Women take the mic in conference interpreting

Exploring the gender imbalance in conference interpreting through the lens of female practitioners

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Unconscious bias

Underlying gender biases affect our societies on numerous—if not all—levels. As Ruth Bader Ginsberg pointed out in an interview in 2014: “I think unconscious bias is one of the hardest things to get at.”

The “humanistic-scientific” divide between men and women can already be observed in education and subsequently continues in the professional world. While there are many initiatives to get women more involved in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) professions, there is a notable lack of effort to get more men involved in ‘feminised’ professions, such as nursing, teaching and social work.

As feminist Gloria Steinem famously said: “We’ve begun to raise daughters more like sons… but few have the courage to raise our sons more like our daughters.” Proposed reasons for this difference are that a majority of female dominated professions are associated with lower prestige and remuneration.

The gender shift in interpreting

During my studies as a post-graduate, I noticed that conference interpreting is a profession with a preponderance of women. Upon reviewing existing literature, I learned that this was not always the case. In the early days, conference interpreting was predominantly performed by men and the gender shift only occurred at a later stage.

Intrigued by this phenomenon, I wanted to find out what had led to this demographic shift and what effect it may have had on the profession.

At that stage, only one study had explored this topic. In 2015, Rachael Ryan had conducted a study on the topic, from the perspective of male conference interpreters. The results of Ryan’s study included a number of hypotheses made by male conference interpreters about why, in their opinion, more women join the profession.

After reading her eye-opening research, one thing became clear: to get the full picture, someone had to add the female perspective.

My study: seeking the female perspective

The goal of my study was to add the missing counterpart to Ryan’s research. As Babie points out: “Women have knowledge about their status and experience that is not available to men.”

My aim was to understand why women become conference interpreters and what they see as the reasons for the existing gender imbalance in the profession. The two core research questions in my Master’s thesis were:

- What are the motivations for women to become conference interpreters?
- Do female conference interpreters agree with their male colleagues’ perceptions of the reasons for the preponderance of women in the profession? If not, what do they see as reasons for the gender imbalance?

The research was conducted using a mixed methods approach. First, an online survey was answered by 161 female conference interpreters from around the world. The findings from the survey were then explored on a deeper level through four interviews with female practitioners. To protect their anonymity, the names of all participants were changed to numbers and letters.

Results: four motivating factors

The study found four main factors that motivate women to become conference interpreters.

1. Language as a tangible skill

First, women expressed a desire to use their passion for languages in tangible way. Many expressed being motivated by the skill focused aspect of the profession, and several also wanted to challenge stereotypes associated with language degrees.

As Respondent 74 explained: “I became an interpreter partially in order to challenge the assumption that someone like me (who had almost exclusively studied languages) had no other choice than to become a teacher.”

2. Stimulation and personal development

The second factor was a search for stimulation and personal development. Participants expressed being motivated by a fear of stagnation and a surge for knowledge, with many describing the profession as exciting, challenging and satisfying their sense of curiosity.

Respondent 22 stated: “I am an extremely curious individual with an almost unquenchable thirst for knowledge.”

3. A meaningful and prestigious profession

The third factor was a perceived sense of importance found in both the meaningfulness and the prestige of the profession. Many wanted to use their communication skills to help others and described this service as playing an important role.

Respondent 51 wrote: “I wanted to be […] that voice that helps people understand each other, argue, agree, and make history.”

4. A sense of freedom

The final motivating factor was a perceived sense of freedom obtained from the travel opportunities and the flexible nature of the profession.

What motivates men and women

In direct comparison to the men’s motivations from Ryan’s study, it was found that while some motivations overlap, others do not. In Ryan’s study, the male participants expressed that the tedium in previous occupations motivated them to join the profession. When asked if this aspect played a role for female conference interpreters, the majority disagreed.

A search for meaningfulness was the second motivating factor that had emerged from Ryan’s study. The results of this study now show that female conference interpreters are driven by the same factor.

Remuneration was the third motivating factor Ryan found. While the results show that the women in this study were motivated by remuneration as well, it was not as important to them...
as it was for their male colleagues (42.24 percent vs 52.51 percent). The flexible nature of the profession was the fourth motivating factor for the men in Ryan’s study. According to the results, the majority of women in this study were drawn to conference interpreting for the same reason.

Differing views on the gender imbalance

The male participants in Ryan’s study had hypothesised that more men join the profession due to female ability – including a superior aptitude for languages and communication, and the ability to be invisible and to set aside their own thoughts – women having a sense of service, gender stereotyping in society in general as well as in education, and different career orientations in men and women, such as men being more career driven.

The results show that the majority of women in this study disagree with the superior female abilities hypothesised by their male colleagues. They believe that it rather comes down to gender biases in society, which expects women to be chatty and tends to push them behind the scenes.

Participant A explained: “You have to learn to put your ego aside and your opinion aside, but I think that’s a struggle for men and women. (…) I think there is a bias that people think that somehow, we find it easier, or maybe we’re just doing it more.”

Several participants did, however, argue that the gender imbalance is due to women having a superior capacity for empathy.

A service profession

In light of recent developments, this topic should be taken seriously and be investigated further. Further research could have significant practical implications on the image and conditions of the profession.

The role of gender stereotyping

Moreover, it was demonstrated that there might be a link between gender stereotyping and the feminisation of the profession. They further agreed that different career orientations play a role and that the profession is too instable for a provider.

Female conference interpreters did, however, disagree with their male colleagues’ perception that the freelance aspect attracts women because the flexible hours are more compatible with family responsibilities. They further disagreed that professional interpreters who are a collective idea of women being brought up towards service, helping others, and caring”.

The second theme was a perceived male privilege. Already in Ryan’s study, a number of the male participants had remarked that they feel they are in a more privileged position within the profession. It was their perception that recruiters and clients often prefer male interpreters, that entering the market is easier for men and that more men achieve higher positions. It was their perception that recruiters and clients often prefer male interpreters, that entering the market is easier for men and that more men achieve higher positions.

Feminisation

The results show that the majority of women in this study agree with Pöchhacker that this affects the image of the profession negatively. They further disagreed with women having a natural predisposition for service professions and rather saw these tendencies rooted in societal expectations again. Participant B said there is “a collective idea of women being brought up towards service, helping others, and caring”.

The role of gender stereotyping

The results show that the majority of participants agreed with their male colleagues that gender stereotyping plays a significant role in the gender imbalance in the profession. Many saw it rooted in the different upbringing of boys and girls, which is then enhanced by educational segregation – humanities vs sciences – in school and the bad reputation of language degrees. They further agreed that different career orientations play a role and that the profession is too instable for a provider.

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Feminisation

The first additional theme was the effect of feminisation. Several women stated that the working conditions and the prestige of the profession have declined. These remarks are coherent with recent protests by interpreters at the European Parliament over diminished working conditions.

While the participants in this study did not want to blame women for this development, they did see a possible link between it and a lack of confidence in women to stand up and demand better conditions. The women in this study agreed with Pöchhacker that this affects the image of the profession negatively and suggested that gender balance would improve the situation.

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Many women in this study now expressed similar views. Respondent 73 for example remarked that “the real imbalance in our profession is not in the numbers, it is in the power structure”.

While some explained this with men being more career driven, others were notably bothered by this imbalance. Respondent 73 concluded: “There is something very wrong with that picture.”

Conclusion: similar motivations, diverging perceptions

The study shows that while male and female conference interpreters are motivated by similar factors, their views on the reasons for the gender imbalance partially differ. The study also revealed that gender stereotyping appears to have a significant impact on people entering the profession, as well as progressing within it.

Moreover, it was demonstrated that there might be a link between gender stereotyping, the feminisation and the declining prestige and diminishing working conditions.

In light of recent developments, this topic should be taken seriously and be investigated further. Further research could have significant practical implications on the image and conditions of the conference interpreting profession.

Notes


Bibliography


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