the word “THINK” tattooed on a skimpy white tank top straining to contain her breasts. (It's a “think” tank, get it?) She's the embodiment of the brainy dream babe D.C. policy dorks fantasize finding in the halls of some obscure federal agency.

Since centerfolds are not the *Monthly*'s typical fare, the photo naturally went viral.

“The Washington Monthly's Inner Lecher Finally Breaks Free” was the headline of a post by *Monthly* alum Kevin Drum in *Mother Jones*. “It's sort of like finding a provocative picture illustrating the minutes of the latest Federal Reserve meeting,” he marveled. He barely mentioned the substance of the article. Nor was he the only one among the commentariat to give full attention to the woman wearing a think tank rather than to the piece about the women working at them.

Given that reaction, perhaps we shouldn't be shocked that the manel is still alive and well—a symptom of persistent gender inequality among the ranks of the think tanks that drive much of the policy conversation in Washington, D.C. Of course, there has been some progress. As a longtime veteran of the think tank world who has attended and organized countless convenings (sometimes even getting to speak), I'll concede some greater sensitivity toward gender balance at public events. But that too often amounts to little more than a token woman serving in a

subordinate role to the male headliner (often as the moderator), or a junior female staffer transparently added to the roster at the last minute.

You don't have to take my word for it. Anecdotes like these are now supported by data, which is one positive development since my original essay. Manels aren't just in our heads—they're real.

In the realm of foreign policy, for example, Federiga Bindi and Mimosa Giamanco of the Institute of Women's Policy Research analyzed 967 events hosted in 2018 by twenty of D.C.'s most prestigious think tanks, including the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Aspen Institute, and the Brookings Institution. They found that women made up just 34 percent of the speakers at these events and that fully 27 percent of panels had no women at all. Predictably, conservative think tanks such as Cato and the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) were the least balanced. At Cato, for instance, 60 percent of foreign policy event lineups were all-male.

This lopsidedness isn't confined to panels—it's also reflected in the ranks of experts at think tanks. At Brookings, for instance, only 105 of the 407 "experts" identified on the organization's website as of September 2019 are women. New America is an exception—with women making up about half of all "fellows"—while the Center for American Progress, another liberal organization, is not too far behind. Again, conservative think tanks are the worst offenders. At AEI, for instance, fewer than a quarter of "scholars" are women, while Cato boasts just five female "policy scholars" out of sixty-seven, none of whom have "senior" in their title.

So to some degree, the manel phenomenon reflects broader staffing imbalances. But it also poses a more specific career obstacle to women in the policy world. Unlike normal jobs, where success is measured by the number of cars sold, patients cured, or widgets assembled on the line, "success" in the D.C. policy community is much harder to quantify. Speaking invitations become a proxy for influence and validation of expertise.

"Visibility is everything," said Federiga Bindi, who conducted the manel research on foreign policy events. "The only indicator of whether you're successful or not is how many times you are invited to speak."

Manels are just as bad for audiences as for the excluded female scholars. Different voices bring different perspectives and new ideas. And by this, I don't just mean a "woman's perspective" on "women's issues." Nobody invites a man to speak in order to get a "man's perspective" on national security or labor economics. Expertise is expertise, and there is no reason to believe that talent, intelligence, and scholarly rigor aren't evenly distributed among men and women.

The good news is that women are fighting back. Chantal de Jonge Oudraat, president of Women in International Security, coauthored a 2018 "gender scorecard" of the top D.C. think tanks working in national security and international affairs to highlight the gender disparities in the leadership, governing boards, and staff at these institutions. There's also GenderAvenger, an organization solely dedicated to bringing more gender equity to panels and conferences. Since its launch in 2013 by veteran Democratic organizer and feminist Gina Glantz, GenderAvenger has spearheaded social media and email campaigns—let's call it "manel shaming"—against high-profile conferences that are particularly imbalanced.

Among its targets were the 2019 National Conference of State Legislatures' annual convening ("The keynoters were six men and Dolly Parton," said Glantz) and the Consumer Electronics

Show, widely considered to be the world's largest trade show. "We went after them in 2016, 2017, and 2018—and then, lo and behold, in 2019, they had great balance," Glantz said.

The group also urges men to boycott participating in panels themselves. Among the prominent men to "take the pledge" is National Institutes of Health director Francis Collins, who issued a June 2019 statement declaring that "it is time to end the tradition in science of all-male speaking panels" and indicating that he would "decline to take part" in conferences where "attention to inclusiveness is not evident in the agenda."

"My hope is for conference organizers to say, 'I don't want to be Gender-Avengered,'" says Glantz.

I, for one, will look forward to that day.