



OVERVIEW

**THE WOMEN'S PROFESSIONAL
CONFERENCE EXPERIENCE
& IMPACT STUDY**

EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF
PROFESSIONAL CONFERENCES
ON WOMEN'S CAREERS

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PURPOSE

Professional conferences play a major role throughout one's career with respect to gender equity; they are a crucial source of networking, learning, and training opportunities across every professional field. Limited research shows that representation on conference stages is not only disproportionately male, but women generally receive less speaking time to present their work.¹ Simultaneously, there appear to be more women-only professional conferences taking place annually across the nation, yet there has never been a study to evaluate their impact on individual women and their careers, the economic effect that they have on the events industry, and so forth. Very little data has been collected to understand women's experiences at conferences in general, as we found only three articles on the subject that reference broad notions.² In considering the important role of conferences in professional development and knowing of the persistent gender gaps within the workplace, we examine women's experiences at conferences and the role they play for women in the workplace through an online survey accessing networks of more than 30,000 professional women across California and the nation. The results of the survey provide baseline information related to the experience of professional women at women's and co-ed conferences.

1. Fischer, Y. 2018. "[All-Male Panels Are Not Going Away Until We Get Up & Walk The Heck Out.](#)" *Bustle*. May 24.

2. Achor, S. 2018. "[Do Women's Networking Events Move the Needle on Equality?](#)" *Harvard Business Review*. 13 February; Bennett, J. 2017. "[Do Women-Only Networking Groups Help or Hurt Female Entrepreneurs?](#)" *Inc.* October; Haughney, C. & Kaufman, L. 2014. "[The Rise of Conferences on Women's Empowerment.](#)" *New York Times*. 6 October.

METHODS

A comprehensive electronic survey was developed to collect a broad array of information related to access, motivation, and attendance of women-only and co-ed professional conferences. The survey included 65 closed- and open-ended questions, although not all questions were applicable to every participant. For example, the survey asked a set of questions for women with children. Non-parents could skip the question set if it was not directly relevant.

The survey was sent to the Center for the Advancement of Women at Mount Saint Mary's University mailing list and distributed through partner networks and social media

between September 2018-February 2019. Before participants started the survey, they completed an Informed Consent form to demonstrate that their participation was voluntary. The survey took an average of 15 minutes to complete and asked no identifying questions. A total of 246 professional women (aged 18-65) completed the survey. Findings generated from this convenience sample (N = 246) are not generalizable to the broader population of women in California or elsewhere and should be reviewed with caution. The survey and associated data collection protocol was approved by the Mount Saint Mary's University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure ethical standards were upheld in the data collection process.

RESULTS

The present summary reports on larger trends found in the survey. The responses that generated the largest percentages are reported to show how a majority of the respondents answered select questions. More global trends, signified by a response rate of more than 50%, are reported also.

DEMOGRAPHICS While respondents ranged in age from 18-65, the majority of respondents were between 36-40 (19%) and 41-55 (32%) years of age. Fifty-five percent (55%) of respondents identified as white, 21% of respondents identified as Latina, 8% identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 7% identified as African American. The majority of respondents had a baccalaureate degree or higher. Specifically, 41% had a bachelor's degree, followed by 36% having attained a master's degree, and 10% attaining a doctorate. Almost half (49%) of respondents identified the private sector as their work environment, followed by 19% and 17% in non-profit work and education, respectively. While reported income level ranged from a low of "under \$50,000" to a high of "over \$200,000" annually, the largest income ranges were between "\$100,000-\$149,000" (20%), "under \$50,000" (14%), and "over \$200,000" (12%).

SELECTED FINDINGS Ninety-four percent (94%) of respondents attend more than two conferences per year. Over 40% attributed attending professional conferences (either co-ed and/or women-only events) to gaining access to "new projects and opportunities," while less than 10% of respondents received a "salary raise" or "promotion" as a result of attendance. However more respondents attributed attending women-only conferences to receiving "mentorship" (30% compared to 25% from co-ed events). Furthermore, 32% of respondents attributed receiving "industry/company recognition" to attending co-ed events compared to 21% who attributed those rewards to attending women-only conferences.

There are some differences in motivations, feeling included, and rate of attendance based on racial and ethnic identification. When attending women's conferences, "networking" and



OVER 40%
OF WOMEN ATTRIBUTED ATTENDING
PROFESSIONAL CONFERENCES TO
**new projects &
opportunities.**



“learning or training” were selected as the primary motivations for each age group and the most frequently chosen motivations for women across the race/ethnicity spectrum. Conversely, when attending co-ed professional conferences, “learning or training” was identified as the primary motivation for respondents. When it comes to comfort level, African American, Latina, multiracial, and white women were more prone to feel equally included at co-ed and women-only conferences, while Asian/Pacific Islander and Native American women felt more included at women’s professional conferences. Finally, Latinas were less likely to attend professional conferences compared to women in other race/ethnic categories.

Experiences that include sexual harassment were all too common among respondents. Almost half of respondents (45%) said they had personally experienced sexual harassment or unwanted advances at a professional conference. Of this group, 86% reported the instances took place at co-ed events with more men than women in attendance. Sixty-seven percent (67%) of respondents articulated an importance for conference organizers to have a code of conduct.

When considering incentives that might increase women’s participation in professional conferences, 81% of respondents expressed the desire for employers to offer stipends dedicated to professional conference participation. Offering on-site child care did not seem to provide an incentive in terms of increased conference attendance—54% of respondents stated they would not be more likely to attend a conference if on-site child care was offered. In addition, respondents reported “the speakers” as their primary consideration, and “the agenda” as their secondary consideration for attending a women’s conference. Conversely, “the agenda” and “the speakers” were selected as the primary and secondary considerations when deciding to attend co-ed conferences, respectively. Across both categories of events, “the sponsors” were listed as least important. Lastly, when considering content, respondents reported a preference for general industry insights and training over soft skills like “work-life balance” and “empowerment” often marketed at women.



#TheConferenceStudy

The following findings are from a national survey of 246 educated, professional women, aged 18-65 with the majority of respondents working in the private sector in California. Fifty-five percent (55%) of respondents identified as white, 21% as Latina, 8% as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 7% as African American.

PROFESSIONAL OUTCOMES

OVER 40% **LESS THAN 10%**

OF WOMEN ATTRIBUTED ATTENDING PROFESSIONAL CONFERENCES TO

 **new projects & opportunities.**

 **salary raises & promotions.**

WOMEN-ONLY VS. CO-ED CONFERENCES

WOMEN REPORTED RECEIVING SLIGHTLY MORE GAINS AT WOMEN-ONLY EVENTS

Mentorship
30% compared to 25%
WOMEN-ONLY/CO-ED

Industry Recognition
32% compared to 21%
WOMEN-ONLY/CO-ED

Sexual Harassment

45% EXPERIENCED SEXUAL HARASSMENT OR UNWANTED ADVANCES

{ OF THESE WOMEN }

86% OCCURED AT CO-ED EVENTS

67% WOULD LIKE ORGANIZERS TO HAVE **A CODE OF CONDUCT**

FACTORS IN ATTENDANCE

94% OF RESPONDENTS ATTENDED MORE THAN 2 CONFERENCES PER YEAR

PRIMARY MOTIVATIONS

Networking
WOMEN-ONLY CONFERENCES

Learning/Training
CO-ED CONFERENCES

PRIMARY CONSIDERATIONS

Speakers
WOMEN-ONLY CONFERENCES

Agenda
CO-ED CONFERENCES

Sponsors
WERE OF LEAST CONSIDERATION FOR BOTH GROUPS

INCENTIVES

81%
WOULD BE MORE LIKELY TO ATTEND WITH
Employer Stipends

54%
WOULD NOT BE MORE LIKELY TO ATTEND WITH
On-site Childcare

CONTENT PREFERENCES

Learning
Industry Insights Work Life Balance
Empowerment **Case Studies**
Training Soft Skills

ETHNICITY

OUT OF ALL ETHNIC GROUPS, **Latinas are the least likely to attend.**

↑ **Asian/Pacific Islanders and Native Americans** FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE AT WOMEN-ONLY CONFERENCES ↓

Authored by Emerald Archer, PhD, Director of the Center for the Advancement of Women at Mount Saint Mary's University and Brady Hahn, Founder of Brady Hahn Consulting and Insight Collective. This study is generously sponsored by The Center for the Advancement of Women at Mount Saint Mary's University. For more information, visit msmu.edu/caw

CONCLUSIONS

The present research is a good first step to study the experience and impact of professional conferences on the lives of women. Because the sample is relatively small and respondents were solicited from existing mailing lists/networks, and therefore self-selected, the findings are not generalizable to the broader population of California or American women at this time. This pilot study identified findings that are worthy of further exploration in a follow-up survey or study.

Based on these findings, initial recommendations for conference organizers include:

- Establishing an event-wide code of conduct that addresses standards in areas such as sexual harassment, diversity (i.e., age, socio-economic status, race/ethnicity, etc.) and gender balance.
- When crafting an agenda, avoid gender bias content silos

and ensure women have equal access to diverse learning and development opportunities.

- Model inclusivity for all women by curating a diverse cross section of speakers (i.e., age and race/ethnicity) in your program, with a particular focus on Latina and Native American voices.

FUTURE RESEARCH This pilot study generated additional avenues for future research, which may include but are not limited to the following three areas: **(1)** Understanding the impact hard skill versus soft skill content has on women in the workplace, **(2)** effective approaches to reaching and creating inclusion for underrepresented populations of women across racial and ethnic categories (in particular Latinas), age, and socio-economic groups, in addition to reaching individuals across the gender spectrum (not studied), and **(3)** examining the dynamics between event sponsors and partners, and content creation.

This study is generously sponsored by The Center for the Advancement of Women at Mount Saint Mary's University, a hub for gender equity research, advocacy and leadership development. Our vision is to find solutions to persistent gender inequities and work with partners to eradicate them in our lifetime.

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