



HOW TO DESIGN AND FACILITATE GENDER INTENTIONAL EVENTS

This tool was developed for use by foundation staff when designing both foundation and partner-led events. It provides actionable recommendations to inform each stage of event design, in a chronological order, from planning to facilitation. It aims to contribute to events with equal participation and contribution from diverse perspectives, where opportunities to harness multiple talents and perspectives to design solutions that address the needs of all can be seized.

Considering gender equality when designing and facilitating an event is important because gender relations shape the formal and informal power that people hold, and gender inequality is a persistent driver of unequal power relations. Event design often ignores how gender and power relations impact participation and outcomes: gender stereotypes and social norms tend to privilege men, so conferences routinely exclude women and individuals from historically marginalized and disadvantaged groups from attending, speaking, and participating in decision-making sessions. When they are invited and attend, they often face challenges in participating fully and are frequently spoken over or ignored by men. These unequal dynamics perpetuate harmful gender biases that result in further inequality in representation and participation.¹ Gender equality matters for effective events. Because gender inequalities are often compounded by privilege related to race, class, age, organizational affiliation, sexual orientation, religion, and other social markers, this tool also includes some considerations to ensure that events consider these intersecting spheres when seeking to promote gender equality and inclusion.

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PRE-EVENT: PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Planning the Event

- Ensure that the group planning the event is diverse and includes women and members from other traditionally underrepresented groups.²
- Consider holidays and important cultural events – including those celebrated by minority groups or those without national recognition – and select a conference date and time that is convenient for as many groups as possible.
- Avoid scheduling key sessions during extremely early morning and evening hours when people with children may not be able to attend.
- In marketing and communications materials use gender-inclusive language and avoid gender stereotypes. If photos are used, ensure they feature a diverse set of people, including women and people from underrepresented groups. When using alt-text for digital images, ensure language is not sexist.³
- Request that organizations send representatives from diverse backgrounds and positions and aim for gender parity.⁴ Pay attention to the composition of attendees. If the proportion of women or individuals from underrepresented groups is low, reach out to organizations directly and request they send a more diverse delegation.
- Consider gendered financial barriers to participation, such as the gender wage gap and the potential increased costs for attendance from caregivers – usually women – who may need to pay for childcare to attend. If feasible, provide subsidies or financial support (for example through scholarships, childcare vouchers, etc.) to those who cannot attend based on cost.
- When making invitations, ask participants about any accommodations they may require, including dietary requirements, accessibility, and/or other personal needs (e.g., childcare or a private space for feeding infants), and ensure participants know what type of accommodations they can request. Clarify any deadlines to submit requests.
- Along with invitation and registration forms, include a code of conduct statement setting expectations to promote respect, diversity, and equality among speakers. Enforce the code during the event and consider repercussions for non-adherence, for example withdrawing invitations for future events.⁵

Agenda Setting, Speaker Selection and Preparation

- Design conference sessions to feature diverse panelists and speakers across all plenary and breakout sessions, including the most notable and visible events. Aim for gender parity among speakers across events, not just for those dealing with gender or with what may be considered “women’s issues”.⁶ Recruit speakers from underrepresented groups (e.g., young professionals, and people from various types of organizations from diverse geographies).
- Ensure there is no gender gap in fees/honorariums paid. Similarly, “perks” or support received by speakers should be equal regardless of gender.
- If too few female speakers agree to participate, reach out to other organizations and networks for suggestions and/or recruit more female speakers through those who have already agreed to attend. Assure female invitees that there will be other women speaking at the event.

- Reserve spots for speakers and guests that may take longer to identify and recruit. Such as those from minority groups, who may not be in visible leadership roles.
- Ensure that the events that address the most technical topics are not dominated by men.
- When possible, offer training and guidance to include and support less-experienced speakers. Consider holding more casual events leading up to the main event as practice for first-time speakers.
- If a speaker plans to use slides, video, or other media, offer design support to ensure that the size and quality will allow for everyone in the audience to see, hear, and understand the content. Make sure all videos shown are captioned. Encourage speakers to use media that features women and men equally. Distribute presentation guidelines that set clear design parameters to ensure accessibility and avoid discrimination.

Venue Selection

- Ensure the chosen venue is safe and accessible to all individuals including those who rely on public transportation and people with disabilities.⁷ The venue should be equipped to provide:
 - » Amenities and services to accommodate for people with disabilities
 - » Gender neutral bathrooms
 - » Directional signage in multiple languages
 - » Private spaces for child feeding, prayer, or rest as needed
 - » Food options that accommodate religious, cultural, and allergy-specific diets and preferences
 - » Childcare, or should be near childcare options
- Consider the workplace policies and standards of the venue (e.g., labor conditions of venue workers) to ensure consistency with event norms and objectives. Given societal gender and hospitality norms, some venues may encourage event staff to dress or act in ways that result in the objectification of women. Make requests with the venue in advance to avoid these scenarios.
- For side events, off-site meals, or other social gatherings, choose accessible venues and provide options that are not alcohol or bar-centered. Select entertainment that does not objectify people or promote any stereotypes, and that is appropriate for a culturally and linguistically diverse audience. Make requests with offsite venues in advance to ensure this expectation is clear. Arrange in advance accessible transportation to any off-site events.

ONLINE AND HYBRID EVENTS THAT PROMOTE EQUALITY AND INCLUSION

PLATFORM SELECTION should consider accessibility, price, and connectivity requirements. Services that don't require a subscription and that are low bandwidth may be preferred (or the only option) in some contexts.

INTERNET CONNECTIVITY can limit if and how an individual can participate in an online event. This can include the possibility for video participation, to adequately listen to content and/or view the presentation slides and videos of other participants. Include other means for participation such as a chat box for Q&A and sharing slides in advance.

ACCESSIBILITY. Ensure online events include automatic or simultaneous captioning of audio and/or the participation of a live interpreter.

RECORDING. If the session will be recorded, request explicit consent from all participants and allow them to opt-out and/or turn off their video and remove their names if they prefer.

PRIVACY. Do not require participants to appear on camera. Some individuals – especially women and individuals from underrepresented groups – may not feel comfortable sharing access to their private space. There are also gender and cultural differences in how appropriate it is considered to show one's face. Consider that women may have different preference for privacy than men and may be more concerned for their online safety. This may further hinder their active participation if required to share personal information on the chat or during discussion.

EQUAL PARTICIPATION. Gender dynamics affect how much an individual chooses to, or can, speak up in group settings. Even in virtual discussions – or potentially more so – women are more likely to refrain from speaking up, or to be interrupted or ignored when they do. Consider what guidelines to set up for the group, whether agreeing to "ground rules" for participation would be helpful and ensure there is a capable moderator that can address issues of participation when/if they arise.



Photo: BMGF/Martina Machackova

DURING THE EVENT

Space Set Up

- For auditorium style, request adequate space between chair rows with multiple aisles so guests can get in and out of seats comfortably and can take breaks in the middle of events. Ensure that there is comfortable and accessible seating for people experiencing disabilities, pregnancy, or other conditions that require proximity to exits, bathrooms, or other accommodations.
- For rooms set up with circular banquet tables or U-shaped configurations, include table skirts to increase privacy and comfort.
- Ensure stage set-up is accessible and accommodating for everyone:
 - » If speakers will be seated, have chairs low in height.
 - » Include a table with a table skirt in front of panelist seats.
 - » Include a ramp to access the stage.
 - » If using a podium, make sure the height is adjustable.
 - » Ensure stage set-up includes space for a sign language interpreter if needed.
- Provide handheld microphones with adjustable microphone stands. Lapel microphones that require a clip and attached battery pack often do not clip on well to dresses, tunics, kaftans, sarees, and other non-Western forms of clothing.
- Set an appropriate room temperature that will be comfortable for all guests. Many public spaces are set to a temperature comfortable for male metabolism that is too cold for women.⁸

Facilitate and Support Equal Participation and Visibility of Speakers

- Designate equal time limits to speakers and let them know the limit in advance. Guarantee that people with greater privilege (i.e. males, senior staff, people from one country) are not given more time than others. Provide more time for speakers who may require it due to different capacities in speech and mobility.⁹
- In panel settings, direct questions at specific panelists to guarantee each person gets equal time, making sure women panelists are not underrepresented in response time. If the same question is asked of multiple panelists, specify who should answer first, and vary this order.
- Refer to men and women in the same way to avoid subtle biases (e.g. moderators and facilitators shouldn't refer to men using their titles and women by their first names).
- If a panelist interrupts another panelist, ensure that the interrupted panelist has the opportunity to continue speaking.
- If certain panelists dominate responses to audience questions, intervene to elicit opinions of others or encourage the audience to direct questions at panelists who have been asked fewer questions.
- If only one person from an underrepresented group is asked to speak, do not ask that person to speak on behalf of the entire group. Instead, ask that individual for their own perspective.
- Repeat valuable contributions and acknowledge the speaker; if an idea is brought up again without attribution, clarify the speaker of the original idea.
- Track and document the length and frequency of male vs. female (and other relevant groups) speaker engagement for post-conference reflections and lessons.

Support Equal Participation and Enjoyment of Attendees

- Ensure that all the needs expressed during registration (on dietary requirements, accessibility, and/or other personal needs) are met throughout the event.
- Consider using lanyards or stickers instead of name badges, which do not clip easily to some women's and non-Western clothing.
- Encourage participants to add their preferred gender pronouns to their nametags and add pronouns to speakers' plaques/speaker agendas.
- Include regularly scheduled breaks of sufficient length for participants to address their health and personal needs.
- Share event objectives and available materials in advance, and announce in advance when discussion will take place, to allow extra time to prepare questions and responses for those who need it.

Attendees' Participation During Sessions

- If calling on participants to ask questions, ensure that women are given equal opportunities. If possible, call on a woman first and avoid calling on people with gender, race, or age privilege first.¹⁰ When calling on individuals, ensure appropriate use of preferred gender pronouns by asking them to state them alongside their question, or avoid the use of gendered pronouns altogether.
- Pause after opening the room for discussion to allow time for non-native English speakers to prepare questions.
- If one person begins talking and dominates the time allotted for question and answers, intervene.
- Make sure that a microphone is used for all discussions. Require that everyone who asks a question to speak into the microphone so that people who have difficulty hearing can hear every question and those whose voices are less loud can be heard by everyone.
- Track and document the length and frequency of male vs. female audience participation for post-conference reflections and lessons.

Decision-making and next steps

- When decisions are required at the end of a session, ensure they are made in a gender-inclusive manner. Call on women to give input and ensure that their input is both heard and meaningfully reflected in final decisions.
- Delegate follow-up items and next steps in a manner that does not perpetuate inequitable gender norms and stereotypes, such as only women taking on secretarial responsibilities.
- Send an event summary after the event and solicit feedback which includes space for participants to explicitly comment on diversity and inclusion.

PROMOTE INCLUSION IN WORKING GROUPS

HAVE A BROAD SELECTION CRITERIA. Consider how criteria may exclude certain individuals who may have relevant expertise but who may not usually be deemed as "experts." For example, if inclusion is based on seniority, consider that in many sectors women are less likely to hold leadership positions. If inclusion will be promoted informally (e.g., through personal suggestions) consider who may have more visibility within an organization and who may be overlooked.

AIM FOR GENDER PARITY. Although not feasible or preferable in all contexts, intentionally aiming to reach a certain level of gender balance can increase equitable opportunities. Further, consider what other individuals, with different identities and backgrounds, can be included to provide a more diverse set of perspectives.

MIXED VS. GENDERED GROUPS. Depending on the issue at hand, it may be helpful to hold a session(s) with separate groups for men and women to ensure that women feel comfortable to share their opinions on all matters, especially on those related to gender.

SUPPORT EQUAL PARTICIPATION. Gender dynamics affect how much an individual chooses to, or can, speak up in group settings. Even in virtual discussions – or potentially more so – women are more likely to refrain from speaking up, or to be interrupted or ignored when they do. Consider setting guidelines for the group and whether signing "rules" for participation would be helpful.

GENDER-AWARE MODERATION. Ensure there is a capable moderator that can address issues of participation when/if they arise. Gender-aware moderation, informed by an understanding of how gender dynamics play out in group discussion, is more likely to promote equal participation and to help participants feel safe and more open to sharing their experiences and opinions. If finding a gender-trained moderator is not feasible, at least provide the moderator with some basic guidance as part of the preparation/onboarding. If possible, the moderator can track the frequency of male vs. female participation and aim to call on one group if roughly equal time is not being claimed by both.

Endnotes

- 1 Kramer, Andrea; Harris, Alton. Breaking Through Bias: Overcoming Gendered Meeting Dynamics. Training Industry. Available from: <https://trainingindustry.com/articles/performance-management/breaking-through-bias-overcoming-gendered-meeting-dynamics/> and ParLAmericas. Strategies for Chairing Inclusive Meetings. Available from: https://parlgendertools.org/media/Chairing_inclusive_meetings.pdf
- 2 For more on the importance of diversity in the planning committee see: Arnold, Carrie. "Countering Gender-Bias at Conferences". 2015. Science Magazine. Available from: <https://www.sciencemag.org/careers/2015/07/countering-gender-bias-conferences>; and Casadevall, Arturo; Handelsman, Jo. The Presence of Female Conveners Correlates with a Higher Proportion of Female Speakers at Scientific Symposia. NCBI. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24399856>
- 3 For more on the importance of alt-text and how to do it see Get ADA Accessible (<https://getadaaccessible.com/>).
- 4 This might mean having a gender balance in facilitator or presenters but could also mean challenging gender stereotypes by having more women speak at a high-level panel of a male-dominated sector, or a mostly male discussion on healthy masculinities.
- 5 An example of such a Code from AlterConf can be found here <https://www.alterconf.com/code-of-conduct>, via Buffer. Diversity in events: Our guidelines in event planning, speaking and sponsoring. Available from: <https://open.buffer.com/diversity-events-guidelines/>.
- 6 O'Neill J. 7 rules for avoiding all-male panels. Foreign Policy. Available from: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/08/7-rules-for-avoiding-all-male-panels/>
- 7 For additional guidance on addressing the needs of people with disabilities, see the Government of Canada's Guide to Planning Inclusive Meetings.
- 8 Kingma, Boris; Lichtenbelt, Wouter van Marken. Energy consumption in buildings and female thermal demand. Nature Climate Change volume 5. Available from: <https://www.nature.com/articles/nclimate2741>
- 9 For example, individuals who require more time to get on/off stage, or individuals who stutter or have other fluency disorders
- 10 "Men were over 2.5 times more likely to pose questions to the speaker (relative to their representation in attendance). This skew in question-asking was observable at seminars in which a man asked the first question. When a woman did so, the gender split in question-asking was, on average, proportional to that of the audience. Simply handing the microphone to a woman rather than a man when the floor is opened for questions may make a difference" <https://www.economist.com/science-and-technology/2017/12/07/women-ask-fewer-questions-than-men-at-seminars>