The Success Gap

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The Success Gap

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When Lisa Uhrig, Cathie Craig and Ruth Brisbain won Impromptu, ADS and Persuasive at the 1971 National Forensics Association National Tournament, the forensics community breathed a collective sigh of relief. These women had won three of the six events the NFA offered at the time. Apparently, the lack of women in the activity had been solved. Over the next several decades teams were encouraged to diversify and include more women. However, while these efforts brought women into the activity, they failed to create a culture of equal success between men and women in forensics. Instead, we have considered the issue solved and have turned a blind eye to the success gap women still face in forensics. We owe it to our activity to first, examine the modern problem of discrimination and how it hinders women in forensics, second, detail the causes within our activity that perpetuate this gap, before finally identifying solutions that give all competitors an equal opportunity for success, not just participation.

Resolving gender discrimination requires more than simply “add women and stir.” Our desire to move past gender discrimination has created a success gap in our activity: we let women compete, but we don’t let them do well. I analyzed the AFA-NIET results from 2009, ‘10 and ‘11. For the nine individual events recognized by both the AFA and NFA, I compared the number of women in prelims and outrounds, and then compared these numbers to the total number of people competing in each level. These percentages reveal how often women break in an event, relative to their presence in that event. Because only data from outrounds of the 2011 NFA national tournament is publically available, I compared that data to the corresponding AFA data to ensure that the results were similar between the organizations. Overall, this data shows two distinct trends: first, that there is an overall gap between the number of women who compete in an event and the amount of women who break in that event, and second, that this gap is worsening in the events where the speaker issues a call to action.

First, of the nine events considered, only rhetorical criticism and informative speaking did not have a significant bias against women. However, in Extemp, Impromptu, ADS, Persuasive, DI,
Prose and POI there is at least a gap of at least 11% between the number of women in prelims and the number of women in out-rounds. In this chart (Female Participation Gap), each bar represents the percentage of women who competed in prelims of that event. The red indicates the percentage of out-round competitors who are women. The blue is the success gap between those percentages. That means that although 53% of the people competing in DI in 2011 were women, women made up only 37% of those who broke in DI. That’s a 16% gap. In Prose, it’s 12%, in ADS it’s 18%, in Extemp and Impromptu it’s 21%, and in Persuasive it’s 22%.

The distribution of this gap leads us to our second trend: this success gap is worsening in the events where the credibility of the speaker matters most. Extemp, Impromptu, Persuasive and ADS have the largest gaps and the worst trends over time. As you can see (AFA-NIET Success Gap), all of these events have a success gap hovering around 20% and all have had steep increases in this gap over the past three years. This trend held for this year’s AFA as well, with Persuasive ringing in with a gap of 17%. These events rely upon speakers being perceived as logical, assertive and credible so that the audience is moved to take action and reconsider their view of the world. That judges consistently reject women within these events suggests that this success gap is part of a larger cultural assumption about the ability—or inability—of women to be effective public speakers. Gender discrimination in forensics is not the archaic practice we believe it to be.

It takes more than gender to be a national champion. Yet, this modern form of gender discrimination is so widespread that we must examine the causes for the success gap in forensics. There are two: implicit audience bias, and lack of awareness.

First, audience members have biases that fall along gender lines. As a community, we have explored these judging biases since Lisa, Cathie and Ruth first became national champions. Bruce Manchester and Sheryl Friedley found in 1987 that “male judges were more likely to rank males higher in [public address] events” and “rank males considerably higher in the limited preparation events.” Leah White confirmed in 1997 that “male judges rank male competitors higher than female competitors in both extemporaneous and impromptu speaking.” In 1974, Cheris Kramer noted that “as a whole, people don’t like to hear women’s voices telling them things.” In 1989, John Murphy documented that women who succeed in forensics are often
trained to imitate men by lowering their voices and speaking at a slower rate to minimize the “feminine” traits that irritate judges. This preference exists beyond forensics. The January 2012 Journal of Evolution and Human Behavior notes that people of both genders prefer political candidates with deeper voices. These biases combine to predispose judges to see female competitors as less authoritative, compelling and effective, and judges convey those perceptions onto their ballots.

Second, we as a community are unaware of how deeply this bias is ingrained. We see women in out-rounds and winning championships, so we assume that all is well when it comes to gender in forensics. However, this superficial assumption has allowed our community to consistently ignore the complexity surrounding the success of women in this activity. That ignorance has systematically denied women the success they deserve. While women continue to face a success gap in forensics, the newest research examining the forensics success gap is almost eight years old. As a community, we have become complacent. We see ourselves as more equal than debate and think this lets us off the hook. However, this lack of academic and personal interest in examining our progress on issues of gender has left everyone blind to the discriminatory bias they unknowingly bring to their ballots.

All forensics competitors deserve to be evaluated by judges who appraise their speech content and presentational style without relying on gendered assumptions. As a community, we have the power to make this change through solutions on the organizational and individual level.

First, we can petition our organizations to address the success gap on a national level. Contact the editors of forensics journals and ask them to solicit articles on this issue, or even offer special editions of their journals devoted to this inequality. This speech is being submitted for publication, but my analysis is just the tip of the iceberg. These organizations issued calls for diversity and inclusion within the activity in the past; now it’s time that they call for us to re-evaluate our prejudice so that forensics can better lead the nation into the future.

Second, we as competitors should demand fairness of ourselves and of each other. Being members of the forensics community doesn’t preclude us from cultural socialization, but it does offer an opportunity to reflect upon and change those preconceptions. When you judge or watch
rounds, try Kenneth Burke’s perspective by incongruity: imagine the speaker is a different gender, then think about how that would change your evaluation of the speaker. Would they still be talking too fast? Would their voice really bother you? Would they still seem too aggressive? Being aware of our biases is the first step to removing the power they hold, so don’t be afraid to question yourself as a judge or audience member.

Thirty years after Lisa, Cathie and Ruth won their national championships, we are still struggling to address the success gap facing women in forensics. The data show that we still tend to “add women and stir,” confusing participation with success. By examining how this success gap is playing out in today’s world, detailing what we as a community have done to cause it, and identifying ways we can end this discrimination, we have the opportunity to transform forensics. Forensics prides itself on its social awareness and personal advocacy, so let’s live up to our rhetoric and finally make gender discrimination a thing of the past.