

# Navigating diversity: Assessing gender inclusivity at the 2023 Association of Geographical Societies in Europe (EUGEO) Congress\*

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## Abstract

Academic gender inequalities have been acknowledged as a long-standing issue. At conferences, a key arena for academic career development, these inequalities manifest themselves in various ways. This article aims to contribute to the debate on these issues by analysing, from a gender perspective, the EUGEO Geography Congress held in Barcelona in September 2023. The research comprises both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The main findings indicate some disparities in the number of male and female participants and in the evaluations and perceptions of men and women during the conference. While both genders generally provided positive evaluations of the conference, women placed greater emphasis on the supportive environment. Additionally, gender disparities were identified in debate participation and feelings, with women expressing less comfort and security during discussions. The research aims to contribute to reflections on gender representation at academic conferences and to provide ideas for possible strategies to foster greater inclusion at such conferences.

**Keywords:** academic wellbeing; conference; geography; gender; Barcelona

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**Resum.** *Considerar la diversitat: avaluació de la inclusió de gènere en el Congrés de l'Associació de Societats de Geografia a Europa (EUGEO) de 2023*

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Les desigualtats acadèmiques han estat reconegudes com un problema persistent. En els congressos científics, un àmbit clau per al desenvolupament professional acadèmic, aquestes desigualtats es manifesten de diverses maneres. Aquest article pretén contribuir al debat sobre aquestes qüestions analitzant, des d'una perspectiva de gènere, el Congrés EUGEO celebrat a Barcelona el setembre de 2023. La recerca comprèn anàlisis tant quantitatives com qualitatives. Els principals resultats indiquen algunes disparitats en el nombre de participants i en les avaluacions i percepcions d'homes i dones durant el Congrés. Tot i que ambdós gèneres el van valorar de manera positiva, les dones van destacar-ne l'ambient inclusiu. A més, es van identificar disparitats de gènere en la participació en els debats i en els sentiments, ja que les dones van expressar menys comoditat i seguretat durant les discussions. La recerca pretén contribuir a la reflexió sobre la representació de gènere en els congressos acadèmics i proporcionar idees per a possibles estratègies per fomentar una major inclusió en aquests.

**Paraules clau:** benestar acadèmic; congrés; geografia; gènere; Barcelona

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**Resumen.** *Abordar la diversidad: evaluación de la inclusión de género en el Congreso de la Asociación de Sociedades de Geografía de Europa (EUGEO) de 2023*

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Las desigualdades académicas han sido reconocidas como un problema persistente. En los congresos científicos, un ámbito clave para el desarrollo profesional académico, estas desigualdades se manifiestan de diversas maneras. Este artículo pretende contribuir al debate sobre estas cuestiones analizando, desde una perspectiva de género, el Congreso EUGEO celebrado en Barcelona en septiembre de 2023. La investigación comprende análisis tanto cuantitativos como cualitativos. Los principales resultados indican algunas disparidades en el número de participantes y en las evaluaciones y percepciones de hombres y mujeres durante el Congreso. Aunque ambos géneros lo valoraron positivamente, las mujeres destacaron más su ambiente inclusivo. Además, se identificaron disparidades de género en la participación en los debates y en los sentimientos, puesto que las mujeres expresaron menos comodidad y seguridad durante las discusiones. La investigación pretende contribuir a la reflexión sobre la representación de género en los congresos académicos y proporcionar ideas para posibles estrategias para fomentar una mayor inclusión en estos.

**Palabras clave:** bienestar académico; congreso; geografía; género; Barcelona

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**Résumé.** *Aborder la diversité : évaluer l'inclusion de genre lors du congrès de l'association européenne de sociétés de Géographie (EUGEO) en 2023*

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Les inégalités académiques de genre sont reconnues comme un problème de longue date. Dans les conférences, un domaine clé pour le développement de la carrière académique, ces inégalités se manifestent de diverses manières. Cet article vise à contribuer au débat sur ces questions en analysant, d'un point de vue de genre, le Congrès d'EUGEO qui s'est tenu à Barcelone en septembre 2023. La recherche comprend à la fois des analyses quantitatives et qualitatives. Les principaux résultats indiquent quelques disparités dans le nombre de participants et dans les évaluations et perceptions des hommes et des femmes lors de la conférence. Alors que les deux genres ont généralement fourni des évaluations positives de la conférence, les femmes ont plus mis l'accent sur un environnement favorable. De plus, des disparités de genre ont été identifiées dans la participation aux débats et dans les sentiments, les femmes exprimant moins de confort et de sécurité pendant les

discussions. La recherche vise à contribuer aux réflexions sur la représentation des genres dans les conférences académiques et à fournir des idées pour des stratégies possibles visant à favoriser une plus grande inclusion dans de telles conférences.

**Mots-clés :** bien-être académique ; conférence ; géographie ; genre ; Barcelone

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### Summary

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|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Introduction           | 4. Final remarks           |
| 2. Methodology            | Bibliographical references |
| 3. Results and Discussion |                            |

## 1. Introduction

The academic community acknowledges that modern science has been dominated by an elite white male minority from the global north (King et al., 2018; Graves et al., 2022; Harding, 2023). Acknowledging that the production of scientific knowledge aims to benefit humanity and its wellbeing, it is imperative for access to be inclusive of all individuals, independent of their race, gender, religion, sexual orientation or background (Chachra, 2017). Integrating a diverse range of knowledge sets influenced by scientific background, origin, personal experiences, values and beliefs significantly enhances the relevance and applicability of scientific studies (Schurr et al., 2020). For instance, studies have demonstrated increased relevance following the inclusion of women's perspectives in fields as varied as medical education (Zimmerman, 2000), urban geography (Parker, 2016) and political economy (Werner et al., 2017). In addition, research quality and productivity receive significant boosts in research teams that are gender and racially diverse (Guterl, 2014; Nielsen et al., 2018).

Therefore, the current focus on promoting gender diversity underscores the need to address traditional dynamics that favour the mentioned elite while simultaneously hindering other groups (Chachra, 2017; Heward et al., 1997; Jacobs, 1996; Nielsen et al., 2018; Smooth, 2016). On one hand, recently, there has been a higher proportion of women earning academic degrees than ever before (Llorens et al., 2021; Ysseldyk et al., 2019) and a growing trend in female enrolment in postgraduate courses (Potvin et al., 2018). On the other hand, these increasing trends contrast with the persistent gender disparities at higher academic levels (Aufvenne et al., 2021; Llorens et al., 2021), particularly affecting women of colour, indigenous scholars, and many national settings apart from the Anglophone domain (Williams et al., 2014; Schurr et al., 2020). As King et al. (2018) note, broadening diversity in science is a complex task that goes beyond simply encouraging women and minorities to pursue university degrees.

The substantial gender gap at advanced academic levels is often referred to as hierarchical segregation or the “leaky pipeline”, whereby women and other

minorities leave the system, either by choice or due to pressure, and do not pursue careers in scientific fields (King et al., 2018: 416). Also, subtle biases in scientific cultures favour certain perspectives, bodies and backgrounds while devaluing others (King et al., 2018). For example, studies indicate that men receive more positive evaluations than women from job search committees, even with identical resumés (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012). Aufenvenne et al. (2021) synthesised two main phenomena contributing to gender disparities in academic careers. The first is the glass ceiling phenomenon, which reflects the overrepresentation of men in higher academic positions and disparities in decision-making. The second is the Matilda effect, which involves the underestimation, reduced visibility and misattribution of women's scientific contributions to male colleagues.

These phenomena also manifest themselves in scientific conferences, which are key for career recognition and development. Conferences serve as platforms for networking, collaboration, knowledge dissemination, idea exchange, feedback reception, innovation fostering and field advancement (Hinsley et al., 2017; Oliver and Morris, 2019). They also offer visibility and recognition for researchers. Subsequently, conferences can either endorse or limit academic career development by integrating researchers into the field and into academic networks, thus influencing career opportunities (Seierstad and Healy, 2012; Storme et al., 2013). Moreover, they act as forums for discussing power dynamics within a discipline (Aufenvenne et al., 2021).

Despite their importance, empirical studies show gender disparities in conference attendance (Blumen and Bar-Gal, 2006; Carter et al., 2018; Ford et al., 2018; Günther et al., 2017a; King et al., 2018). Women tend to participate in fewer conferences, due to structural mobility limitations and disproportionate caregiving responsibilities. The lack of childcare accommodation at conferences exacerbates this barrier, commonly termed the “caregiving penalty” (Calisi and WG Mothers in Science, 2018).

Gender disparities in behaviour during scientific conferences were also observed. For instance, women at equivalent academic levels speak significantly less than their male counterparts at conferences (Jones et al., 2014), while men ask more questions than women (Aufenvenne et al., 2021; Carter et al., 2018; Ford et al., 2018; Käfer et al., 2018; Storme, 2014). Additionally, both younger and senior male researchers attract more questions, suggesting that gender has a more significant influence than age on question-asking dynamics at conferences (Günther et al., 2017b). These quantitative studies emphasise numerical gender disparities but do not analyse the individual feelings and perceptions behind these disparities. Our study aims to address this gap by exploring researchers' feelings and perceptions during conference participation, to better understand gender disparities in scientific practices, both in geography and in the broader field of science studies.

This paper critically examines gender disparities at the 2023 European Geosciences Union General Assembly (EUGEO) held in Barcelona. The 9th EUGEO Congress, a major meeting of geographical societies across Europe,

serves as a platform for scholars, researchers, professionals and policy makers to exchange ideas, discuss current research and address disciplinary challenges. Despite its relatively recent origin, it is one of Europe's largest and most prominent geography conferences and attracts a diverse group of attendees. It offers an excellent opportunity to explore the dynamics of individual scientists and groups. The interdisciplinary nature of geography, encompassing sub-fields across the natural and social sciences as well as the humanities, positions EUGEO as a prime domain for examining gender disparities in academia. Notably, women are more prevalent in the humanities but underrepresented in the natural sciences (Blumen and Bar-Gal, 2006).

By adopting gender lenses, this research aims to assess and understand inclusivity and representation at the conference, exploring researchers' perceptions of participation, engagement and opportunities. The study also seeks to identify factors contributing to observed disparities, and to propose recommendations for fostering greater inclusivity and equity at future EUGEO Congresses.

This paper is divided into four sections, including this introduction. The following sections are: Methodology, which presents the main methods for data collection and analysis; Results and Discussion, which first addresses the profile of conference participants and then focuses on the experiences reported by volunteers and survey respondents; and last, final considerations are made which summarise the main reflections, limitations and questions for future research.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Conference overview

The 9th EUGEO Congress, themed "Geography for Our Common Future" took place at the Faculty of Geography and History at the University of Barcelona (UB) from 4th to 7th September 2023 (Figure 1). It was coordinated by an organising committee, comprising a president and members of the board of the *Societat Catalana de Geografia* (SCG) [Catalan Society of Geography], which was responsible for venue selection, speaker recruitment and coordination; and a scientific committee supporting these activities. Chairs were tasked with selecting session participants, moderating discussions, introducing speakers, managing session schedules, ensuring adherence to conference rules, facilitating discussions and coordinating audience interactions to maintain conference flow. In addition, volunteers assisted with specific conference activities, including administering questionnaires and collecting data for this analysis. It is worth noting that the chairs were researchers who had responded to an open call for sessions from the conference organisers. During this call, researchers worldwide had the opportunity to propose one or more sessions to be included in the conference's programme schedule. All of them ultimately served as chairs during the conference, as all proposed sessions were accepted.

Figure 1. EUGEO Congress entrance



Source: Photograph by Imma Minguez.

To showcase Catalonia and Europe's linguistic diversity, the organising committee hosted the conference in Catalan, Spanish, French and English. This promoted linguistic inclusion and extended the conference's global reach, with English as the main language for international scientific events. However, this decision added organisational complexity, requiring the website and official communications to be in all four languages, oral presentations and posters in these languages, and simultaneous translations for the opening and closing ceremonies.

A team of 49 volunteers, comprising students from Catalan universities and members of the SCG, monitored the running of 131 sessions during the conference. They were predominantly doctoral students from diverse backgrounds (e.g. Catalonia and Latin American countries), as well as undergraduate students, associate professors and SCG members.

In terms of general conference attendance, 710 delegates were registered for the four days of the conference, with 131 sessions covering diverse topics relating to geography and addressing the challenges of the 21st century.

To provide financial support for researchers in more insecure situations, the organising committee was able to provide up to 33 subsidised places, regardless of gender. Apart from this, no other actions were taken by the conference organisers to encourage participation, especially regarding women. The sole initiative for addressing women's issues involved distributing information detailing the process for reporting sexist behaviour, and directing individuals



to the organisers' helpdesk. A conference representative would promptly engage the gender representative of the Faculty of Geography and History at the University of Barcelona (UB) to address the concerns.

Prior permission was obtained from the conference organisers to carry out this study, which was the initiative of the lead author of this article. However, chairs were not notified about the study, to ensure that the results accurately reflected the typical behaviour of chairs and conference participants. We made sure to aggregate all session data, with no collection of personal or identifying information about any individual.

## *2.2. Data Collection*

The data collection process included three main groups of qualitative and quantitative data: (i) on the profile of conference organisers and delegates; (ii) on the perceptions of volunteers regarding the way conference participants behaved and the integrated discussions during the event; and (iii) on the profile, preferences and feelings of some of the participants surveyed post-conference. This combination provided a rich dataset for a comprehensive analysis of the conference, allowing us to better understand the dynamics, experiences and demographics of the participants.

### *2.2.1. Data collection during the conference*

First, the company in charge of the organisation of the conference provided a full list of participants, classified by type of engagement (volunteers, general participants, poster presenters, oral communicators, chairs, the organising committee and the scientific committee). Second, during the conference, the group of volunteers assisted us in analysing each of the 131 sessions held over the four days of the conference (Figure 2).

On 6 July we held an initial online meeting with volunteers, expressing gratitude for their response to the call, outlining the conference programme and its key features and explaining their assigned tasks. Following the meeting, volunteers were asked to indicate their availability for conference days using a provided form. With this information, we organised volunteers to ensure each conference session had a designated data collector for our research. Before the conference began, we established a WhatsApp group for ongoing communication. Additionally, on the first conference day, we conducted an early morning in-person meeting to review data collection procedures using a standard form and to clarify their responsibilities throughout the event.

Thanks to the volunteers' efforts, we collected quantitative data for each session, including the number of session organisers, presenters and audience members, as well as the age of participants involved in the debate. Additionally, qualitative data supplemented this information, with volunteers identifying debate participants and their gender (male, female or non-binary) based on their perceptions. Volunteers also responded to three questions: Did you notice any differences in interventions related to gender? Or age? And a final question

Figure 2. Volunteer taking notes during the conference



Source: Photograph by Imma Minguez.

in which they were invited to share any observations they had regarding gender and age dynamics within the sessions.

These efforts included analysing the list of participants by session to identify potential gender disparities. Sessions were categorised by branches of geography: Human, Environmental, Political, Urban, Gender, Transport and Rural. Of the 131 sessions, we focused on those with the greatest gender disparity, classifying their subject matter according to these branches.

### *2.2.2. Data collection after the conference*

To gain a deeper understanding, in November 2023 an online questionnaire was distributed voluntarily to all registered conference delegates to explore their involvement, motivations and experiences at the conference. A total of 142 respondents completed the post-conference questionnaire, representing 20.0% of overall participants. Of the respondents, 49.3% were women, 48.6% were men and 2.1% chose not to disclose or did not answer (DK/DA). This diverse group provided additional information on their profiles, including age and ethnicity. Participants were also asked about their roles at the conference, such as session chairs, volunteers, audience members or presenters (oral or poster). The questionnaire sought subjective experiences, encouraging reflections on feelings during conference engagement, aiming to capture emotional and experiential aspects. Available in Spanish, Catalan, French and English, the questionnaire aligned with the conference's multilingual nature. Before answering the questionnaire, respondents were asked to confirm that they were aware of the research



objectives and that they authorised the use of their responses, which were anonymised to encourage candid feedback. Aggregated data was analysed to identify trends, patterns and potential areas for improvement in future scientific events.

### *2.3. Data Analysis*

#### *2.3.1. Profile of conference participants*

The profile of conference participants was analysed using statistical descriptive analysis and tests conducted with SPSS software (Chi-square test), combined with qualitative data analysis. We approached the results in two phases, first characterising respondents profiles generally and by gender; and second, looking at respondents' profiles more closely, collecting data on gender, age, ethnicity/race and origin, as these could provide insights for further analysis of their preferences and feelings. For pragmatic and methodological reasons, we treated gender as a binary category in data analysis, despite collecting data using three categories: female, male and others (encompassing other gender types). This decision was due to the low percentage of respondents selecting "others" and to facilitate representation of the results. We acknowledge that this approach may not fully reflect social reality and that the "others" category may be ambiguous, failing to capture the full spectrum of gender identities.

#### *2.3.2. Exploring the Conference Participation Experience*

The perceptions captured by volunteers at each session during the conference, as well as those captured by the post-conference online questionnaires with general participants, were analysed in two ways: (i) Quantitative analysis was employed to ascertain the types of participation chosen, as well as whether they engaged in debates and how they felt about it, also according to gender; (ii) Qualitative analysis to look at how these experiences were narrated by volunteers and survey respondents, and to identify patterns and differences between genders. Despite the small survey set, it is valid as it represents 20% of the conference's participants. This methodological choice ensures the robustness and validity of our findings within the data constraints.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

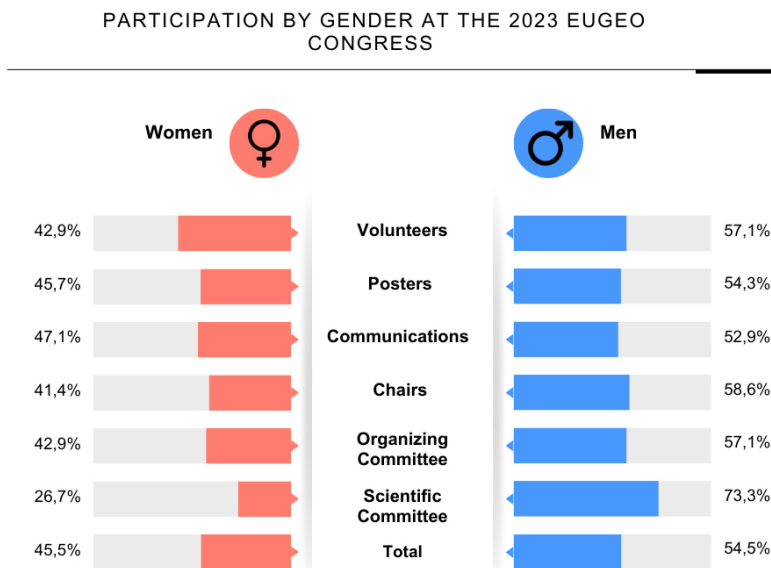
### *3.1. Quantitative gender differences at the EUGEO Congress*

This section analyses gender differences at the 2023 EUGEO Congress, and covers participant demographics and post-conference survey data. It reveals some gender imbalances across roles and participation levels, potentially impacting overall inclusivity in the geographical community.

#### *3.1.1. Profile of conference participants*

According to the organisers, a total of 710 attendees were registered at the 2023 EUGEO Congress, of whom 54.5% (n=387) were male and 45.5%

**Figure 3.** Gender participation at the 2023 EUGEO Congress (n=710). The participants are categorised as volunteers, poster presenters, communicators, chairs, organising committee and scientific committee

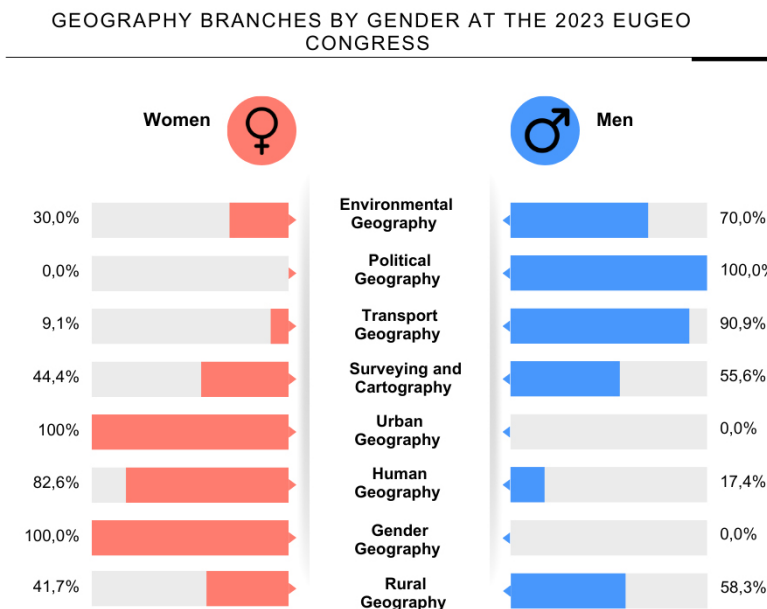


Source: Own elaboration.

(n=323) female. However, examining categories such as volunteers, poster presenters, oral communicators, chairs, the organising committee and the scientific committee reveals distinct patterns. Figure 3 gives an overview of gender participation across these categories. Balanced gender distribution was observed in oral and poster communications, with a slight majority of men though not notably different. This also reflected the general attendance percentages observed at the conference. This is noteworthy given that a process of masculinisation of undergraduate studies has been observed, at least in the case of Catalonia. While there is a subtle male predominance (i.e. more than approximately a 15-percentage-point difference) in volunteerism, organising committee and chair roles, the disparity is not significantly pronounced. Furthermore, the most notable gender imbalance emerges in the scientific committee, where an overwhelming majority, 73.3%, are men.

The prevalence of men in higher hierarchical roles, as noted in previous studies (Hoyt, 2010; Burkinshaw, 2015), mirrors our findings. First, as academic environments usually have a higher proportion of men (King et al., 2018), and this is also true in the case of geography studies (Rigg et al., 2012; Maddrell et al., 2016; Schurr et al., 2020), it was expected that there would be a higher predominance of chairs proposing sessions, although this was only subtly observed in practice during the conference.

**Figure 4.** Gender disparities by geography branch in selected sessions of the 2023 EUGEO Congress (n=117)



Source: Own elaboration.

As Isbell et al. (2014) observe, in the case of conferences and symposia, there is a correlation between women serving on organising committees and the presence of female participants at conferences. In the specific case of the 2023 EUGEO Congress, this was linked to the hierarchical positions beyond the organising committee's intentions, as men holding higher-level positions at invited institutions also influenced the increased participation of men at the closing session. This aligns with the glass ceiling phenomenon (Aufvenne et al., 2021), in which the gender gap in higher academic positions leads to disparities in decision-making and participation. Additionally, it extends to the lack of provision for maternal/parental care at the conference facilities, which may deter female participation, given that traditional childcare responsibilities fall on women (D'Ávila, 2019). Overall, this lack of support likely poses a significant barrier to women's involvement in decision-making and academic settings (Calisi and WG Mothers in Science, 2018; D'Ávila, 2019).

On the other hand, despite a slightly higher male presence among the chairs, who are responsible for reviewing and approving contributions, the resulting approvals did not show gender differences, as evidenced by similar proportions of posters and oral communications between male and female groups. This raises the question: Why has the Matilda effect (Aufvenne et al., 2021) not been reflected in the chairs' choice of these works?

We also observed notable gender differences in the topics covered in the geography sessions, grouped by geography branch, at the conference. Figure 4 shows the gender distribution within geography branches, in sessions with a greater difference between men and women. Several branches are male dominated, including Environmental Geography (70.0% male), Political Geography (100.0% male) and Transport Geography (90.9% male). Conversely, Gender Geography (100.0% female), Urban Geography focussing on urban vitality and neighbourhood experiences (100.0% female) and Human Geography (82.6% female), which were related to global change and sustainable future alternatives to global change processes, have a higher female presence. Finally, in Surveying and Cartography there was a clear difference between sessions on remote sensing topics, which were predominantly male, and sessions on participatory mapping approaches, which were predominantly female. This is why two colours are depicted with nearly equal presence in this branch.

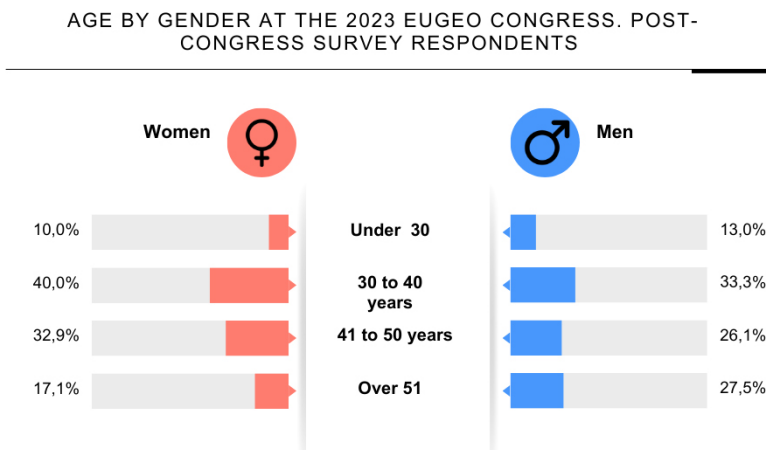
These results refer to traditional trends in geography studies, observed in some contexts such as The Netherlands, where “technique, mathematics, money and power are male-dominated domains in geography, while culture, human relations and human life are more female domains” (Droogleever, 2004: 137-138). Gender inequalities in the field of geography are not harmless; as Schurr et al. (2020) observe, the absence of female authors in some textbooks has a direct impact on which topics and issues are deemed relevant for inclusion. In this regard, the inclusion of women in geography in textbooks of recent decades – who are mostly white, Anglophone, able-bodied and based in the global north – has expanded the discipline to include topics such as gender, sexuality, race, disability, care, community building and intimacy, as well as traditionally overlooked areas such as the home and the body (Mountz and Hyndman, 2006; Valentine, 2008; Schurr et al., 2020). Their presence on leading sites of geographical knowledge production obscures the barriers that keep others – particularly scholars of colour, Indigenous scholars and non-native speakers – off these sites (Schurr et al., 2020). Addressing diversity requires confronting not only gender inequality but also racism, Anglocentrism, classism and heteronormativity (Schurr and Segebart, 2012; Mollett and Faria, 2018).

### *3.1.2. Profile of post-conference survey respondents*

Respondents included men (48.6%), women (49.3%) and those who did not answer or were unsure of their gender (2.1%). This gender distribution is more balanced than the overall conference attendance, where men outnumbered women by almost ten percentage points. This may indicate that women were more interested in providing feedback on the conference, as the proportion of women responding to the survey was greater than the proportion of women who attended the conference.

The results of the post-conference survey show a diverse age distribution (Figure 5), with most respondents in the 30-50 age group and the fewest in the

Figure 5. Age of post-congress survey respondents by gender (n=142)



Source: Own elaboration.

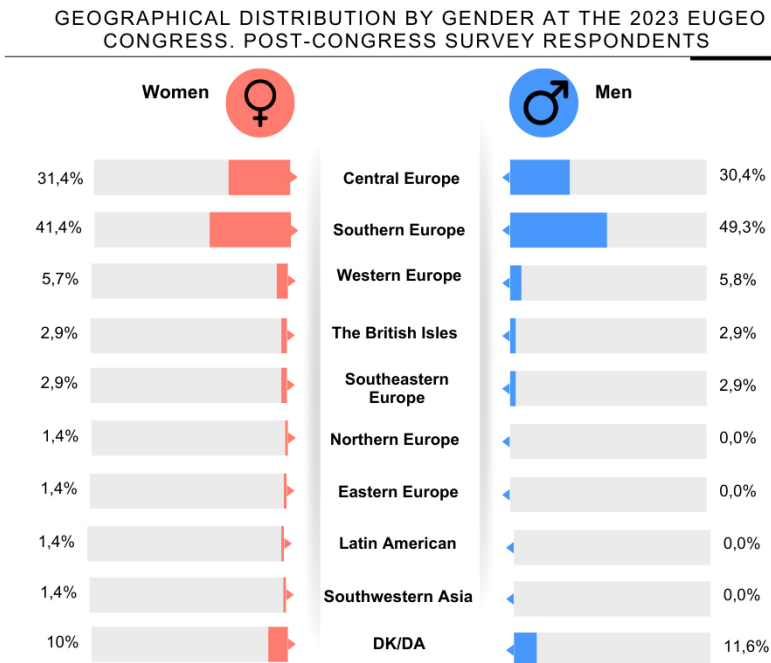
under-30 age group. Women were more likely to be in the 30-50 age group, while men were more likely to be in the under 30 and over 50 categories, especially over 50, indicating a significant gender gap in this age group.

The data also reveal significant variations in the geographical distribution of respondents (Figure 6). Many respondents came from universities in southern and central Europe. Women came from a wider range of regions, while men came mainly from central and southern Europe, the British Isles and western Europe, with a notable higher proportion of men from southern Europe.

In terms of race/ethnicity (Figure 7), almost three quarters of respondents identified as White. A notable proportion of respondents chose not to disclose their racial or ethnic identity, while a sizeable number identified as Latin American. Categories such as combined race/ethnicity, 'other' and South Asian were less represented. Gender differences in racial identification were minimal, although slightly more women identified as White and more men identified as Latino. A few respondents, both men and women, identified with combined race/ethnicity, mainly combinations involving Latino and White.

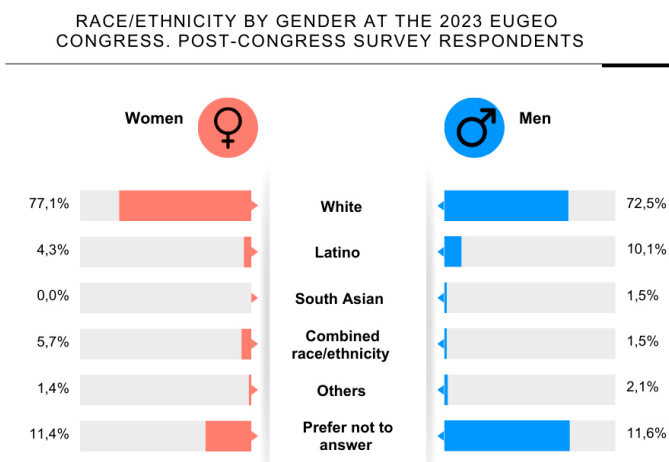
Given that the results of the questionnaire, completed by approximately 20% of the conference delegates, are considered representative of the conference as a whole, and in the absence of collected gender, race/ethnicity, origin, or age information during registration, these results may encourage discussions about gender representation dynamics and the challenges faced by conference participants at various life stages. Effectively, the results may emphasise factors affecting regional representation, including mobility opportunities and academic networks. Furthermore, they raise questions about gender and racial representation in academic settings, as well as their possible intersections.

Figure 6. Geographical distribution of post-congress survey respondents by gender (n=142)



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 7. Race/ethnicity of post-congress survey respondents by gender (n=142)



Source: Own elaboration.



### *3.2. Gender differences in conference experience*

In this section we look at the qualitative findings from the volunteers' surveys and the post-conference questionnaires completed by conference delegates, and we show the gender differences perceived by both groups during the EUGEO Congress.

#### *3.2.1. Volunteers' perceptions*

First, volunteers observed gender-based disparities in debate participation during conference sessions. There were higher participation rates by men in 61 out of 131 sessions, while women led in only 10 sessions. Men frequently asked more questions and dominated discussions even in predominantly female audiences. Comments addressing the greater participation of men can be summarised by the following responses: "Only men ask questions and they do so more than once." and "Although the majority of the audience was female, most of the questions were asked by men." Likewise, Hinsley et al. (2017) and Gunther et al. (2017) found that male researchers ask more questions than their female counterparts.

Conversely, in the few sessions where greater participation by women was observed, the following comments are notable: "More participation by women. The topic required it: urban planning from a gender perspective," "There were more women at the meeting, they presented themselves as members of the public and asked questions," and "A female participant was the first to intervene, breaking the atmosphere of silence in the room with kindness and empathy." We note that women's involvement may be linked to specific geographical topics and a higher engagement when the overall group comprises more women.

Second, our volunteers made observations related to the duration of the interventions or the type of intervention. Both male and female volunteers noted that, despite the gender balance in the messages presented and in the audience, men spoke more often and spent more time commenting or asking questions. For example, "The only difference I noticed was that women made comments, not questions, while men asked questions," or "Men's interventions are longer. On two occasions, the women were a little more insecure when presenting their contributions or repeating themselves. Women reformulate what they have said if it has not been understood."

Finally, in some sessions volunteers observed that senior academics, mostly men, were more likely to participate, even though the audience was of different ages: "Almost all men participated. The older people tended to make longer introductions, contribute and show their knowledge," and "There has been more participation from men and those over 50 years old, despite having more female attendees."

#### *3.2.2. Experience and perception of questionnaire respondents*

Questionnaire respondents primarily focus on their conference experience, participation preferences and potential involvement in debates. First, their motivations for attending the conference and their feelings and perceptions

during the event are examined. Second, the types of participation chosen are analysed quantitatively and qualitatively, along with motivations for these choices. Lastly, participation levels are evaluated quantitatively and respondents' feelings about involvement in the debate are assessed using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

### *Motivations for coming to the conference*

Both women and men attending the conference were motivated by similar reasons, such as networking, establishing cooperation and presenting or disseminating research (Figure 8). Career progression and personal interests were mentioned less frequently by both groups as well. Hinsley et al. (2017) highlighted similar motivations in their study, that is, building reputation, establishing and maintaining professional networks and developing international collaboration. Additionally, both groups acknowledged the importance and reputation of EUGEO as a scientific event, with many being regular participants. However, a subtle difference between the genders emerged: women placed greater emphasis on learning from others, sharing research, incorporating new perspectives and staying updated in their field, while men focused more on receiving feedback, international recognition of the event (especially at the European level) and the opportunity to travel or visit Barcelona.

In addition, women also mentioned other factors such as interesting topics in the event programme, inspiration, and English communication skills, albeit

Figure 8. Conference participants socialising



Source: Photograph by Imma Minguez.

less often: “Networking, meeting others who work on similar topics, inspiration, learning what research others are doing” (female delegate, 30-40, Germany), “To meet and talk to researchers from other countries about the subject of my research” (female delegate, 40-50, Brazil), and “I regularly attend EUGEO Congress in order to present my research results, to hear the latest research results from my colleagues from other countries, to establish cooperation” (female delegate, 40-50, Croatia).

Conversely, men highlighted the importance of incorporating international perspectives and geographic proximity, among others: “As an early-career researcher, I considered EUGEO a valuable opportunity to make contacts and interact with an international audience” (male delegate, 30-40, Italy), “To present scientific results. To get feedback on my results. To get inspiration from other researchers. To learn new research methods. To meet other researchers and build new contacts. To get to know the recent trends” (male delegate, 30-40, Hungary), and “Opportunity to present my research at a prestigious conference. Opportunity to visit Barcelona” (male delegate, over 50, Italy).

#### *Feelings and perceptions during the conference*

Most participants gave a positive evaluation of the conference. Their responses reflected assessments of various aspects, including the conference venue’s amenities, interactions with others and personal experiences. Women and men used similar language to describe their perceptions and feelings, such as “comfortable” and “good/well”. As Settles and O’Connors (2014) observe, for the most part men and women did not differ in general conference perceptions. However, women tended to emphasise the supportive environment more, using words such as “welcome”, “supported”, “relaxed”, “familiar” and “friendly”, while men focused on individual feelings like “satisfied” and “at ease”.

Regarding the conference venue, women showed a more integral and intimate relationship, ranging from the lack of air conditioning and snacks to the perception of the rooms where the meetings took place, such as: “The environment was very comfortable” (female delegate, 30-40, Portugal), or “The place and rooms were cosy and nice” (female delegate, 40-50, Poland). They mentioned feeling more comfortable in smaller sessions: “I felt better in the smaller, more targeted sessions” (female delegate, 30-40, Italy). Conversely, men focused on the building and the host city, for example that “It was very well organised, in a nice building, in the centre of beautiful Barcelona with lots of sessions and social events” (male delegate, 30-40, Croatia). They also suggested increasing room comfort but to answer the need for informal meeting spaces: “It was a shame that there was no physical room for informal meetings during the sessions. Incorporate new members/students/solitary people more” (male delegate, under 30, Czechia).

In terms of interactions with others, women noted positive experiences, following the idea of a supportive and welcoming atmosphere, such as “I felt welcomed and supported, and overall the conference felt relaxed and well organised” (female delegate, under 30, Ireland), or “Everyone was kind and

interested in what I had to say” (female delegate, 40-50, Italy). In contrast, while men also highlighted the positive atmosphere, for example: “The feeling was one of confidence” (male delegate, 40-50, Spain) they focused on opportunities for networking and dialogue (Settles and O’Connor, 2014): “The sessions were welcoming and fostered dialogue, as did the informal meetings with other participants” (male delegate, 30-40, Italy).

Women were more likely to mention negative experiences, such as feeling excluded from discussions or facing audience disrespect. For example, “I didn’t feel comfortable during my presentation because I had the impression that some people in the room did not respect the topic I had chosen” (female delegate, under 30, Poland), or “The chair of the session where I presented largely ignored me” (female delegate, 40 to 50, Germany). Some expressed concerns about networking opportunities and presentation nerves. For instance: “I always feel some tension to make sure everything goes well” (female delegate, over 50, Spain).

Some manifestations of sexism that others have identified, such as exclusion from discussions and activities (Biggs et al., 2014), can also be subtly inferred from responses to this question. Consequently, women may perceive the conference atmosphere as more sexist, feeling more excluded than men and, consequently, not fully taking advantage of these professional meetings, which are known to be valuable extensions of the academic workplace (Settles and O’Connor, 2014). This is evident even when women express overall positive feelings about the conference, as they are more likely to highlight negative situations in positive answers. Atmosphere cues conveying sexism, such as reputation, actions, beliefs and materials, may signal to women that they do not belong, potentially contributing to their intentions to leave academia (Biggs et al., 2014). Increasing the numerical representation of women has been suggested as an effort to mitigate sexist atmospheres (Biggs et al., 2014; Biernat and Hawley, 2017).

### *Participation format and feelings*

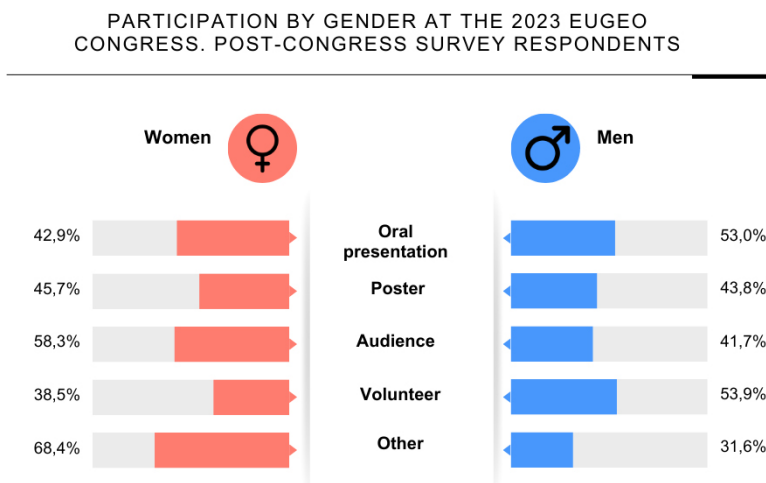
When asked about the type of participation (Table 1), respondents indicated that they mainly participated as oral presenters (n=115; 65.7%). Other types of participation were posters (n=16; 9.1%), volunteers (n=13; 7.4%), audience (n=12; 6.9%) and others (n=19; 10.9%).

**Table 1.** Conference participation by post-conference survey respondents

Type of participation	n	%
Oral presentation	115	65.7
Poster	16	9.1
Volunteer	13	7.4
Audience	12	6.9
Others	19	10.9
Total	175	100.0

Source: Own elaboration.

**Figure 9.** Participation in 2023 EUGEO Congress by gender, post-congress survey respondents (n=175). As responses do not encompass an “others” category, the combined percentages for women and men may fall short of 100%



Source: Own elaboration.

Looking at gender differences (Figure 9), men slightly outnumber women in oral presentations (53.0% vs. 46.1%), while women slightly outnumber men in poster presentations (50.0% vs. 43.8%). Women also outnumber men in the audience (58.3% vs. 41.7%) and in other roles (68.4% vs. 31.6%), while men are more likely to be volunteers (53.9% vs. 38.5%).

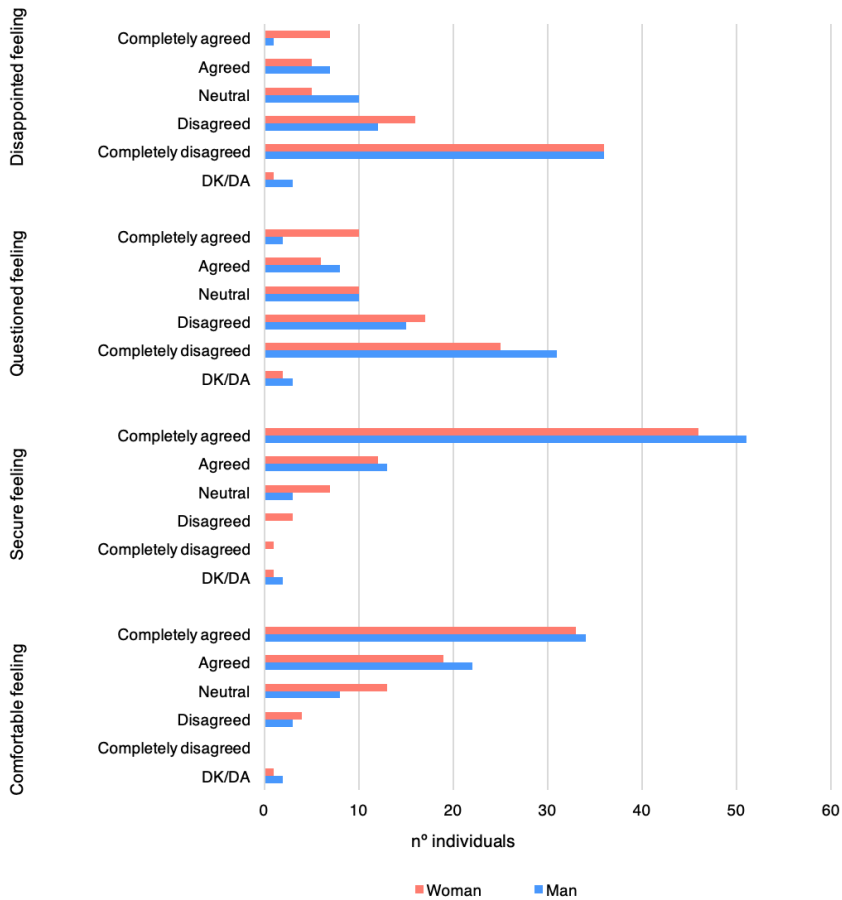
The data in Figure 10 illustrates how participants felt during presentations. A significant number of respondents felt secure and comfortable, indicating that many participants experienced positive emotions. However, some felt neutral or disagreed, suggesting individual differences. The low number of participants who felt questioned implies that most did not find the environment contentious, although a few did. Additionally, varied responses regarding disappointment point to dissatisfaction issues. These nuanced findings suggest the need for a deeper discussion on participant experiences, the factors affecting them and strategies to create positive and engaging conference environments.

Gender differences in feeling comfortable when presenting show slight variations. In general, women were more likely to be disappointed in their intervention, feel questioned during presentations and express concerns about safety during presentations, while fewer women felt comfortable during their presentations. These findings suggest nuanced gender differences that could guide strategies to improve the presentation experience for all participants.

#### *Reasons for the selection of the presentation format*

Both women and men preferred oral presentations or audience participation over posters (Figure 11), primarily due to networking opportunities. Women

**Figure 10.** Participation feelings post-congress, survey respondents by gender (n=568). Total respondents n=142



Source: Own elaboration.

additionally highlighted the effectiveness of oral presentations for disseminating research findings, facilitating discussions, exchanging knowledge and experiences and promoting research. They also mentioned reasons such as convening experts on specific topics, familiarity with the format, gaining experience, providing more information about their research and ensuring representation of their topics in conference sessions. Reasons included, “To gain more experience, build a broader network and communicate the results of my research” (female delegate, under 30, Ireland), and “I wanted to present my work and receive feedback, that’s why I chose the oral presentation” (female delegate, 40-50, Portugal).



Figure 11. Sessions during the conference



Source: Photograph by Imma Minguez.

In contrast, men focused more on exchanging feedback with the audience. Moreover, men mentioned feeling comfortable or skilled in verbal communication, presenting research in greater depth, adhering to the customary conference participation format, improving English proficiency, strengthening connections within research projects, testing gathered information for future initiatives (e.g., special issues or research methods), and one organiser highlighted a personal scientific responsibility to sustain the field: “Because I enjoy the role of speaker more than others” (male delegate, 40-50, Italy), and “The possibility of direct contact and discussion with researchers involved in my discipline” (male delegate, over 50, Poland). This difference between women and men regarding the idea of participating, with men saying that they feel comfortable or skilled in verbal communication, may be linked with the findings of Isbell et al. (2014), which emphasise that generally men dominate visibility at conferences.

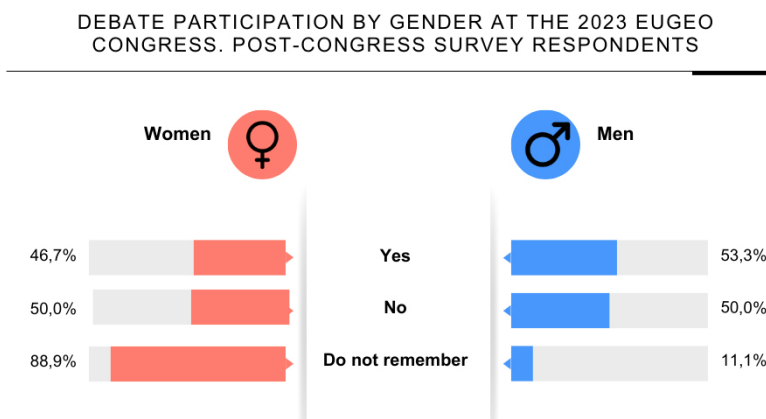
#### *Debate participation and feelings*

Most respondents participated in conference debates, with a slightly higher proportion of men, as shown in Figure 12. As for how participants felt about debates (Figure 13), the data provided highlights predominantly positive perceptions of comfort and security. The prevalence of disagreement with feelings of disappointment raises questions about the significance of debate outcomes and participants’ emotional investment in them.

Gender differences in debate comfort were minimal, while more women both agreed and strongly disagreed about feeling disappointed. In general, women felt slightly more questioned than men, while men felt more confident and comfortable.

These results reveal gender differences in perceptions and experiences during debates. Women were less likely to feel comfortable and secure, while men tended to report higher levels of agreement or disagreement with, respectively, feeling secure and questioned. These findings prompt discussions about factors contributing to discomfort and insecurity, such as social dynamics,

**Figure 12.** Debate participation at the EUGEO Congress 2023 by gender, post-congress survey respondents (n=139)



Source: Own elaboration.

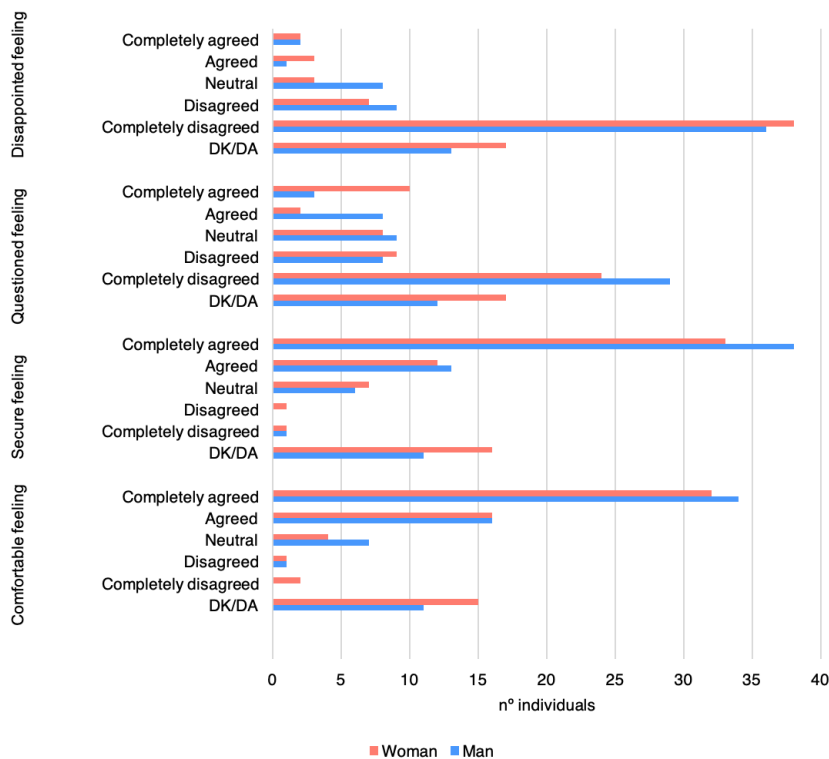
power imbalances and communication styles, as well as the challenges faced by participants and potential gender biases in debate structures. Men were more likely to give neutral responses, especially regarding comfort and disappointment, which may indicate genuine neutrality or reluctance to express an opinion. Additionally, women were more likely to give no response or show uncertainty, challenging societal expectations regarding expressing opinions.

### *Reasons to participate in the debate*

This analysis focuses on two complementary questions: “If you participated in the debate (asked questions or made comments), for what reason did you do so?” and “If you did not participate, for what reason did you not participate?”. Overall, participants expressed interest in the research, sought clarification on specific issues and desired to engage in debate and interact with colleagues: “For two reasons: to understand the message better and also to make suggestions” (male delegate, 30-40, Switzerland), and “To show my interest in the research presented, to increase my knowledge on the issues presented” (female delegate, 30-40, France).

Besides general similarities, subtle differences persist between women and men. Men often highlight their participation as a means of contributing to discussions, emphasising the importance of discussion for scientific progress and academic life, such as discussing future publications. Some men expressed surprise at this question, noting that for them active participation is a fundamental aspect of conference attendance. When asked about reasons for non-participation, some reiterated their involvement in debates. This suggests they may not realise that others do not always feel comfortable asking questions or commenting on presentations: “What’s the point of attending a meeting if you

**Figure 13.** Participation feelings post-congress, survey respondents by gender (n=568). Total respondents n=142



Source: Own elaboration.

don't actually participate in the discussion?" (male delegate, 40-50, Italy) and "This is a strange question. Participation is the basis of a conference" (male, 40-50, Belgium). In contrast, some women expressed their intention to participate in debates to encourage others, indicating this as an ongoing concern: "I asked questions to encourage others to participate" (female delegate, over 50, Spain). Women were also more likely to cite reasons for not participating, such as discomfort with English, shyness or insecurity: "I felt comfortable during the sessions, but I could not speak because I was insecure and worried about the judgement of the other lecturers" (female delegate, 30 to 40, Italy).

Furthermore, the results reveal that the organising committee's decision to hold the conference in multiple languages can cause significant discomfort. While it was generally well received by conference attendees, some participants expressed disagreement, deeming it impractical and unnecessary. Among those whose first language is English, feelings of frustration arose due to the need to use languages other than English, leading to occasional difficulties in unders-

tanding communications. Conversely, individuals with limited proficiency in English reported feeling unable to participate in debates due to a lack of confidence in asking questions in English.

Five participants from Portugal, Brazil or Italy felt that Portuguese or Italian should have been considered as official languages of the conference. One participant from Brazil said, “The first point to raise is the language issue. The Portuguese language is part of the European and Latin American geographical community, with several Brazilians taking part in the meeting. I thought it was disrespectful not to allow the presentation in Portuguese” (female delegate, 40-50). Similarly, a participant from Italy said, “I believe that it is not only the Spanish who can ask for their language to have the same importance as the English language. All European languages should have the same importance. For example, also in this questionnaire” (male delegate, over 50).

The conference’s addition of three languages besides English acknowledges regional multilingualism and aligns with recent discussions on diversifying academic spaces, challenging Anglocentrism. However, resistance to this shift highlights a lack of global understanding within geography, emphasising the need to prioritise “worlding geography” at scientific events (Müller, 2021). Hohti and Truman (2021) noted that tacit agreements resist change but emphasised the importance of modest beginnings in enhancing mutual understanding and improving shared linguistic frameworks, contributing to overall academic efficacy. Moreover, given the tendency for women to be less visible at such events, the additional challenge for non-Anglophone women exacerbates the issue. Hence, alongside efforts to broaden the canon by integrating contributions from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, initiatives such as promoting flexible English usage and allocating resources for non-Anglophone languages for international applications and events are imperative (Hohti and Truman, 2021; Müller, 2021). These measures address political and ethical concerns by advocating for improved inclusivity in academic environments, especially regarding linguistic diversity, which also exhibits specific manifestations in relation to gender.

## 4. Final remarks

### 4.1. *Research limitations*

Following our research, we have identified several aspects that warrant consideration for future studies on this topic. First, given that we only have data from this conference, it remains open to future use in other conferences to verify if it can be extrapolated. Second, we recommend expanding conference registration forms to capture detailed demographic data, including gender, race and origin, to facilitate more effective qualitative analyses. Third, providing gender perspective training to volunteers during sessions could improve observational accuracy by integrating a “purple lens” to capture subtle gender dynamics. Fourth, the post-conference questionnaires did not explicitly highlight gender differences, which may have limited the identification of

certain issues. However, we believe this approach also had benefits, allowing us to focus on subtle differences that exist even without a detailed investigation through questions. Fifth, conducting semi-structured interviews shortly after conferences, alongside questionnaires, could provide deeper insights into participant evaluations and opinions. The delay in sending questionnaires two months post-conference might have led to diminished recall. Sixth, focusing data collection on selected sessions would enable a more detailed analysis of debates, as well as of the duration of these interventions. Last, recognising gender as a non-binary construct in data collection and analysis is essential to comprehensively address gender imbalances. These individuals, akin to other racialised groups, may face discrimination and prejudice in academia. Future research should take these nuances into account in order to address gender inequalities more comprehensively, as well as the practical application of the methodology used.

#### *4.2. Final considerations*

Conferences are vital in academic life, fostering research development, idea exchange and networking. Individually, they enhance academic recognition, influencing researchers' careers. However, conferences are relational spaces that can be welcoming or uncomfortable depending on one's identity. They are multiple, open and hybrid spaces (Massey, 2013) where unequal power relations (Sharp, 2009) reflect academic hierarchies. Historically, universities have privileged certain identities (white and male), often making those with different gender or cultural identities feel marginalised (Oliver and Morris, 2020). Exploring this topic is essential as it sheds light on the dynamics at conferences that can either facilitate or hinder individual and collective research trajectories.

Our research at the 2023 EUGEO Congress revealed gender disparities, with more men registered, particularly in leadership roles. Session topics varied by gender, with women's sessions focusing on culture, human relations and life aspects, while men's sessions leaned towards technical, mathematical, financial and power-related topics. Attendees' motivations and experiences differed: women prioritised learning and sharing research, and valued supportive atmospheres, while men focused on networking opportunities and venue quality. Women also provided more detailed and nuanced responses about their feelings, whereas men were more concise and sometimes questioned the relevance of discussing feeling. Men participated more in debates, except when women dominated or in specific topics. Language nuances also played a role, with women emphasising knowledge-sharing and comfort, while men sought feedback and felt more confident. Understanding these nuances is essential for improving conference experiences, particularly for women, and for guiding future research directions towards addressing discomfort and promoting well-being.

Hinsley et al. (2017) have emphasised that concern regarding participation at conferences is not about women participating "poorly" due to their lower

visibility in Q&A sessions. Instead, they advocate for alternative conference participation methods in order to enhance inclusivity and comfort for all attendees, and they highlight the need for a code of conduct to address inequality and discrimination. Some discussions arising from our study concur, and further highlight certain proposals in order to promote creativity and inclusivity, challenging the rigid structures of traditional conferences to foster thoughtful reflection and engagement. These suggestions are:

- a) Conference venues should offer comfortable, accessible social spaces, including childcare facilities, to foster parental participation.
- b) Implementing a code of conduct should foster equity, inclusion and diversity, emphasising respect, open communication and diverse perspectives. It should encourage respectful debate, awareness of surroundings and reporting of problematic behaviour. Additionally, a list of “soft” recommendations could guide participants in maintaining a positive environment, such as encouraging established researchers to offer supportive feedback to less experienced colleagues.
- c) Conferences should strive for gender equality across all activities, including decision-making roles and sessions. Incorporating a gender and intersectional perspective is vital to ensure diversity. Despite its intentions, the 2023 EUGEO Congress did not achieve gender-balanced participation, particularly in the closing ceremony.
- d) Presentations could be carried out using inclusive space arrangements (e.g., with chairs arranged in a circle to break the dynamic of a single presenter and passive audience) and in small groups for collective question formulation, and should allow written questions. They could also be jointly presented to provide support, particularly for young or non-native language presenters.
- e) Because characteristics such as origin and race often intersect with gender, exacerbating barriers to participation and opportunity, incentives for women and minority groups are essential. This not only includes restructuring conference dynamics to accommodate diverse needs, and to be more flexible and welcoming, especially for participants with parenting responsibilities, but also allocating resources to enable the participation of women and other minority groups, such as through discounts or the availability of bursaries. It also includes emphasising the inclusion and mobilisation of languages other than English. Since language is another factor that intersects with gender issues and can increase limitations for women and other minority groups, such an approach can make these events more open and inclusive for non-Anglophone participants.

Finally, we emphasise that it is not only necessary to make an effort towards gender equity in scientific events, but also to consider this from the perspective of the broader geographic environment. This is arguably the main factor hindering the participation of more women in spaces for knowledge construction and debate within this discipline. For instance, at Catalan universities, the achieve-



ment of gender parity at conferences is becoming increasingly challenging due to the trend of masculinisation in undergraduate classrooms, as demonstrated by Pujol et al. (2012) and continuing more markedly in the present. Future research should focus on understanding and mapping gender differences and participation alternatives in geography studies. As mentioned before and elsewhere, it is particularly important because integrating diverse knowledge sets, influenced by scientific background, origin, personal experiences, values and beliefs, significantly enhances the relevance and applicability of scientific studies.

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