

## Equality is an economic and social imperative

Written by Madi Sharma on 8 March 2018 in Opinion  
Opinion

It is the end of an era for all-male panels thanks to a great initiative called The Brussels Binder, writes Madi Sharma.



Social media has been a friend to women lobbying against those white stale males hogging conference stages in Brussels. By posting pictures of all-male panels and naming and shaming EU institutions lacking female representation, women and men have begun to change the status quo. It is the end of an era for the #AllMalePanels thanks to a great initiative called The Brussels Binder.

As someone who has worked in the Brussels policy environment for over 13 years, I find the lack of female role models concerning. This lack of visibility restricts the next generation of brilliant young women coming to the fore, as their voices are quashed by the ever-visible male politicians and speakers.

However, it is not just visibility that counts, but the impact of women's voices on actual policymaking. As my friend Mirella Visser from the Centre for Inclusive Leadership says, "Ladies - if you are not around the table, then you are on the menu."

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Where women are not included in policy debates, decisions will retain their bias towards male preferences, particularly where men hold the majority of votes and their voices are the loudest.

Virginia Marantidou, founder of the Brussels Binder Project, highlights that “there is an evident underrepresentation of female voices in policy debates in Brussels. We needed to take action and somehow give visibility to female policy experts but also eliminate the excuse that ‘we couldn’t find any woman expert to invite’ or ‘there are not enough women experts on this field’. This is how the Brussels Binder, a database of women experts was conceived, as a go-to resource for media and conference organisers.”

The Brussels Binder was started through an online crowdfunding campaign, which raised sufficient funds to develop the initiative and awareness of the tokenism given to women in the Brussels decision making processes.

Now launched for public access, The Brussels Binder is a free, accessible, online database listing female experts in all sectors. Women experts can register on the website, complete their profiles (listing current position and expertise), and include any relevant publications or videos of their participation in debates.

Age, and years of experience are not compulsory criteria for any listing, allowing equal access for all experts. Organisations looking for female speakers can search the database using filters for subject and region.

In 2017, 380 debates in Brussels were monitored by EU Panel Watch, an organisation that observes events in Brussels to track gender balance. Of over 1700 speakers, only one third were women. Gender representation on panels is only the tip of the iceberg in a Europe that increasingly treats the majority as a repressed minority.

Fortunately, times are changing. New initiatives will be launched in the coming year which will see gender equality tools being used in national parliaments, including gender budgeting and other systems for parity, aimed at bringing equal voting rights for women.

This is not a gender argument - this is an economic and social imperative to build and retain a European Union which is fair and sustainable; a European Union that uses all of its available resources, including the intelligence, innovation and passion of its female experts.

### About the author

Madi Sharma is an entrepreneur and a member of the European Economic and Social Committee

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