

Why are there so few women speakers at seafood conferences?

The ratio of male-to-female presenters at seafood conferences varies according to the professional population targeted, the process used to select speakers, and the profile of the organizers. In scientific or technical gatherings where candidates are selected on the basis of abstracts submitted and where quality is the number one criteria and the population invited to apply is well balanced, the % of female speakers is usually relatively high. Meetings organized by international public institutions, quite sensitive to this issue, are generally gender balanced. The situation in Industry conferences is dramatically different. According to our observations in 2017 and early 2018, it ranges from 0% to 40%.

The paucity of women presenting at industry conferences and events may not be intentional but a result of implicit bias. When signaling the low number of women to business conferences' organizers, we received explanations of many kinds. The most incredulous and condescending justification is "competence is our first criteria¹". This is based on the assumption that women are less capable than men.

"The lack of expert women is a myth"

The most honest yet lazy was "We don't know any women speakers". This is probably true that organizers (men, most of the time) don't have many female names in their notebook. But this doesn't mean that competent women speakers do not exist. The lack of expert women is a myth. It has been said in several circumstances that the demographic of top seafood professionals is very unbalanced, but here we are talking about a handful of persons. It would take a few calls to solve the problem if really it had been one for organizers. Let us recall that last year over 100 high profile women attended the women in seafood seminar organized by Intrafish in Seattle in June 2017.

Another interesting justification we were given: "We only invite CEOs for higher attractiveness". This is fair enough from a commercial viewpoint to better sell the

¹ All the quotes are authentic



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event. In several cases when this CEO story was given to us, it turned out that medium range professionals were in fact included in the speakers' list.

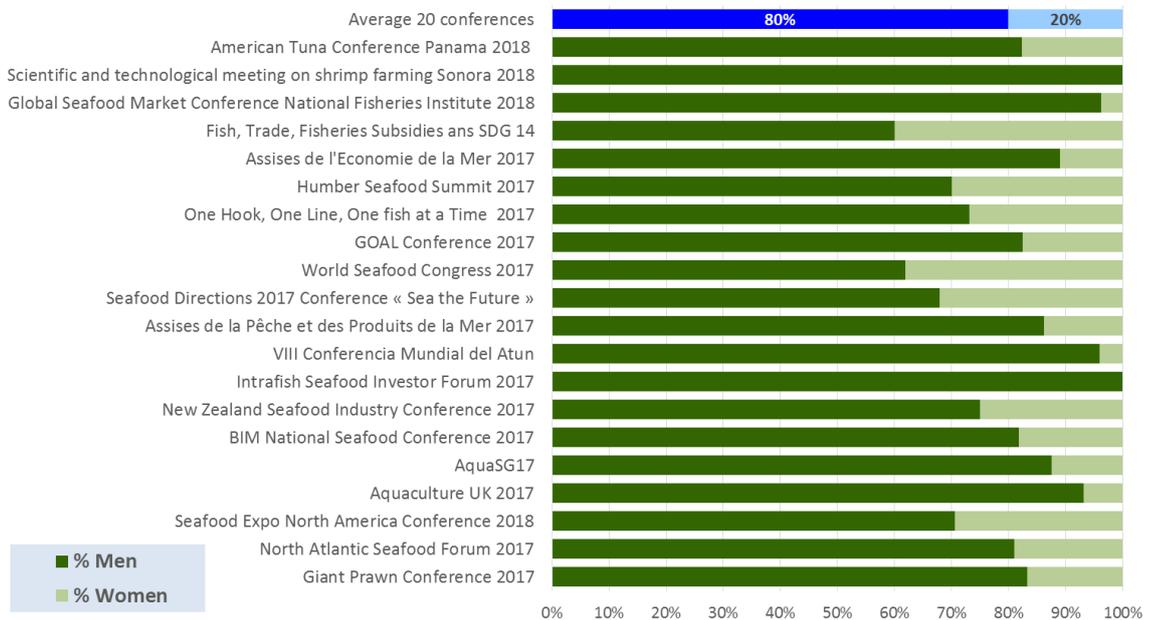
When we asked the organizer of a fish canning industry conference why they did not invite any female speakers, they explained awkwardly that this industry is dominated by female workforce, meaning that complaint was misplaced. In fact, this comment illustrates clearly the "sticky floor and glass ceiling" syndrome in this industry where women are over-represented in low paid, low skilled roles in fish processing and canning and are rarely seen in the more valued roles, such as senior management or conference presenters.

Over the past years, we have seen a tiny improvement. This is probably the combined result of the increased number of female experts and the repeated alerts denouncing the excessive gender inequities which have typified the seafood industry.

The graph below reports the sex ratio of speakers in international seafood related conferences, as mentioned on programmes.

Over the past 12 months across the 20 conferences analysed out of a total of 820 speakers, only 20% were women. The percentage of female keynote speakers is much lower.

Seafood Conferences' speakers by sex



Source: WSI 2018



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Time to break the vicious circle of invisibility: Women need to be seen and heard at conferences

Being invited to speak at a professional event helps to credentialise the expertise of the speaker. It also frequently catches the attention of journalists who will often then reach out to such “experts” seeking an opinion. Quotes or mentions in professional magazines in turn increases professional standing. In our industry, women are far less represented than men as technical or expert commentators in the industry press. Being visible at one conference calls for invitations to others. Some male professionals in the seafood industry cumulate presentations at over 7 or 8 major events a year. Companies feel good about doing business with a person that has been celebrated by their peers and requested to express publicly their opinions. This again increases the value of the speaker.

“It is time for organisers of seafood events to be intentional and more creative.”

The absence of women as top speakers may not be intentional but the result of unconscious bias. But the result is a cycle of exclusion of women in visible roles at industry events and in the media. Organisers and journalist tend to take the easy way out asking those that they know or have heard about for speaking opportunities or interviews. They may consider deep in their subconscious that women are less legitimate, less competent. It is time to break these prejudices. And when a top woman declines an invitation, they should not stop there. It is time for organisers of seafood event to be intentional and more creative.