

Gender inequality and sexism are pervasive issues within the speech and debate community, particularly in rural areas. Female competitors often encounter biases that undermine their performance and recognition compared to their male peers. This article explores the manifestations of sexism in rural speech and debate and proposes attainable solutions to address these challenges.

As a coeducational extracurricular activity, speech and debate are not exempt from gender biases. Female participants frequently face unique challenges, including harsher judgment and diminished acknowledgment of their accomplishments. A panel discussion by [One Clap Speech and Debate](#), featuring five female leaders from Wyoming's speech and debate community, highlighted the impact of gender inequality in this sphere. The panelists revealed that gender bias manifests in various forms, from subtle discouragement to overt discrimination in ballots—written feedback from debate rounds.

The 2022 documentary, “Girl Talk,” further sheds light on the systemic challenges high school girls encounter in debate, such as being underestimated or subjected to biased judging criteria. These narratives underscore the pervasive nature of gender bias in competitive academic settings.

Empirical studies corroborate these experiences. Research by the [SSRN](#) analyzing 125,087 high school debate rounds found that all-female forensics, or speech and debate, teams were 17.1% less likely to win against all-male forensics teams, and mixed-gender forensics teams were 10% less likely to win. Additionally, female debaters were 30.3% more likely to leave the activity. These disparities can partly be attributed to the subjective nature of debate rounds, where norms surrounding what it means to be a “good” debater often play into already existing gender biases.

Even in my home state of West Virginia, gender biases within forensics are not uncommon. At a recent round table between West Virginia’s chapter of Equality in Forensics and IgniteHER that aimed to highlight the challenges faced by minorities within speech and debate and public speaking, one competitor revealed that she was constantly undermined by her male counterparts when she was in the prep room for extemporaneous speaking, or extemp. In this case, the prep room is where competitors in extemp will research and prepare their speeches before presenting them. A male competitor in the room, who was in there at the same time as her, had called her a “bimbo” – all while she was within earshot of his remarks.

Outside of ballots and discriminatory practices, the speech and debate community, more specifically, the rural speech and debate community, has long struggled with sexism. Even at local tournaments or practices, we, as females, often see male competitors or even coaches, who are also female, tell us that we should not compete in the event we are; often because we are “bimbos” or simply perceived to be incapable of learning the event at the same capacity as a male would.

Another competitor, who competed in West Virginia and on other circuits, recounted how numerous times male competitors she debated or she spectated were often aggressive towards her or other competitors. In the finals round of one Tournament of Champions qualifying tournament, a male debater was, to put it lightly, harsh and not-the-nicest to his opponent, who was a female. In the previous year of an elimination round for prose interpretation at the same tournament, a male competitor from the same school was mocking a female competitor during her performance — this affected the competitor so much so that she had called his behavior out mid-round, asking for him to be removed.

Clearly, it is evident that gender bias and sexism within speech and debate, particularly in rural areas like Wyoming and West Virginia, is extremely prevalent, if not mainstream. So, what can we do to minimize these biases? I would like to offer the following solutions:

1. **Bias Awareness and Training:** Implementing comprehensive training programs for judges, coaches, and participants can help identify and mitigate implicit biases. Educating our community about the existence and impact of gender bias and sexism is a crucial step toward fostering a more fair and impartial environment.
2. **Mentorship Programs:** Establishing mentorship opportunities for female debaters with experienced women in the field. These relationships provide guidance, support, and advocacy, empowering young female competitors to navigate and challenge the biases they encounter.
3. **Community Engagement:** Engaging the broader community in discussions about gender inequality in speech and debate can foster a culture of support and awareness. Hosting workshops, panels, and open forums encourages collective responsibility and action toward creating an inclusive environment.

By implementing these strategies, the speech and debate community, especially in rural areas, can work toward dismantling systemic gender biases. Creating an environment where all participants are judged solely on their skills and arguments, irrespective of gender, is imperative for the integrity and inclusivity of the activity.