Women in Nephrology Speakers Bureau Initiative

By Niloofar Nobakht, Michelle Rheault, Susanne B. Nicholas, and Mala Sachdeva

Women in Nephrology (WIN) is an international organization that was founded in 1983 by prominent women nephrologists with the goal of assisting women in developing their careers. Over the past 40 years, WIN has expanded its purpose to include advocacy for and mentoring to professionals of all genders in the field of nephrology. In addition, WIN champions within the nephrology community for education and research relevant to women’s health (Figure).

Throughout history, women in medicine have been underrepresented in public and leadership roles, including as speakers and moderators at medical conferences and members of conference-planning committees. In fact, a 2017–2018 study showed that only approximately 30% of speakers at medical conferences were women (1). In addition, the proportion of women speakers correlated with their representation on planning committees (1). Over the past few years, some conferences within the nephrology subspecialty have demonstrated strong gains in representation of women as speakers and moderators. Notably, the ASN annual meeting increased its proportion of women speakers twofold, from approximately 20% in 2013 to 40% in 2019. Similarly, women moderators increased from approximately 25% in 2011 to 47% in 2019 (2).

Unfortunately, other national and international conferences within nephrology have not been as equitable in gender representation. Women continue to be underrepresented among invited speakers at departmental grand rounds and named lectureships. A study in 2020 illustrated that women represented only one-fifth of invited speakers at departmental grand rounds and the proportion of women-named lectureships was approximately 20% or lower (3).

Women also remain underrepresented in the proportion of major awards given by nephrology organizations (4). Although there was somewhat of an increase in 2019, O’Lone and Webster pointed out that major organizations in nephrology awarded fewer than 20% of awards to women over the previous 10 years (4). All of these inequalities significantly limit women’s ability to achieve proper recognition and obtain leadership roles that would contribute to advancing their professional careers.

Furthermore, women in the field of nephrology face several barriers within their work environments. These challenges include but are not limited to: confronting financial disincentives in which they take on more tasks either without being paid or being underpaid; experiencing pay inequities with lower salaries; facing work/life balance challenges; or being offered fewer opportunities for career advancement compared with their male counterparts (5–7). To address these challenges, O’Lone and Webster recommend four strategies to help women in their career advancement (4).

- Facilitating and prioritizing women to conduct kidney-related research
- Instituting family-friendly policies at conferences and the workplace
- Addressing gender discrimination at an institutional level
- Promoting women through mentorship and increasing opportunities for leadership roles

The WIN social media team has led the way in highlighting and pointing out conferences and seminars in which women have been underrepresented or not represented. When session organizers were asked why this was happening, WIN received responses such as, “We don’t know any women who can talk in that area,” or “There aren’t any women doing that work.”

In an effort to reduce the barriers for institutions and organization leaders to identify women speakers who are experts in their field, WIN established the Speakers Bureau, a database comprised of WIN members who can voluntarily register to speak on a specific subject area and offer their expertise as panelists, speakers, or collaborators. Currently, there are 80 women speakers in the WIN Speakers Bureau (https://www.womeninnephrology.org/career/speaker-bureau.aspx), which is publicly and freely accessible through the WIN website (https://www.womeninnephrology.org/). The opportunity to join the database is open to all WIN members.

As women continue to advance in their professional careers, they deserve to be recognized for their knowledge and expertise on a local, national, and global level. There continues to be a need to increase the number of women speakers at departmental grand rounds and conference-planning committees. Through the creation of the Speakers Bureau initiative, WIN has stepped up to address these disparities within speaking opportunities, to provide a conduit for women to advance their careers, and ultimately, to advocate for women across the field of nephrology.

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References

Figure. Goals of the WIN Speakers Bureau