



Entrepreneur Ms Roya Mahboob, from Afghanistan, on stage during the Worldwebforum 2019 in Zurich, Switzerland (Credit: Oliver Michael Maier, Worldwebforum)

# MORE WOMEN NEEDED AT THE SPEAKER'S PODIUM

In contrast to many other industries, the proportion of women employee in the international meetings- and conference-sector has traditionally been high. There is a certain logic to it: women are great organisers, many of them are patient (a crucial value in the event planning), and women are comfortable in the service-sector and in the hospitality-industries.

But that does not automatically mean, that there are equal employment- and career- opportunities for both genders. The issue is highly political, some countries are more advanced than others. The MICE-industry, eventually,

started to address the topic too. In fact, at Frankfurt's IMEX tradeshow, there is an annual forum named «She Means Business», and it covers issues such as gender equality and emancipation.

## No more than ten percent

An inequality is also visible on the lists of lecturers and presenters at conferences and symposiums. Meeting planners yet must learn to initiate and propose a more relevant proportion of women. At events in Europe, usually only about ten percent of the speakers are women.

One of the reasons why events feature

such a small number of female presenters, is the fact that the pools of academic professors and corporate board members both serve as perfect source for potential speakers. Program directors appreciate the wisdom and experience of those people who serve to others: Professors as lecturer to students, and Board Members as coach and leader to their management team. Both target groups try to embrace the «whole picture», think about strategy and reflect on the future and how to tackle it. Thus, they are perfect sources for meetings and events.

## Speaker Pools are male dominated

The problem is, if one searches in those pools of professors and board members, the percentage of women there is usually unequal. At the University of Zurich, Switzerland, for example, the share of female professors is presently at 23 percent, and the recent statement of the University Board, that they aim to increase that share to 25 Percent, does not really change much.

German Universities have tried to achieve more equality; they employ women officers and take part in women's support programs. Yet, although roughly half of all graduates are female in that country, like in Switzerland, only every fourth professorship in Germany is held by a woman. There are exceptions, such as the 'Freie Universität Berlin' with an impressive 37.8 percent of female professors. The Northern Universities in Berlin, Hamburg and Bremen have good quotes, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Saarland and in the rather conservative State of Bavaria are at the bottom of the list. A recent study suggests that when it comes to recruiting young researchers, women are considered less often than men. And that the still dominant «world of men» tends to promote more men to new appointments.

This imbalance is even more evident in the Corporate World. The recent Swiss «Schilling Report» presented the following finding: In 2018 the proportion of women among Swiss Stock Corporations rose from 19 to 21 percent, very obviously far too low.

### At least 1 in 4

In consequence, program planers, or the speaking bureaus they use, do search for potential speakers in the academic or corporate worlds. But there, only about 20 to 25 percent are female. So, the

mathematical chance to invite a women to a Speakers Desk is limited by a ratio of 1 to 5. Now, if the meetings industry would at least use that proportion, twenty Percent of all speakers and panellist would be female. But that's not what is happening today. In fact, across most industries, the percentage of women speakers and women panellist at international conferences or symposiums is most of the time at a level of about ten percent. Plus, often, women take the role of «decorating and/or entertaining moderators». Lovely for the greetings and awards, but not respectable when it comes to educational or academical content.

Analyses in the USA also reveal the gender-specific differences. One report found, for example, that at fifty US research institutions, male speakers gave twice as many colloquium lectures as women. That study identified a form of discrimination, against which female scientists are increasingly objecting. Triggered by similar experiences, in Switzerland, the industry-specific hashtag «#manel» becomes more and more popular. It stands for «male panel», meaning speaker panels that consist exclusively of men. Not really a compliment.

### New demand

Meeting planners must try to search, propose and mandate more women to panels or as keynote lecturers. Even if, maybe, women must be convinced a bit more than men, to step in front of an audience. If equality is not possible on a fifty/fifty-balance, women speakers should at least, for now, represent a minimum of 25 percent. 25, not 10. As an immediate objective, this means one speaker in four should be a women. One can achieve this by applying an understanding of diversity, an understanding that women can contribute very differently, and

successfully too, and that not all good speakers have to come from the list of «tall, white and successful men».

It's a learning experience. A young Swiss politician, the National Councillor Cédric Wermuth, recently declared: «I only take part in public discussions and conferences, when there is a women on the podium».

The event industry will have to respond to this demand.

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