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GENDER REPRESENTATION IN THE EASL LIVER CANCER SUMMIT 2023: ASSESSING PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Background: Women are numerically underrepresented in the field of gastroenterology and hepatology. This study aims to characterize gender representation during the EASL Liver Cancer Summit 2023. Methods: Using data available on the LCS2023 online platform, we compared the distribution of moderators, speakers, and debaters in the Plenary and Industry Sessions. Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted using R Software 4.3.0. Results: In 75% (n=18) of the sessions, women were underrepresented, comprising less than 50% of the total speakers, debaters, or moderators. Conclusion: There is a gender disparity in the oral sessions, predominantly composed and mediated by men. Additionally, the study highlighted the need to broaden the discussion and identify mechanisms for greater inclusion and retention of women in hepatology careers.

KEYWORDS: Gender Equity, Liver Cancer. Female representation, Equity in conferences.

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INTRODUCTION

Gender diversity and equality in scientific conferences are crucial for promoting a balanced and inclusive scientific community, nevertheless, there exists a numerical underrepresentation of women in the fields of gastroenterology and hepatology⁽¹⁾. The EASL (European Association for Study of the Liver) has been at the forefront of championing these principles, evident in its Equality and Diversity policy statement⁽²⁾. The policy establishes the requirement for gender diversity in the governing board and emphasizes the need for a minimum representation of two females and two males on the scientific committee, out of six members. Additionally, to achieve gender parity in conference participation, the policy sets a minimum threshold of one-third female or male speakers and chairs at ILC/EASL events. Notably, the EASL has also implemented a male and female-specific speaker registry, further enhancing the potential for gender-balanced participation.

Gender Equality Month, celebrated by the EASL in March 2022, demonstrated the organization's commitment to mitigating gender disparities. As part of this celebration, the EASL organized the EASL YI Afterwork series: Live(r) Webinar on Overcoming Gender Gaps in Hepatology⁽³⁾. These initiatives highlight the commendable efforts made by the EASL to address gender inequality within the field.

Despite these pioneering efforts, it remains a subject of controversy whether the EASL Liver Cancer Summit achieves adequate and equitable representation of women. The purpose of this article is to critically examine the progress made and the challenges faced in ensuring gender balance within the summit. By shedding light on the current state of female representation, we aim to provide insights into potential strategies for further improvement.

METHODS

To examine the female representation in sessions of the EASL Liver Cancer Summit 2023, we collected data from the EASL platform containing information about the sessions⁽⁴⁾. For the purpose of this study, we focused on the positions of moderators, debaters, and speakers in panels, round tables, and activities within plenary or Industry Sessions. Presentations in the form of e-posters were not considered. The statistical analysis was performed descriptively using R Programming 4.3.0 and represented using a scatter plot.

RESULTS

The EASL Liver Cancer Summit featured 24 sessions, including plenary and Industry Sessions, held from April 20th to 22nd, 2023, in Portugal. While the EASL encourages female participation, out of the 47 mentioned guests on the website (moderators, speakers, and panelists), only 36% (n=17) were women, indicating a disparity in the number of invited guests.

Among the 24 oral sessions, 87.5% (n=21) had more men than women as speakers, moderators, and panelists. In 12.5% (n=3) of the sessions, there were more women than men, and these sessions took place on the last day of the event (Multidisciplinary care of patients with liver cancer, Multi-Disciplinary Tumour Board, and Systemic therapy of HCC in 2023). Only 16.7% (n=4) of the sessions were solely moderated by women, and all four sessions were Industry Sessions.

None of the plenary presentations were moderated and/or presented exclusively by women. More than one-third (n=8) of the sessions were solely moderated and presented by men. In 75% (n=18) of the sessions, women were underrepresented, comprising less than 50% of the total speakers, panelists, or moderators.

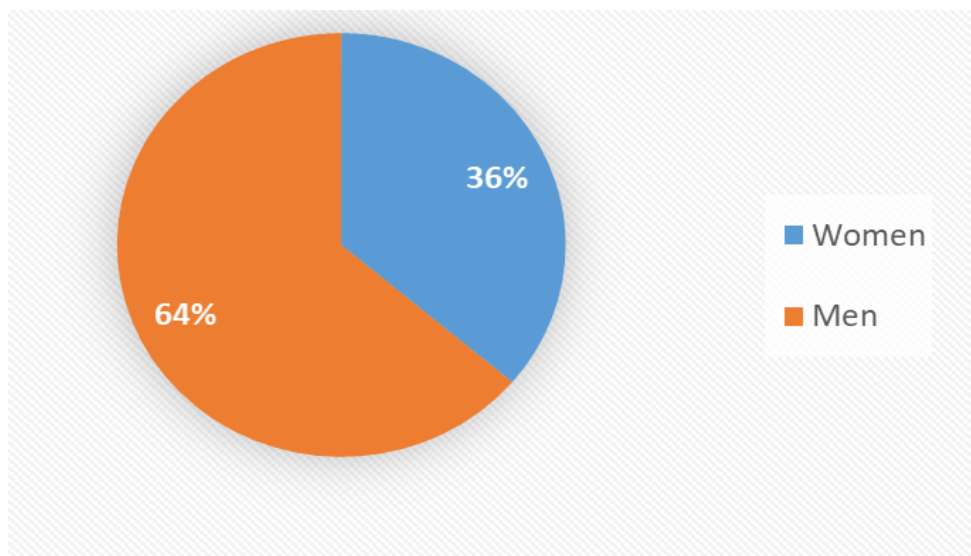


Figure 1 - Distribution of guests by gender at the EASL Liver Cancer Summit 2023. The graph analyzes the number of guests by gender in the sessions of this edition of the congress. To make this chart, we considered the positions of moderator, debater, and speaker, and all sessions of the congress' online programming. Of the 47 guests, 17 were women (36%) and 30 were men (64%). Source: Online Schedule of the EASL Liver Cancer Summit 2023.

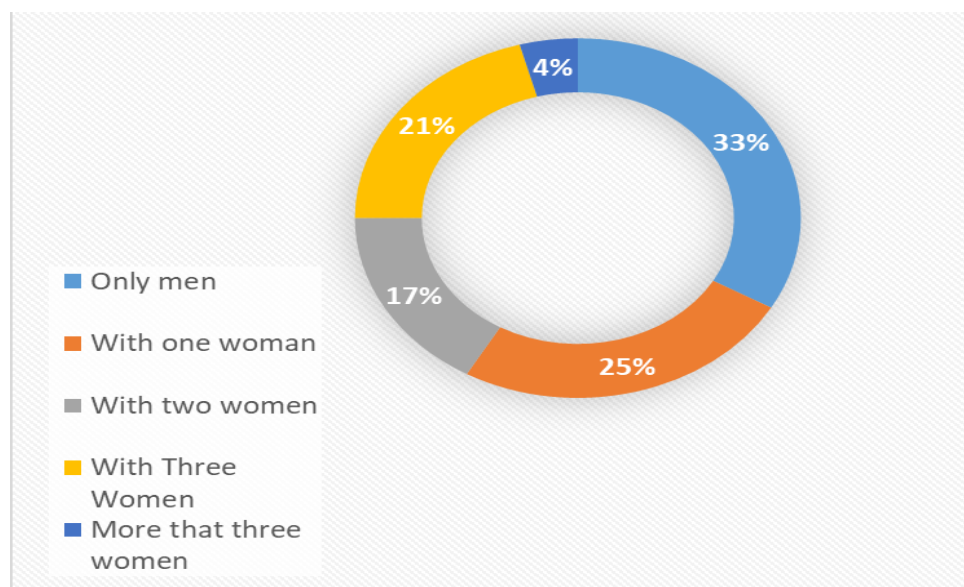


Figure 2 - Female representation in the sessions of the LCS2023. This chart analyzes the distribution of women and men in the 24 sessions of the congress' scientific program, in the form of panels, oral presentations, round tables, and industry sessions. To make this chart, we considered the positions of moderator, debater, and speaker. Source: Online Schedule of EASL Liver Cancer Summit 2023.

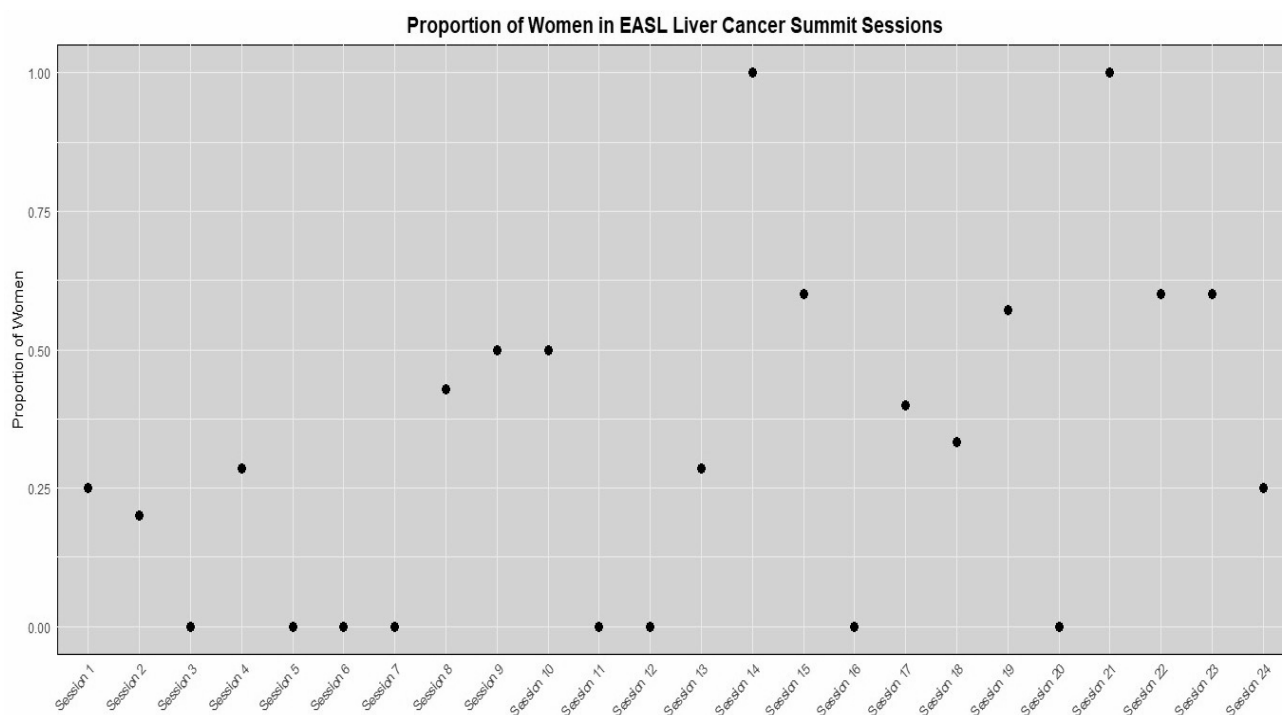


Figure 3 - Proportion of Women in EASL Liver Cancer Summit Sessions. Only two sessions had exclusively female speakers. 46% (n=11) of the sessions had a representation of women equal to or less than 25%. Source: Online Schedule of EASL Liver Cancer Summit 2023.

DISCUSSION

Female physicians participate in national conferences less frequently than their male counterparts, and commitments to childcare are often cited as a barrier, to some extent, worldwide (5). This lower frequency of women's participation can impact the development of their careers and subsequently result in a lower presence in leadership positions. There is also an impact of this subrepresentation by Gender of Recognition Award Recipients from Gastroenterology and Hepatology Professional Societies⁽⁶⁾, which relegates women to a less prominent position within scientific events. While this low representation is a recurring issue in other areas of medicine such as surgery, neurology, and anesthesia⁽⁷⁾, there is currently a gap in the literature

regarding the underrepresentation of women in hepatology events. To create a strong community with good career progression for its members, the scientific potential of the female contingent cannot be ignored. As an alternative to mitigate this issue, we suggest the following:

- **Enhancing Gender Diversity in Speaker Selection:** It is crucial to promote gender diversity when selecting speakers, moderators, and members of congress organizing committees. This proactive approach aims to achieve greater equity during the event, not only by including more women but also by considering other genders and ethnic minorities.
- **Strengthening Response Mechanisms against Gender Discrimination:** Institutions should establish and strengthen notification and response mechanisms to address cases of gender discrimination, as well as

moral and sexual harassment. These mechanisms play a vital role in providing a safe and inclusive environment for all participants.

- **Education on Gender Biases:** To address gender biases, both implicit and explicit, mandatory institutional courses on diversity, equity, and inclusion should be implemented for medical students, resident physicians, practicing physicians, and other health professionals. This education will help raise awareness and foster a more inclusive mindset within the medical community.

- **Family Planning Initiatives and Support:** Implementing family planning initiatives during graduation and residency is crucial. This includes providing comprehensive information on contraceptive methods, fertility, and assisted reproduction. Additionally, offering compatible maternity and paternity leave, flexible working hours, and on-site daycare facilities with adequate breastfeeding facilities will support individuals in achieving a work-life balance.

The mere inclusion of women in positions of leadership sends a powerful message of acceptance and acknowledgement of their worth. Moreover, women in leadership roles inherently understand the importance of supporting and advancing other women in their careers, following the principle of "lifting as you climb."⁽⁸⁾ This approach, coupled with a culture of mentorship, can significantly impact the growth and success of future generations of women hepatologists, alleviating the barriers that previous generations have had to overcome^(8,9).

CONCLUSION

The EASL's initiatives towards gender diversity and equality in the Liver Cancer Summit are commendable. However, the journey towards achieving adequate and equitable representation of

women is an ongoing one. This article serves as a call to action for the scientific community, urging continued discussions, research, and implementation of strategies to enhance gender diversity, inclusivity, and equality in scientific conferences. By doing so, we can foster a more vibrant and inclusive research environment that harnesses the talents and perspectives of all individuals, irrespective of gender. To ensure safe hepatology for all individuals, gender equality should be at the core of planning for every scientific society.

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