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Bound no more

Fed up of watching male-only discussion panels, a group of think-tankers launched the Brussels Binder – a database of female experts

Thousands of women work in the EU policy bubble, yet if you attend one of the numerous policy debates taking place across Brussels daily, you'll be hard pressed to find a gender-balanced discussion panel. Shocked at women's lack of visibility in the EU capital, Corinna Hörst of the German Marshall Fund helped set up the Brussels Binder, a database of female experts that aims to improve diversity in policy debates.

When I returned from maternity leave, I realised people were treating me differently than before. People I met through my job suddenly saw me first and foremost as a mother, not a colleague. They insisted on talking to me about children, rather than the subjects I specialise in – EU affairs and transatlantic relations.

I did not know many women were working in policy fields.

I also observed what happened to women colleagues around me who wanted to move from project management to research. I'd hear people say – 'She's good at her work, but she lacks writing experience,' despite the fact the colleague had written successful grant proposals, conference reports and internal memos, and contributed to research that ended up in articles published under the name of her male supervisors.

It was around that time I also discovered my own unconscious bias. I did not know many women were working in policy fields. I never saw them, never heard them. It was men sitting on the panels, being quoted by journalists, and men writing—or at least being credited with authoring policy briefs.

There – yet invisible

Women are still notably absent from expert panels around Brussels. Conference organisers often claim it's too difficult to find female experts, or that there are just aren't enough of them in certain policy areas.

Instead, we have to endure debates full of lengthy, self-aggrandising speeches, followed by Q&A sessions in which (usually) men pose 'questions' that are actually statements intended to prove how much they know. There's plenty of 'mansplaining' and 'manterrupting', but the events themselves are dry and unimaginative.

Why? Because the people organising these panels call up experts and analysts they know already, and have seen speak elsewhere. Time pressures mean they go for the easy option, rather than making the effort to find alternative voices.

However, addressing the lack of gender diversity in policy discussions is not only a matter of time, money, or political correctness. If women experts become more visible, they will have a profound impact on Europe's policies and future. The EU faces many challenges – from globalisation, to violence beyond its borders; from attacks on democracy from within, to the impact of new technologies.

The Brussels Binder, seeks to level the playing field.

Europe needs new ideas and innovative approaches that get heard and picked up by policy makers and opinion shapers. And more gender diversity won't just improve the quality of our conversations; it will also help policies reflect better the societies they're meant to serve.

According to the volunteer-run campaign EUPanelWatch, in 2017 only 33.8 per cent of speakers on panels in Brussels were women. In June 2017, of 283 panels observed, only 11 per cent (42) of panels were balanced in terms of gender, while 68 per cent (261) were made up entirely, or almost entirely of men.

Yet, there are plenty of women who know 'stuff'. The trouble is, they either don't get noticed, or don't have the high-ranking titles conference organisers desire to boost their own image. The Brussels Binder, seeks to level the playing field.

No more excuses

'Binders full of women' is an expression coined by Mitt Romney during the 2012 election campaign in the US. I, along with several other women

working at think-tanks in Brussels, decided to make the phrase our own.

On the back of a successful crowdfunding campaign and fundraiser, we created the Brussels Binder, a publicly accessible database of women experts. Launched in January 2018, the database already boasts close to 500 profiles.

We hope the Binder will ensure conference organisers and journalists will always be able to find female experts to speak on panels and comment on stories. That's not because women are necessarily any brainier or more knowledgeable than men, but they do bring different experiences. When diverse groups of people come together, that enhances the debate.

In the future, we plan to link up with other existing databases across Europe, to extend women's reach and amplify their voices.

Women are currently underrepresented in news coverage by a ratio of three-to-one.

Any woman expert who works in Brussels or travels there frequently can create a professional profile on our site, stating her areas of expertise, years of experience, media appearances and publications.

Our ambassadors include Spanish Foreign Minister Ana Palacio, MEP Marietje Schaake, NATO's Rose Gottemoeller, Paul Adamson from ESharp and corporate supporters such as Google, FTI, and Rtesian. We also have the endorsement of 17 European think tanks.

This kind of top-level support is important because we need to demonstrate women's voices count just as much as men's. Women are currently underrepresented in news coverage by a ratio of three-to-one, while scientific reports written by women are seen as less credible and authoritative than those written by men.

In the policy world, who gets to be considered an 'authority' is subject to a deep bias. We see this clearly in Brussels policy circles. Male privilege in the 'EU bubble' is so endemic that many don't even see it. But we need to break with patriarchal and damaging cultural patterns. By trying to close the gender gap at work, journalists and event organisers will enable their audiences to engage with fresh ideas, and expose them to research otherwise obscured by systematic bias.

As European Commission Vice-President Frans Timmermans said during the launch of the Brussels Binder, we shouldn't just expect those at a disadvantage to fight their way up the career ladder. They need to create alliances with those in positions of privilege – white men in this

case – who recognise that the status quo needs to change, and not just because women demand it.

So the Brussels Binder is about creating systemic change. It seeks to ensure that every single European has a voice, thereby bolstering equal rights and equal opportunities at work. In the long run, we hope the Brussels Binder will contribute to a diverse Europe where expertise is valued above gender, age, religion, ethnic or racial background.



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