

# QUOTED AT THE PULPIT: MALE RHETORIC AND FEMALE AUTHORITY IN FIFTY YEARS OF GENERAL CONFERENCE

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In her 2020 address to the worldwide membership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Primary general president Joy Jones declared, “President Russell M. Nelson taught, ‘It would be impossible to measure the influence that . . . women have, not only on families but also on the Lord’s Church, as wives, mothers, and grandmothers; as sisters and aunts; as teachers and leaders; and especially as exemplars and devout defenders of the faith.’”<sup>1</sup>

Though it certainly may be impossible to measure women’s influence on families, it is to some extent possible to measure the influence that leaders like Jones and Nelson believe women have on the Church. Jones’s speech, delivered at the Church’s semiannual general conference, exemplifies a long tradition of Latter-day Saint rhetoric, particularly in her use of quotation. In her eleven minutes at the pulpit, Jones quoted

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1. Joy Jones, “An Especially Noble Calling,” April 2020, <https://abn.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2020/04/14jones>.

current Church president Russell Nelson four times, previous Church presidents three times, scripture six times, and a previous apostle once. Additionally, in the middle of her speech, a video played of Nelson speaking to a group of children. In all, though almost one third of Jones's address about women's roles was focused on other people's voices, women were not among her selected sources.<sup>2</sup>

This article argues such quotation choices reflect Church leaders' views on authority. When the most powerful leaders in the Church use their limited time in the spotlight to highlight someone else's words, they send a signal about how that source should be perceived. The quotation patterns in fifty years of general conference addresses reveal that, despite increasingly vocal commitments from Church leaders to the equal though separate status of women and men, those leaders continue to treat female voices as less authoritative than male ones.<sup>3</sup> Church leaders quote men more than sixteen times for every one time they quote a woman. Even taking into account the expected effects of the Church's overwhelmingly male scripture and all-male priesthood hierarchy, women are quoted less, cited less, and acknowledged less than one might expect from an organization whose president recently told women, "We need your voice teaching the doctrine of Christ."<sup>4</sup> This article contends that their treatment of these voices is indicative of women's status in the Church more broadly.

## Background and Research Methods

General conference plays an important role in the Church and in its members' lives. It is frequently the site of development and affirmation

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2. A young girl spoke briefly in the filmed meeting with Nelson.

3. Though terms referring to sex (female/male) and terms referring to gender (women/men) are not equivalent, they are used interchangeably in this article.

4. Russell Nelson, "Spiritual Treasures," October 2019, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2019/10/36nelson>.

of Church doctrine, policy, and culture. At conference, leaders deliver what are understood to be divinely inspired messages on how members should act and think about their relationship to God. Members are frequently instructed in Sunday meetings in the weeks preceding conference to pray to receive answers to personal questions during conference, with the idea that God will speak to them individually through their highest leaders. Afterwards, the sermons are published in Church magazines and used as the lesson material in local meetings for the next six months, ensuring that what is said in general conference makes its way through the entire Church.

As such, studying conference talks is critical to understanding Latter-day Saint theological and practical beliefs. It is also significant when considering women's place in the Church. While Mormon feminists have worked tirelessly to amplify women's voices, the voices that define the Church and its interests to members continue to be the primarily male speakers in general conference. The status and experiences of women in the Church cannot be fully understood without examining the Church's most powerful men and their messages as delivered in its most influential forum.

In particular, such a study requires paying attention not just to the content of general conference talks, but to how that content is packaged. As sociologists Gary and Gordon Shepherd note in their groundbreaking studies of general conference, meaning is found not just in the content and themes of any given talk but in the "rhetorical *modes* in which themes are expressed."<sup>5</sup> Women's place in the Church can be understood not just through what leaders say to and about women—and

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5. Gary Shepherd and Gordon Shepherd, "Modes of Leader Rhetoric in the Institutional Development of Mormonism," *Sociological Analysis* 47 no. 2 (1986): 127, original emphasis. Statistical analysis of general conference rhetoric is becoming more popular: others who have recently engaged on this front include Quentin Spencer and blogger Ziff at *Zelophehad's Daughters*.

they say a lot!—but in how they frame and support what they have to say.

My research explores these questions by analyzing quotation practices in general conference between 1971 and 2020. I read every April<sup>6</sup> session talk given by a member of the First Presidency or Quorum of the Twelve Apostles during those decades. I also read every talk by a female leader given in the April general session during that time period (thus, between 1984 and 2020).<sup>7</sup> In order to understand how quotation dynamics vary by leadership position, gender, and audience in the modern Church, I also read every talk given by any leader in any session between April 2016 and April 2020. For each address, I documented every quotation,<sup>8</sup> including what was cited, the number of words in each quotation, and the way the speaker verbally introduced each quotation. This totaled more than 12,700 quotations over 1,100 talks.

The rhetorical practices of general conference, like its format and structure, have changed over time. Nineteenth and early twentieth-century leaders would extemporize for hours; modern translation

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6. Though general conference happens twice a year, because of time constraints I chose to only study one session per year. Because the April conference often falls on Easter or the anniversary of Joseph Smith's First Vision, the New Testament and Joseph Smith may be overrepresented in my data. However, my analysis of trends and changes over time should not be impacted, because those events happen every April.

7. In 1984, the recently released Relief Society and Young Women's presidencies were invited to give short farewell talks. This marked the first time women had spoken in the general session in more than fifty years, but women did not become regular speakers until 1988.

8. I only counted direct quotation: ideas that were paraphrased or attributed to a source without actual words from that source were not documented. I also did not count dialogue within narratives, though I did count quotations by characters that explained the "moral of the story," as well as stories that were told entirely in someone else's voice.

and global broadcasting have necessitated timed, prewritten addresses.<sup>9</sup> This is the backdrop to my choice to focus on the period between 1971 and 2020. Many substantial technological changes happened in the 1960s: conference was first translated simultaneously in 1962,<sup>10</sup> first broadcast to Europe in 1965,<sup>11</sup> and first televised in color in 1967.<sup>12</sup> Though speakers were still adjusting to these changes in the 1970s, the era of spontaneity was over, and leaders were aware of themselves as speaking to a much larger audience than those sitting before them. Additionally, transcripts and video recordings of general conference are available for that entire period on the Church's website,<sup>13</sup> providing definitive sources for those addresses.<sup>14</sup> The quotations used in these

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9. The actual process of writing and editing conference talks is opaque. Many people other than the speaker might contribute to any one address. Spencer Kimball's biography, for example, includes a story about Emma Lou Thayne reviewing a draft of his address to the first women's session, where he apparently adopted many of her suggestions. Edward Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride: The Presidency of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 167. Even potentially ghostwritten conference talks, however, should be seen as written from the position of the speaker's authority.

10. Richard Armstrong, "Researching Mormonism: General Conference as an Artifactual Gold Mine," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 30, no. 3 (1997): 164.

11. Sheri Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson: A Biography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 380.

12. Armstrong, "Researching Mormonism," 164.

13. "Conferences," Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/general-conference/conferences>.

14. The audio of the original delivery and the transcript later published in Church magazines will sometimes differ in small and large ways. I chose to rely on the published transcripts, which Church spokespeople have claimed represent the "speaker's intent." See for example "LDS Church Addresses Changes Made to Pres. Packer's Talk," Ksl.com, October 8, 2010, <https://www.ksl.com/article/12749665/lds-church-addresses-changes-made-to-pres-packers-talk>.

carefully crafted speeches for a global audience provide a window into Church leaders' views on gender and authority.

### Understanding Quotation: Audience and Authority

Quotation is a common rhetorical practice that serves many different functions: spicing up a narrative, providing exact wording, or lending legitimacy to one's own argument. As every student of high school English literature intuitively knows, this last function is particularly important. Anthropologist Ruth Finnegan writes that quotation "enables a writer to stand in alliance with revered words and voices from the past and . . . endow oneself with something of their authority."<sup>15</sup> Speakers in general conference constantly use quotation in precisely this way, positioning their ideas as (for example) the continuation of teachings from other Church leaders. In general conference, the rhetorical force of a quotation relies on the source of a quotation just as much, if not more, as the content of that quotation.

Scholars have sometimes used quotation in general conference as evidence for which sources general authorities were personally reading.<sup>16</sup> Conference quotation patterns cannot be understood only in these terms, however. This is the case first because of quotation's rhetorical function. With limited time and such a significant audience, conference speakers must be understood as carefully selecting their quotations for both content and source. Indeed, a look at the footnotes reveals that speakers in general conference frequently use sources specifically designed to achieve that purpose. Many draw upon references like *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, which collects acknowledged sources

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15. Ruth Finnegan, *Why Do We Quote?* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2018), 284.

16. For one persuasive example of this technique, see Taylor Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay: Sexuality and Gender in Modern Mormonism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

of wisdom like historical leaders or the anonymous proverb.<sup>17</sup> This is one indication that conference speakers look for quotations to include in their talks *as quotations*, rather than, say, encountering those writers during research on some topic.<sup>18</sup> The sources that appear in general conference are deliberately chosen with the spiritual and institutional goals of the Church's highest leaders in mind.

The second reason to understand speakers' quotations as deliberately selected for their audience is that the changes in quotation in general conference over time (see table 1 below) cannot be explained merely by changes in individuals' reading habits. Because apostles and prophets occupy those roles until their deaths, the composition of leaders speaking in conference changes slowly.<sup>19</sup> Even as the membership of this group remains largely the same, their quotation patterns change

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17. This practice is much less common now than it used to be, likely in part because of the way the internet has changed source availability. For uses throughout the years, see for example Marvin Ashton, "Roadblocks to Progress," April 1979, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1979/04/roadblocks-to-progress>; Thomas Monson, "Building Your Eternal Home," April 1984, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1984/04/building-your-eternal-home>; James Faust, "The Power of Self-Mastery," April 2000, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2000/04/the-power-of-self-mastery>; Joseph Wirthlin, "The Abundant Life," April 2006, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2006/04/the-abundant-life>; and Thomas Monson, "Preparation Brings Blessings," April 2010, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2010/04/preparation-brings-blessings>.

18. One particularly interesting feature of *Bartlett's* is that it is organized by the person who said the quotation rather than topic, so speakers who cited it would have to be looking for the source. However, it is possible that speakers use these collections for citations only, rather than finding quotations within them.

19. For example, of the fifty general conferences in my sample, Thomas Monson spoke at forty-seven of them.

significantly.<sup>20</sup> Not only do the same leaders collectively quote different sources over time, but they also frame their quotations of those sources differently for their audience. Though whom leaders quote is indeed an indication of whom they privately take to be authoritative or interesting, it is also a public decision.

Consider the fifteen most frequent sources of quotation from the Quorum of the Twelve and First Presidency in the 1970s and how that list changed in the 2010s (table 1). Both are clearly a reflection of the sources that matter most to the Church and its members: scriptures and prophets handily top each list. But the changes in these sources' popularity is striking. Quotation of current prophets and apostles, for example, has increased dramatically,<sup>21</sup> while presidents of the United States have gone from the top ten to zero. These changes in sources can be understood at least in part as a reflection of a change in audience. While general conference's availability in the 1970s was limited beyond the United States,<sup>22</sup> it is now internationally broadcast to communities without much besides their Church membership in common. Church leaders and their quotation practices are responsive to their audience.

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20. Changes involving a population over time can happen for many reasons. For example, the population might change as it ages, or because the composition of the population changes, or because various events impact all members of the population. I argue that many changes in conference quotation can be attributed to this last source. Again, shifts in conference quotation happen more quickly than cohort changes in Church leaders, and though these leaders are all aging, the age range between the group is often as high as thirty years in the decades covered here. These broad-scale changes in general conference are unlikely to be due solely to changes in private attitudes among speakers.

21. While percentage changes can look particularly dramatic when they are changes in small values, these particular changes are worth noting. For context, between 1971 and 1980, the Quorum of the Twelve and First Presidency quoted current apostles nine times and the current prophet fifteen times; between 2011 and 2020, they quoted current apostles twenty times and the current prophet fifty-two times.

22. Armstrong, "Researching Mormonism," 164.



Table 1: Change in Most Frequent General Session Citations from Members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, April 1971–1980 and 2011–2020<sup>a</sup>

	1971–1980	2011–2020	Net change (percentage points)	Percent change
New Testament	31.5%	23.4%	–8.0%	–25.6%
Doctrine and Covenants	16.1%	16.4%	+0.3%	+1.9%
Book of Mormon	12.6%	21.5%	+9.0%	+71.3%
Old Testament	11.8%	7.4%	–4.4%	–37.4%
Pearl of Great Price	4.8%	4.4%	–0.5%	–9.6%
Past Prophets	3.2%	4.4%	+1.2%	+38.0%
Anonymous Sources	2.9%	0.2%	–2.7%	–94.3%
Past Apostles	1.9%	1.9%	0.0%	–1.8%
Joseph Smith	1.8%	2.8%	+1.1%	+59.0%
US Presidents	1.3%	0.0%	–1.3%	–100.0%
Hymns	1.3%	2.5%	+1.3%	+99.2%
Current Prophet	0.8%	2.8%	+2.1%	+260.3%
The First Presidency <sup>b</sup>	0.6%	0.4%	–0.2%	–39.4%
Current Apostles	0.5%	1.1%	+0.6%	+131.0%
Members of the Church	0.5%	1.5%	+1.0%	+211.8%

a. Total citations for 1971–1980: 1,904; for 2011–2020: 1,832.

b. Speakers will sometimes quote statements put out by the First Presidency (the prophet and his two counselors) as a unit. This is distinct from citations of any one of those members.

While there is much to explore in these trends beyond their application to gender, this article focuses on quotation as a reflection of authority in order to explore women's status in the Church. Quotation is a rhetorical practice in which speakers reveal beliefs about their audience. When choosing to quote from certain sources, speakers indicate two things: first, that they believe their audience will accept that source

as authoritative, and second, that they themselves support that source's authority.

Broadly, a source is more authoritative to an audience the more that members of that audience would believe a claim or obey an instruction (or seriously consider doing so) because it came from that source, regardless of their prior views about the content of the claim or instruction. Sources can be authoritative in many different ways. Conference speakers must navigate secular and ecclesiastical authority as well as many varieties of spiritual authority.<sup>23</sup> What broad-scale conference quotation patterns demonstrate is how *weighty* these different sources of authority are in their context.

Rhetorically effective quotation requires choosing sources with one's audience in mind.<sup>24</sup> The sources that general conference speakers choose, then, reveal features of the Latter-day Saint community, at least as those leaders understand it. A previous United States president might be an authoritative source to Americans, but citing one would not help one's persuasiveness overseas. How often various choices are made reflects the expected effectiveness of those appeals for members.

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23. Latter-day Saint thinkers have long acknowledged the different roles played by scripture, prophetic pronouncements, and personal revelation in Church doctrine and practice. See, for example, David Holland, "Revelation and the Open Canon in Mormonism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, edited by Terryl Givens and Philip Barlow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Other scholars make additional distinctions. Holbrook and Reeder's *At the Pulpit: 185 Years of Discourses by Latter-day Saint Women* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2017) notes that women draw on authority from their Church positions, their expertise, their experiences and conviction, and their access to the Holy Spirit. Writing about the early Church, Jonathan Stapley distinguishes between "ecclesiastical authority, derived from Church office; liturgical authority, derived from membership in the Church to participate in general rituals of worship; and priestly authority, derived from participation in the Nauvoo Temple liturgy or cosmological priesthood." Jonathan Stapley, *The Power of Godliness: Mormon Liturgy and Cosmology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 85.

24. Finnegan, *Why Do We Quote?*, 57.

This indicates that the sources cited more are, on the whole,<sup>25</sup> considered more authoritative in the Latter-day Saint context, while the sources cited less are less so. For this reason, the term “authority” functions broadly in this article to refer to the weight of a certain source’s status, not the reason for that weight.

Effective quotation must also be balanced by the speaker’s own views about the source. If someone crafting a speech knew that her audience put great trust in, say, mainstream media sources, but she herself did not think that trust was merited, she would not quote that source to bolster her argument even if it would be persuasive. Conference quotation patterns thus reveal both leaders’ beliefs and their hopes about their community. The sources cited most frequently are not only the sources audiences trust but also the sources leaders want their audience to trust. In the mouths of the Church’s most powerful leaders, such support through quotation can even increase a source’s authority.

Because leaders’ use of sources reflects their beliefs about their audience, studying how Church leaders quote women sheds light on how those leaders perceive women’s authority in the Latter-day Saint community. Because speakers affirm authority through quotation, whether and how speakers quote women in general conference is indicative of those leaders’ commitment to women’s authority and equality. In this way, leaders’ treatment of women in their general conference addresses provides a meaningful window into the status of women in the Church more generally.

### Why Quote Women?

Examining what conference quotation says about women in the Church is significant for two reasons. First, it is relevant for broader feminist projects involving concepts like equal representation of and

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25. Though conference speakers sometimes quote sources in order to disagree with them, this is quite rare.

respect for women. Second, it reflects on the Church's realization of its own values.

This article takes feminist commitments on board, arguing that women's underrepresentation in general conference is a problem to be fixed. Because Church leaders support a different model of womanhood than many feminist and secular sources propose, however, some might worry that it is misguided to evaluate the Church's discursive practices by such standards. But the ways leaders engage with female voices in general conference can also be examined in light of their own stated commitments. Church leaders throughout the years have preached that women and men are equal, though separate. Church president Spencer Kimball told men in 1979, "The women of this Church have work to do which, though different, is equally as important as the work that we do. Their work is, in fact, the same basic work that we are asked to do—even though our roles and assignments differ . . . Our sisters do not wish to be indulged or to be treated condescendingly; they desire to be respected and revered as our sisters and our equals."<sup>26</sup> Other speakers throughout the years have mirrored that language and those sentiments, down to Relief Society president Jean Bingham's 2020 declaration of "the eternal truth that men's and women's innate differences are God given and equally valued."<sup>27</sup>

Quotation as a rhetorical device sends messages, and those messages can reinforce or undermine the actual content of the talks in which they appear. This article will argue that, even if it is not their intention, leaders' quotations of women in general conference marginalize women in the Latter-day Saint community rather than portray them as worthy of respect and value. Insofar as this study shows that

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26. Spencer Kimball, "Our Sisters in the Church," October 1979, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1979/10/our-sisters-in-the-church>.

27. Jean Bingham, "United in Accomplishing God's Work," April 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2020/04/34bingham>.

conference quotation practices fail to live up to an equal standard with respect to gender—and especially insofar as inequality is not the aim of Church leaders—it provides both an internal and external critique of those practices. If the Church is to live up to its creed, leaders must reexamine which voices they choose to emphasize and how they do so.

It is crucial to note that claims about women's and men's equal value do not translate easily into claims about equal authority, especially in an ecclesiastical setting. Women's ecclesiastical authority in the Church is, of course, limited because they are not ordained to priesthood office. While leaders have recently asserted that women have both "priesthood power" and "priesthood authority,"<sup>28</sup> this distinction is contentious, and women's authority is instead most often spoken about (as in the Nelson quotation that began this article) in terms of "righteous influence."<sup>29</sup> The source of this influence is attributed to women's caring nature<sup>30</sup> and "unique moral compass."<sup>31</sup> Discussions of these kind emphasize women's spiritual rather than ecclesiastical authority.

Conference quotation, however, is not limited to sources with ecclesiastical authority. If quotation were just about appealing to authorities in some sense higher than one's self, one might expect prophets to quote mostly other prophets and scripture, but prophets also quote current and past apostles, as well as secular poets and historical figures.<sup>32</sup> Poet William Wordsworth, philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, and *New York Times* columnist David Brooks have all been quoted

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28. Bingham, "United in Accomplishing God's Work."

29. "Influence" frames a woman's power as something that manifests in others' words and actions rather than in her own words and actions.

30. See, for example, Gordon Hinkley, "The Women in Our Lives," October 2004, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2004/10/the-women-in-our-lives>.

31. Nelson, "Spiritual Treasures."

32. C. S. Lewis was only quoted seven times in my sample, less than other figures like Alexander Pope, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

multiple times by prophets and apostles.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, because conference addresses focus on how members should live their lives and understand their relationship with God, leaders might have reason to reference other acknowledged sources of spiritual authority, like women. As Bruce McConkie wrote in 1979, “Where spiritual things are concerned, as pertaining to all of the gifts of the Spirit, with reference to the receipt of revelation, the gaining of testimonies, and the seeing of visions, in all matters that pertain to godliness and holiness and which are brought to pass as a result of personal righteousness—in all these things men and women stand in a position of absolute equality before the Lord.”<sup>34</sup>

These types of assertions should lead to some degree of gender balance in quotations whose sources are not selected for their ecclesiastical authority. Indeed, given frequent conference claims about women’s superior moral sensitivity, one might expect leaders who profess such views to draw on women more frequently than men in some contexts. In a sermon about how to understand one’s relationship with God and live a moral life, the sources of insight McConkie listed ought to be just as open to women as to men, regardless of their ecclesiastical status. Despite this, a righteous woman’s influence is rarely the kind of authority conference speakers are interested in drawing upon.

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33. I did not set out to collect data on race, but it is notable and unsurprising that people of color (setting aside questions about race in the scriptures) are referenced in general conference far less than even women. In my sample, of the eighty-one named individuals not in Church leadership who were quoted more than once in the April general session by apostles, only one was not White: Abie Turay, who was quoted in Henry Eyring, “Is Not This the Fast that I Have Chosen,” April 2015, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2015/04/is-not-this-the-fast-that-i-have-chosen>.

34. Quoted in Dallin Oaks, “Spiritual Gifts,” March 1986, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1986/09/spiritual-gifts>.

## Men Quoting Women

When looking at gender in general conference, the big picture numbers are striking. In April general sessions between 1971 and 2020, members of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (hereafter referred to inclusively as “apostles”) quoted specifically male sources<sup>35</sup> 3,264 times. This does not include the male-gendered deities, Jesus Christ and Heavenly Father, who were quoted 1,968 times.<sup>36</sup> In that same period, female sources were quoted 197 times.

This imbalance is huge, but not surprising—the perhaps natural consequences of an all-male priesthood and hierarchical structure that places over one hundred men at a time in positions more powerful than the most powerful female leader. Latter-day Saint scripture is also almost entirely male: the Book of Mormon has almost 250 named individuals, but only six of those are female, and only two women actually speak in the text. Given the Church’s broader position in a patriarchal society, it is also not surprising that the poets, historical figures, and non-Latter-day Saint leaders they quote would also be overwhelmingly male.

Though it may not be surprising, the lack of female representation is troubling, especially once the trends are broken down further (table 2). Altogether, female voices comprise 2.1 percent of general conference quotations in this sample. Looking only at 2011–2020, this number increases slightly: to 2.7 percent. By the same measure, explicitly male

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35. I counted male sources as those that were either gendered male by a speaker’s verbal citation or footnoted citations from men.

36. In what follows, quotations attributed to Heavenly Father or Jesus Christ are never included in the male/female ratios. However, divinity in the Church is not outside of gender. See, for example, D. Todd Christofferson, “Let Us Be Men,” October 2006, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2006/10/let-us-be-men>. Readers are encouraged to consider the impact of an embodied male divinity on these quotation patterns and on the Church. No potentially quotable texts are attributed to Heavenly Mother or to the male-gendered Holy Ghost.

Table 2: Gendered Citations in April General Session Addresses by Members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and First Presidency, April 1971–2020<sup>a</sup>

Total Female	2.1%
Total Male <sup>b</sup>	35.5%
Scripture (Not Gendered)	36.1%
Jesus Christ	20.1%
Male Scriptures <sup>c</sup>	17.8%
Past Prophets	6.1%
Other Male Sources <sup>d</sup>	5.8%
Apostles	3.7%
Church Publications <sup>e</sup>	2.7%
Non-Gendered Sources <sup>f</sup>	2.0%
Current Prophets	2.0%
Other Female Sources	1.7%

a. Total citations: 9,200.

b. Here and throughout, Male totals do not include citations of Heavenly Father or Jesus Christ.

c. A quotation is counted as Male or Female Scripture if the verbal citation attributes the quotation to a man or a woman. “1 Nephi 3:7 reads” would be labeled Scripture, but “Nephi wrote” would be labeled Male Scripture. Scriptural quotations that were not verbally cited are not categorized as Male or Female. The Male and Female Scripture categories do not, however, count the numerous quotations that are verbally attributed to Christ through or to a gendered individual (except for one section in the D&C addressed to Emma Smith, all of those are male); those are categorized as citations of Jesus Christ.

d. Other Male Sources and Other Female Sources include all quotations whose gender can be determined from footnotes or verbal citations that do not fit into other categories. All secular gendered sources are included here, as well as quotations from church members outside of the highest levels of church leadership.

e. The category of Church Publication includes documents like *The Living Christ*, *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*, the Handbooks, etc. (mostly written by men). It also includes all songs from the Hymnal and the Primary Children’s Songbook except when the verbal citation references a gendered author.

f. Non-Gendered Sources are all the sources whose gender could not be determined from the footnote or the verbal citation that do not fit into another category. Examples of non-gendered sources include quotes from newspapers and magazines that did not include authors, anonymous sayings, the dictionary, musicals, individuals without names or gender identification, etc.



Table 2 (continued)

God <sup>g</sup>	1.2%
Female Church Leaders <sup>h</sup>	0.2%
Female Scriptures	0.2%
Male Church Leaders <sup>i</sup>	0.2%
Couples	0.1%

g. Quotations verbally attributed to Jesus Christ or the Lord were categorized as citations of Jesus Christ, while other citations verbally attributed to divinity, including references that were ambiguous between God the Father and Christ, were categorized as citations of God.

h. Female Church Leaders includes all quotations from women occupying the general presidencies of the Relief Society, Young Womens, and Primary.

i. Male Church Leaders includes all quotations from men who are general authorities or members of the Sunday School and Young Mens presidencies but are not apostles.

voices other than Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ account for 35.5 percent of conference quotations, going down to 31.7 percent between 2011 and 2020. This decrease is entirely due to leaders verbally attributing fewer quotes from scripture to male voices<sup>37</sup>—if scriptures are excluded, quotation of men goes up from 14.8 percent over fifty years to 18.1 percent of all quotations in the final decade of my sample. Examining only quotations from specific people, removing quotes from scripture<sup>38</sup> and not clearly gendered sources,<sup>39</sup> reveals that more than nine out of ten of the individuals quoted in general conference are men.<sup>40</sup>

Women's absence becomes even more visible in quotations from sources with high-level Latter-day Saint ecclesiastical authority.<sup>41</sup> Of

37. Even with gender-neutral verbal citations, the scriptures quoted continue to have been almost entirely written by men.

38. This includes God, Jesus, Male Scriptures, Female Scriptures, Not Gendered Scriptures.

39. This includes Non-Gendered, Church Publication, and Couple.

40. Women make up 9.73 percent of 1,801 total citations.

41. This includes Past Prophets, Current Prophets, Apostles, Male Church Leaders, and Female Church Leaders.

those, female leaders of the Church make up 1.9 percent of quotations. Ninety-eight percent of the leaders that apostles quote in general conference are men. This amounts to a mere twenty-one citations of female Church leaders by its highest authorities; ten are from Eliza Snow, and six of those are her hymns. In this sample of five decades of talks, a current female leader of the Church was only quoted to an audience that included men once, when apostle Dallin Oaks quoted Relief Society president Linda Burton in the 2014 priesthood session.<sup>42</sup> In fifty years, an apostle never quoted a current female leader in an April general session. Current male leaders, meanwhile, were quoted 257 times in that same period. It is worth noting, however, that male leaders who are not apostles (such as members of the Seventy) have been quoted even less frequently than female leaders (thirteen times as opposed to twenty-one).<sup>43</sup> Apostles' quotational emphasis on the authority of the institutional Church is entirely on its highest level—the level they themselves occupy. Because women are entirely excluded from that level, they are also excluded from consideration as ecclesiastical authorities.

It may seem that the gender imbalance in general conference is thus a result of women's limited ecclesiastical authority. However, as discussed above, there are many other kinds of authority on which conference speakers draw, and leaders frequently make claims about women's moral and spiritual authority. Though women are excluded from the most important leadership roles, Church leaders have encouraged them to be "contributing and full partner[s]" with men rather than

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42. In that same talk, Oaks also quoted three past Church presidents, three apostles (two living), *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*, the D&C, and Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. See Dallin Oaks, "The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood," April 2014, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2014/04/the-keys-and-authority-of-the-priesthood>.

43. Current non-apostle male leaders have, however, been quoted in the general session three times.

“silent . . . or limited partners.”<sup>44</sup> Outside of leadership roles, then, one might hope for gender parity.

However, this is not the case. Even when apostles quote sources who do not have ecclesiastical authority, they consistently prioritize male voices over female ones. Of the individuals quoted in conference who are neither scriptural nor high-level Church leaders, fully 77 percent of them are male. This number is changing over time, but not always equitably: between 2010 and 2015, 58.6 percent of quoted individuals without scriptural or high-level ecclesiastical authority were male; between 2016 and 2020, 69 percent were male.<sup>45</sup> Representation of women, at least on this measure, has significantly<sup>46</sup> increased since the 1970s, but this is happening neither quickly nor consistently.

There are two important caveats about these patterns. First, these statistics are the product of hundreds of talks by almost forty different apostles over fifty years. They are not the product of any one person’s conscious decision, and certainly no speaker selects his quotations with these broad patterns in mind. The average apostle quotes eleven times in a single talk, not nearly enough to cover all the categories of sources presented here.<sup>47</sup> These patterns are also the structural default, the rhetorical norm for conference addresses, and individual speakers are unlikely to choose to deviate widely from them. This, however, makes it even more necessary to examine and bring them to light.

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44. Spencer Kimball, “The Privileges and Responsibilities of Sisters,” September 1978, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1978/11/privileges-and-responsibilities-of-sisters>.

45. Out of seventy and sixty-five total citations, respectively.

46. Women are cited significantly more frequently in 2010–2020 than overall (using a one-sided t-test,  $p=0.004$ ). However, women are not cited significantly more frequently in 2016–2020 than overall ( $p=0.254$ ).

47. Some quote far more often than others: Neal Maxwell averaged twenty-four quotations per talk (almost all scripture), while Richard Scott averaged 4.5.

Second, the consistent overrepresentation of male quotations in general conference can be explained in part by the overrepresentation of men in the worlds of ecclesiastical, scriptural, and cultural authority that conference speakers inhabit. The Church's all-male priesthood, male-focused scriptural canon, and patriarchal cultural context all play a role in muting women. The non-ecclesiastical sources cited by speakers include a greater number of well-known male writers and historical figures than female ones because many more men have historically been given the opportunity to become famous. There are also fewer conference talks and books on Church doctrine written by women. When thinking about the available sources leaders have to draw upon, women are consistently underrepresented, though not so dramatically as they are in quotation practices.<sup>48</sup> In any case, this is only an explanation for these patterns, not a justification of them. The Church consistently emphasizes members' responsibility to choose the right even when "the world" and those around them push in opposing directions. Leaning on excuses about cultural norms is unfair to leaders by refusing them the ability to choose differently.

The persistent failure of apostles to quote women is a persistent failure to acknowledge women as authorities. This tells us something about the way they see their audience: when leaders do not feature women's voices, they indicate a belief that the community they are addressing would not view those voices as authoritative. They also affirm that belief. If the Church truly values women's voices, its leaders must take responsibility to do so themselves. Rather than being contributing and full partners, women are silent in general conference, limited by prophets and apostles. Not only do women speak less frequently in conference because of the restricted leadership roles available to them, but they are heard less frequently because other speakers choose to amplify male voices instead of female ones in their quotation practices.

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48. While women make up less than 2 percent of quotations of Church leaders, for example, they make up closer to 5 percent of conference talks.

Women's silence here indicates a broader inability to be heard within the Church.

### Women Above the Footnotes

Analyzing not just which sources leaders select but how and where they present those sources is key to understanding quotation's rhetorical role. Even when conference speakers choose to quote women, they engage in rhetorical techniques that further reflect women's lack of authority in the Church. Male leaders minimize women's presence and influence by frequently mentioning their appearance and relationship status and infrequently giving their names.

Conference talks are written to be spoken. Understanding this is essential to understanding conference quotation because listeners, unlike readers, depend on authors to include information about when and who they cite in the body of the text rather than leaving it to parentheticals and footnotes (many readers may not scour the footnotes either). Embedded quotes go unrecognized by conference listeners unless speakers make a deliberate effort to frame them by changing their tone of voice or giving a *verbal citation* that provides an introduction to the quote. "1 Nephi 1:1," "a young woman," "it is said," and "our beloved prophet, Russell M. Nelson" all function as verbal citations when spoken during an address. These citations can serve not just to indicate the source but to add to or explain its credentials: the common "our beloved prophet" preface does precisely that, as do additions like "prominent writer," "one of my eminent business associates," or "faithful wife and mother." Verbal citations provide the information a speaker thinks the audience needs to understand and respect the source of a quotation.<sup>49</sup>

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49. One initial difficulty with using verbal citation to assert women's authority is the lack of authority titles for women in the Church. Though there has been a recent push to refer to female presidents as presidents, women were not referred to as "President X" in my sample.

### 1. Acknowledging and Anonymizing Women

If the source of a quotation plays a significant part in its selection, speakers are likely to verbally cite as fully as possible the sources that they take to be most authoritative. To see how women are acknowledged beyond the footnotes, each gendered non-scriptural quotation can be sorted into one of three categories based on the way a source was verbally cited: *complete*, *incomplete*, or *none* (table 3). A *complete* verbal citation indicates a specific individual. Both partial and full names were counted as completely verbally cited: “President Spencer W. Kimball,” “Bishop Williams,” and “Liz” are all complete. An *incomplete* verbal citation indicates only that the speaker is quoting someone. All quotations that were verbally cited but had no name attached counted as incomplete. “The poet,” “a dear sister,” and “a business executive” are incomplete verbal citations. The *none*s are quotations that were not verbally indicated at all by the speaker.

The data on how different sources are verbally cited aligns with expectations in terms of the Church’s most authoritative sources. The current prophet is completely verbally cited 94 percent of the time, and past prophets are verbally cited nine out of ten times. Similarly, apostles are completely verbally cited almost eight out of ten times, and non-apostle leaders are completely verbally cited six out of ten times. Female leaders of the Church, though rarely quoted, are completely verbally

Table 3: Completeness of Gendered Verbal Citations of Different Sources in General Session Talks by the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, April 1971–2020

	<b>Prophet (558 total)</b>	<b>Apostle (338 total)</b>	<b>Current Prophet (184 total)</b>	<b>Male (530 total)</b>	<b>Female (155 total)</b>	<b>Female Leader (21 total)</b>	<b>Male Leader (15 total)</b>
Complete	90.5%	79.3%	94.0%	62.5%	51.6%	95.2%	60.0%
Incomplete	1.8%	6.2%	0.5%	24.9%	42.6%	4.8%	33.3%
None	7.7%	14.5%	5.4%	12.6%	5.8%	0.0%	6.7%

cited 95 percent of the time: when speakers cite female leaders, it seems that they do so deliberately and want their audience to know.<sup>50</sup> This suggests, interestingly, that female Church authority does have weight in this context despite its infrequent representation.

However, the opposite is true with women outside of Church leadership positions. Whereas non-leader men are completely verbally cited 62 percent of the time, non-leader women are only completely verbally cited 51 percent of the time, the lowest of any of those categories. They are also by far the highest, at 42 percent, of any group for incomplete citations. Between 2016 and 2020, women were quoted as named sources outside of narrative contexts only six times in front of men. In contrast, forty men who held no position of high-level leadership in the Church were quoted and named in non-narrative contexts in that time period, thirty in the general session. Non-leader men are significantly<sup>51</sup> more likely to be completely verbally cited than non-leader women. These numbers demonstrate how men and women with the same level of ecclesiastical authority—local or none—are treated differently in terms of their authoritativeness for Church members. Not only do leaders quote women much less frequently than men, they often minimize their presence even when they do quote them.

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50. One additional way to determine the authority of a source is to look at the average length of quotations from that source. In a quotation from an authoritative source, what matters most is the presence of the source, rather than what is said. This is borne out by the data, as the current prophet has the lowest average word count of all non-scriptural sources. (In part because of a frequent conference pattern of weaving short phrases from scripture into one's talk, scriptural sources had the lowest average word count of all sources.) Non-leader women have the highest average word count of all groups. This indicates that when women are quoted, they are quoted for content—meaning, again, that they are not quoted for source. The average length of quotes from women is also in part because of the frequency of narrative quotes from women.

51. Using a two-sided t-test,  $p < 0.0001$ ,  $t = 4.902$ .

Again, part of this is due to the fact that more of these non-leader men than women are famous historical figures. However, speakers are more likely to name men than women even when those men are not well known. When quoting family members, regular church members, or writers who are not household names, speakers frequently name their male sources while leaving out the name of their female sources. These trends occur side-by-side, often in the same talks. In his 2015 address, apostle Quentin Cook quoted a woman, Carla Carlisle, and described her as “one of my favorite writers” without naming her or revealing her gender through pronouns in the talk itself—while naming and quoting several men in the same talk.<sup>52</sup> Even though Cook seems to personally admire Carlisle, his reluctance to reveal her name or gender compared with his willingness to name and gender male sources suggests that her gender might decrease her legitimacy as a source.

## *2. Quoting Beautiful Wives and Mothers*

The content of incomplete citations also reveals a great deal about women’s authority. Incomplete verbal citations have to do all the work in describing the credentials of a source. All the audience knows about the source comes from that verbal citation—they can’t bring in any background knowledge about the individual involved. It is telling, then, that speakers treat men differently than women in this sphere as well, tying women’s authority to their relationship status or their physical appearance.

Table 4 shows the incomplete verbal citations from apostles in the general session in 2017–2020. These years are a microcosm of a pattern that is consistent through the last fifty. Women are most frequently cited in their capacities as relations, with more than one out of three of all incomplete verbal citations referring to a woman’s relationship or family status. Men’s relationship status, meanwhile, is only mentioned

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52. Quentin Cook, “The Lord is My Light,” April 2015, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2015/04/the-lord-is-my-light>.



Table 4: Incomplete Verbal Citations from Members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and the First Presidency, April 2017–2020

<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>
A faithful wife and mother	One observer
Two LDS women	One writer
A dear sister	A fourteen-year-old boy
A single sister in her mid-40s	One friend of nearly 20 years, whom I
A beautiful, vibrant young wife and mother	admire greatly
A beautiful young returned sister	A temple president
missionary	One frustrated writer
Their precious mother	One historian

in 8 percent of incomplete verbal citations, all in their capacity as fathers. Their calling in the Church is mentioned with about the same frequency (7.6 percent), while their employment status is used as a credential 41.7 percent of the time. Verbal citations recognize women's careers only 6.2 percent of the time—not a surprise for an organization that was still frequently preaching against women's employment into the 2000s—and their Church calling only 1.5 percent of the time. These numbers are particularly striking given that these sources are already anonymous. Evidence has already been presented that conference speakers are more likely to name men than women: the actual number of men who are cited in their capacities as local Church leaders, for example, is even higher.

In these incomplete verbal citations, and elsewhere in conference talks, women are also far more likely to be the subject of adjectives such as “dear,” “precious,” and “beautiful,” as seen above, as well as “lovely,” “wonderful,” and “sweet.” In verbally citing the women they quote as beautiful and lovely, speakers connect to a tradition of conceptualizing female spirituality through the lens of female attractiveness, implicitly—and explicitly, in the form of the speaker—evaluated by men. Just like a Hollywood movie where the main character is gorgeous and the villain is inevitably scarred or ugly, in conference talks, righteous

women are beautiful women. None of those adjectives (or correlates like “handsome”) are regularly applied to men, who are instead more likely to be described as “wise” or go without evaluative adjectives entirely in favor of authoritative credentials in the form of careers or Church callings:<sup>53</sup> consider Gary Stevenson’s story about “a beautiful, vibrant young wife and mother [who] was a scrappy Division 1 soccer player when she met and married her dental student husband.”<sup>54</sup> Women are specifically described as “young” fully three times as often as men, further depriving them of authority by minimizing their life experience. If anything, these trends have increased over time, particularly the use of “beautiful” to describe anonymous women. These verbal citations further undermine women’s ability to stand as equals in their community. By contrast, men occupy a variety of positions in and outside of the Church and have a range of authoritative credentials available.

Conference quotation practices serve to diminish female authority.<sup>55</sup> Not only are women quoted significantly less frequently than men, but the ways in which women are quoted serve to further mute

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53. It is worth noting that leaders have become more reticent about using career status as a credential over time.

54. Gary Stevenson, “A Good Foundation Against the Time to Come,” April 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2020/04/28stevenson>.

55. These patterns are present in many elements of conference talks besides quotation: leaders often tell stories that consistently mention women’s appearance, feature them only in their familial roles while men are discussed in a variety of settings, anonymize women even when they are the main characters of the story, and so forth. One memorable example was Cook’s 2011 talk, “LDS Women are Incredible!” (taking its title from a Wallace Stegner quote), which told the story of Young Women’s leaders digging through a young woman’s purse and finding items inside that demonstrate her spirituality, attention to personal hygiene, craft-making creativity, and ability to be “a **HOMEMAKER!**” Quentin Cook, “LDS Women are Incredible!,” April 2011, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2011/04/lds-women-are-incredible> (original emphasis). Such a story would never be told about a man.

their voices. Women are anonymized and described with diminutives rather than with authoritative credentials. They are included as the wives of husbands while men are the leaders of organizations in and outside of the Church, despite the fact that conference speakers frequently encourage men to be good family members<sup>56</sup> and women to step up as community leaders.<sup>57</sup> These quotation patterns play into tropes that undermine leaders' professions of gender equality.

### Gendered Audiences and Gendered Topics

The data presented thus far have only been from members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in the general session. The general session is open to everyone, but leaders also historically spoke at gender-segregated priesthood and women's sessions each year. When investigating how quotation patterns from the Church's top leaders shift in different sessions, it becomes apparent that these leaders are very aware of gender. Their awareness leads them, however, to continue privileging male voices. What is more, when these leaders are speaking on the topic of gender, they assert male authority more strongly than ever.

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56. See for example James Faust, "Father, Come Home," April 1993, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1993/04/father-come-home>; L. Tom Perry, "Fatherhood, An Eternal Calling," April 2004, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2004/04/fatherhood-an-eternal-calling>; D. Todd Christofferson, "Fathers," April 2016, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2016/04/fathers>.

57. See, for example, Dallin Oaks, "The Relief Society and the Church," April 1992, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1992/04/the-relief-society-and-the-church>; D. Todd Christofferson, "The Moral Force of Women," October 2013, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2013/10/the-moral-force-of-women>; Russell Nelson, "Sisters' Participation in the Gathering of Israel," October 2018, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2018/10/sisters-participation-in-the-gathering-of-israel>; and Henry Eyring, "Covenant Women in Partnership with God," October 2019, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2019/10/34eyring>.

In the last twenty years, First Presidency members have used quotation differently when speaking to different audiences (table 5). Looking at quotations across the general, priesthood, and women's sessions, several interesting trends become visible. First, past prophets are a more popular source in the priesthood session than in either of the other two, but the current prophet is cited far more in the women's session (a statistically significant<sup>58</sup> difference).<sup>59</sup> Men are quoted more in priesthood (40.6 percent) compared to the general (36.8 percent) and women's (36.6 percent) sessions. However, non-leader men experience a drop of almost six percentage points when speakers are addressing only women.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, women are quoted less in the priesthood session (1 percent)<sup>61</sup> than in the general session (2.6 percent), and the most in the women's session (3.7 percent).

These numbers are an acknowledgment that the gender of a source matters. If leaders were not aware of the gender of their sources, there would not be this kind of variation between sessions. These numbers are also, then, an acknowledgment of audience. When Church leaders

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58. Using a one-sided t-test,  $p=0.00001$ .

59. Note that women's session data is only from the First Presidency; members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles more frequently quote the current prophet, but they do not speak in women's session and so are not represented here. It might be that citations of the current prophet are lower in the priesthood and general sessions because the prophet usually speaks in those sessions, while he has only spoken at every women's session more recently. This might be part of the story; however, as shall be shown below, there is also a difference in content in the talks given at the women's and priesthood sessions that accounts for a greater number of citations of the current prophet. In the last few years, the current prophet has been frequently cited in the women's session even when he is present.

60. This difference is statistically significant:  $p=.02$  using a one-sided t-test.

61. The 0.2 percent appearance of female leaders in the priesthood session is due entirely to a story narrated by Eliza Snow in James Faust, "Perseverance," April 2005, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2005/04/perseverance>.

Table 5: Gender Distribution by Session of Citations in Talks by Members of the First Presidency, April 2001–2020<sup>a</sup>

	<b>General Session</b>	<b>Priesthood Session</b>	<b>Women's Session</b>
Total Female	2.6%	1.0%	3.7%
Total Male	36.8%	40.6%	36.6%
Scripture	34.7%	35.1%	28.8%
Jesus	18.9%	16.7%	20.4%
Male Scripture	15.8%	12.5%	16.2%
Past Prophet	5.8%	14.1%	5.2%
Other Male Source	8.7%	8.0%	2.6%
Apostle	4.3%	5.0%	3.7%
Church Publication	3.3%	3.2%	5.8%
Non-Gendered Source	1.8%	3.2%	4.2%
Current Prophet	2.1%	0.6%	8.9%
Other Female Source	2.5%	0.8%	2.6%
God	1.9%	0.2%	0.0%
Male Leader	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%
Female Leader	0.1%	0.2%	0.0%
Female Scripture	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%
Couple	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%

a. Total General Session citations: 726; Priesthood: 524; Womens: 191

speaking to women, they seem to find their audience less willing to take men's voices seriously without high-level Church authority; hence the drop in quotations of non-leader men. However, when the Church's highest leaders speak in the general session, they appear to think those male voices will be almost as respected as with an all-male audience. This indicates that men are still in some ways the perceived audience, or perhaps the more important one, in a mixed-gender group. And, as a group, men are perceived to grant female voices significantly less authority than male ones.

The notable increase in citation of the current prophet in women's session by men is almost certainly due to the fact that quotation practices are responsive to topic as well. When discussing the origins of the Church, speakers are more likely to quote Joseph Smith; when discussing the sins of the world, secular news sources are used more frequently. In the women's session, speakers are more likely to discuss being a woman—but they are most likely to quote men, not women, to make their case.

The Church has become increasingly concerned with gender and sexuality as society has become more permissive toward same-sex relationships and less “traditional” models of the nuclear family, both of which (history of polygamy aside) the Church rejects. Speakers often use their time in general conference to address these issues, with growing frequency and urgency. Talks entirely devoted to discussing gender,<sup>62</sup> from speakers of any rank, have increased dramatically in the twenty-first century. Between 1970 and 1989, which included the contentious period of the Church's fight against the Equal Rights Amendment, ten talks were given solely<sup>63</sup> on gender. In the 1990s, there were eight. In the 2000s, there were twenty-three; in the 2010s, there were twenty-five. The pattern appears to be set to continue. Though some leaders are more focused on these issues than others, the high rate of talks about gender is not due to just a few. Every prophet since Gordon Hinckley (who became president of the Church in 1995) has delivered multiple addresses on gender, as have fourteen different apostles.

Every decade, just over half of the talks about gender are given in the general sessions. The rest are usually addressed to women: eight in

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62. I use *gender* to cover talks dealing with both male and female gender roles and sexual orientation. Speakers usually tie sexuality closely to gender roles: heterosexual marriage is a key element of required masculinity and femininity.

63. Gender and sexuality were mentioned in more than ten talks: homosexuality and women working outside the home, in particular, made their way onto several litanies of modern-day evils. However, gender was the primary topic of only a few of those addresses.

the 2000s, and ten in the 2010s. Attendees of the priesthood session have been the recipient of talks specifically focused on gender only twice a decade in that fifty-year period.<sup>64</sup> Though “gender roles” sounds gender inclusive, these conference addresses generally are not. While discussions of sexuality are disproportionately aimed at gay men,<sup>65</sup> gender is a women’s issue. True manhood will sometimes make an appearance, but good womanhood is the primary focus of these addresses, even when delivered to men. One might assume, then, that this difference between the men’s and women’s sessions would be due to female leaders’ focus on gender roles, but this is not the case. Only four of the eighteen talks about gender in the women’s session between 2001 and 2020 were given by women. The rest were given by the First Presidency. This is not to say that women do not speak often about gender roles; women gave eleven of the twenty-six talks about gender in the general session in that time period. But the prophet and apostles speak on these topics far more often than any other group, and it is notable that they do so far more to women than to men. Male conference speakers who are not apostles almost never devote their talks to the subject.

In the context of authority in the Church, such patterns make sense. Because gender is the subject of developing Church doctrine, only the most powerful leaders have the appropriate ecclesiastical authority to make claims about these issues. When all such leaders are male, this means that discourses on gender are a male domain, regardless of how egalitarian their arguments may be. Quotations in these talks, though small in number (101 in this subset), provide further evidence of this. In talks by the First Presidency about gender between 2001 and 2020

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64. I did not count addresses about being good priesthood holders as talks about gender unless the speaker also mentioned maleness. Where leaders have repeatedly insisted that all women are mothers, whether or not they actually have children (see for example Nelson, “Sisters’ Participation”) men’s relationship with the priesthood is not discussed in the same terms.

65. See Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, for a more extensive discussion of this issue.

Table 6: Gender Distribution of Citations in Talks about Gender and Sexuality from Members of the First Presidency, April 2001–2020<sup>a</sup>

Scripture (Not Gendered)	25.7%
Jesus	19.8%
Current Prophet	14.9%
Male Scripture	9.9%
Apostle	9.9%
Non-Gendered Source	5.9%
Other Female Source	4.0%
Prophet	3.0%
Church Publication	3.0%
Female Scripture	2.0%
Couple	1.0%
Other Male Source	1.0%

a. Total citations: 101

(table 6), quotes from current leaders are much higher than in the First Presidency's total average (shown in table 5). Members of the First Presidency quote the current prophet nearly six times more frequently when they are talking about gender (14.9 percent) than they do on average (2.5 percent).<sup>66</sup> The six total citations from female sources represent a higher percentage (6.0 percent) than elsewhere from these speakers, but female leaders of the Church are not among those quoted. Specifically male voices, in comparison, still make up nearly 40 percent of the total.

It is perhaps surprising that leaders choose to rely so much more heavily on men's voices when talking to women about how to be good women. This can be seen as both an appeal to established authority and an attempt to establish it. Gender and sexuality are two issues on which church members find themselves most at odds with mainstream Western culture, so leaders must increasingly support their arguments

66. This difference is statistically significant:  $p < 0.0001$  using a one-sided t-test.



with the weightiest religious authorities. On the other hand, many church members are also at odds with Church leadership about these issues, with increasing numbers of young people leaving the Church over its position.<sup>67</sup> In continually emphasizing the current prophet's authority by citing him, these speakers are working in part to maintain the Church's jurisdiction over these topics. Quotation is one tool to enforce male hierarchical church authority when addressing the issues that most threaten it.

This reliance is stronger than ever in the Nelson era.<sup>68</sup> Oaks's 2019 address at the women's session quoted Nelson eight times out of twelve, along with the First Presidency and past Church president Kimball.<sup>69</sup> Eyring also used Nelson as three of his five total quotes (the other two from scripture) in his 2019 talk on gender, telling women to "remember President Nelson's perfect description of a woman's divine mission—including her mission of mothering."<sup>70</sup> Neither speaker drew on women's voices to describe women's divine mission or anything else.

When looking at gender-segregated sessions, it becomes apparent that the gender of both audience and source inform leaders' quotation practices. It also becomes clear that leaders consistently prioritize men. Though conference speakers seem to believe that women see men without ecclesiastical authority as less authoritative than men do, that belief does not impact their quotation practices when men as well as

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67. Jana Riess, *The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

68. Citations of Nelson make up 7.7 percent of apostles' quotations in general sessions since his calling as prophet, while the current prophet made up only 2.0 percent of quotations in previous years. Monson, the prophet preceding Nelson, was quoted 2.2 percent of the time. Nelson is quoted significantly more than other prophets ( $p < 0.0001$ ,  $t = 11.8$  using a two-sided t-test) and significantly more than Monson ( $p < 0.0001$ ,  $t = 8.32$  using a two-sided t-test).

69. Dallin Oaks, "Two Great Commandments," October 2019, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2019/10/35oaks>.

70. Eyring, "Covenant Women."

women are in the audience. In this way, they treat their male listeners as more important than their female ones. Though apostles tend to quote women more often when talking to women, they also quote male leaders more often when talking about women. Women's voicelessness elsewhere in the Church culminates in apostles' choices to exclude female voices and prioritize male leaders when talking about womanhood.

### Women Quoting Men

In the previous sections, this article has examined quotation patterns only from members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and First Presidency. Women have been quoted less, acknowledged less, and, by implication, seen as less authoritative than men. The highest authorities of the Church have indirectly used their voices in general conference not to elevate women but to emphasize male power, especially in the spaces that impact women most. These patterns also have an impact on how female leaders perceive themselves and their audience. The same analysis of quotation patterns from female leaders' conference talks reveals that women also treat female voices as less authoritative than male ones—including their own.

On average, female leaders spend the greatest percentage of their talks quoting, more than any other group of conference speakers. Between 2016 and 2020, members of the First Presidency spent 15.5 percent of their talks on quotation,<sup>71</sup> while members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles spent 18.6 percent of their time quoting. Male leaders in other positions spent 16.9 percent of their time quoting, and female leaders spent 21.4 percent. These differences are both statistically

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71. This is measured by dividing the total word count of the address with the total word count of quotations within the address. It may not map exactly to speaking time.

significant<sup>72</sup> and revealing. When the leaders who spend the most time using their own words are the most powerful, it is telling that the leaders who spend the least time doing so are female.<sup>73</sup>

Not only do women spend more of their time than male leaders repeating others' words, they also spend even more time quoting male sources than male leaders do. Like the First Presidency, women's talks about gender include a heavy emphasis on quotations from the current prophet and other leaders. The women's talks in the April 2020 session were perhaps the starkest possible example of this pattern: two of the three female leaders spoke on gender roles, and video footage of church president Nelson speaking was also inserted in the middle of their addresses. (Neither of the talks about gender roles given by male leaders had video segments.<sup>74</sup>)

This pattern of female speakers focusing on male voices is not limited by topic, however. Since female leaders began speaking regularly in the general sessions (1988–2020), 5.7 percent of female leaders' quotations in the general sessions were from female sources, while 42.0 percent of them were from male sources (table 7). Between 2011 and 2020, female leaders quoted men 46.6 percent of the time—fully fifteen percentage points higher than the frequency with which apostles quoted men in the general session during that same time period (31.7 percent). Even when they are quoting women, female leaders treat them

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72. Women spend a significantly greater portion of their talks in quotation than other groups of leaders ( $p=0.002$ ,  $t=11.9$  using a two-sided t-test) and the First Presidency spends significantly less than other groups ( $p=0.04$ ,  $t=2.7$  using a two-sided t-test).

73. It may be surprising that apostles quote more than other male leaders, but this can be attributed to other rhetorical differences. For example, male leaders who are not apostles tend to spend a larger percentage of their talks telling stories rather than discoursing authoritatively, which reduces the number of quotations in their addresses.

74. The only other video appearance that conference was in Nelson's address, which was not about gender. He showed a video of himself in the Sacred Grove.

Table 7: Breakdown of Gendered Quotations in April General Session Talks Given by Female Leaders, 1988–2020<sup>a</sup>

Total Female	5.7%
Total Male	41.9%
Scripture	28.4%
Male Scripture	12.3%
Jesus	11.8%
Past Prophet	9.8%
Apostle	9.8%
Church Publication	8.6%
Current Prophet	6.8%
Other Female Source	3.9%
Other Male Source	3.2%
Non-Gendered Source	2.7%
Female Leader	1.4%
God	0.5%
Female Scripture	0.4%
Couple	0.2%

a. Total citations: 559

as less authoritative than similarly positioned male sources: female leaders completely verbally cite 68.4 percent of their male sources with no ecclesiastical authority, but only 47.8 percent of their non-leader female sources. This is a greater disparity than in apostles' talks (shown in table 3). In the women's session, where female leaders quote women the most (13.2 percent of the time), they still quote men more than twice as frequently as they quote women (30.9 percent). Between 2016 and 2020, almost eight out of ten gendered quotations from female leaders have been male. By comparison, male conference speakers in other leadership positions<sup>75</sup> in those years quoted men 40.7 percent of the

75. Members of the Presiding Bishopric, Presidency of the Seventy, Quorum of the Seventy, or presidencies of the Young Mens and Sunday School.

time in the general session and 32.2 percent in the priesthood session, while quoting women 1.9 percent of the time to their mixed-gender audience and not once to their all-male one.

If quotation in general conference is about drawing upon the authority of quoted sources, it might be surprising to see female leaders quoting male sources so often instead of even more authoritative sources like God or the scriptures. Indeed, female leaders tend to quote Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ less frequently (12.3 percent of the time) than apostles do (19.7 percent between 1988 and 2020).<sup>76</sup> Women are not just quoting any male source, however: they are overwhelmingly quoting male Church leaders in an appeal to institutional authority. This is increasing over time: between 1988 and 2010, 19.8 percent of female leaders' quotations came from male leaders, but between 2011 and 2020, that number went up to 37.5 percent—twenty-two times the percentage of their quotations that comes from female leaders. Of these citations, women are quoting current leaders sitting on the stand behind them fully two out of three times. In this way, at least, women's access to authority is mediated by male priesthood holders rather than coming directly from God.

Comparing this to quotation patterns from male leaders who are not apostles indicates that female leaders' emphasis on apostles' authority is not just due to women's lower leadership positions. Between 2016 and 2020, non-apostle leaders quoted current and past apostles 19.4 percent of the time.<sup>77</sup> This is more frequent than apostles' own quotations of fellow apostles in this time period (16.5 percent), but far less frequent than female leaders' quotations of apostles (28.2 percent). Of the leaders they quoted, non-apostle men also quoted living apostles less frequently than women did (57.8 percent as opposed to 61 percent). Just because these male leaders are not quoting apostles as often as women are does not mean that they are less comfortable with male

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76. This ratio has remained relatively stable over time.

77. Apostles are the only group of leaders that consistently quote each other. Non-apostle men quote each other only 0.2 percent of the time.

authority, however: 95 percent of their gendered citations in the general session are from men, as are 100 percent of their gendered citations in the priesthood session. Where non-apostle men have not quoted a woman once in the April priesthood sessions over those five years, 11.9 percent of their quotations in that session are from men without any ecclesiastical authority. Male leaders consistently treat male voices as authoritative, but they do not draw upon male ecclesiastical authority to the same extent that female leaders do. It appears that even the most powerful female leaders in the Church need to appeal more frequently to ecclesiastical authority because they do not themselves have the same access to it as men.

Female leaders' quotation of apostles and prophets might be seen as their own active affirmation of male authority, deliberately directed at a potentially skeptical female audience. However, it is difficult to imagine that female leaders are even more invested in the maintenance of the prophets' and apostles' authority than those men are themselves—that is, the fact that female leaders quote male leaders more than any other group of speakers (and female leaders only 2 percent of the time) looks more like an attempt to draw on male authority to bolster their own credibility. Instead, female leaders' quotation patterns indicate an investment in promoting female authority: when speaking to an all-female audience,<sup>78</sup> they quote both regular women and female leaders far more frequently than men do when addressing only women. The drop in quotations of women when men enter the audience, however, suggests that female speakers may not believe they have the power to follow through on that investment in a broader Church setting.<sup>79</sup> These quotation patterns indicate that the highest-ranking female leaders of the Church continue to rely upon male priesthood authority in order to

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78. Excepting, of course, the First Presidency members on the stand.

79. Alternatively, this drop might indicate that female leaders do not believe that female voices should be treated authoritatively by men. This seems unlikely given their presence in general conference and on mixed-gender leadership panels, however limited that presence may be.

be taken seriously, by women and by men. Male leaders' quotation patterns reveal that women lack authority compared to men in the Church; female leaders' quotation patterns are a direct result.

## Conclusion

Those concerned with the role of women in the Church can cite a litany of statements from Church leaders over the last fifty years that claim that the Church both empowers women and relies upon empowered women.<sup>80</sup> In 2015, for example,<sup>81</sup> then-apostle Russell Nelson quoted Boyd Packer's 1978<sup>82</sup> encouragement to women, saying, "We need women who are organized and women who can organize. We need women with executive ability who can plan and direct and administer; women who can teach, women who can speak out."<sup>83</sup> As prophet in 2019, Nelson reaffirmed, "As a righteous, endowed Latter-day Saint woman, you speak and teach with power and authority from God. Whether by exhortation or conversation, we need your voice teaching the doctrine of Christ. We need your input in family, ward, and stake councils. Your participation is essential and never ornamental!"<sup>84</sup>

Intentionally or not, these same leaders consistently engage in rhetorical practices that undermine these stated commitments. The overwhelming imbalance in quoting men and women reveals

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80. Whether leaders' views of female empowerment are indeed empowering is another question.

81. See also Spencer Kimball, "The True Way of Life and Salvation," April 1978, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1978/04/the-true-way-of-life-and-salvation>; and Gordon Hinkley, "Live Up to Your Inheritance," October 1983, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1983/10/live-up-to-your-inheritance>.

82. Boyd Packer, "The Relief Society," October 1978, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1978/10/the-relief-society>.

83. Russell Nelson, "A Plea to My Sisters," October 2015, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2015/10/a-plea-to-my-sisters>.

84. Nelson, "Spiritual Treasures."

conference speakers' belief, conscious or otherwise, that their audience respects male voices more than female ones. While much has changed for women in the Church over the last half-century, much remains the same. Women consistently make up less than 3 percent of quotations in general conference. They are still described in terms of their appearance and relationship status; sermons about how they should live are the domain of male authority; their own representatives in the Church spend much of their time at the pulpit repeating male leaders' words. Despite leaders' claims that women speak and teach with power and authority, their quotation practices diminish that authority and frequently deny women the opportunity to speak at all.<sup>85</sup> Quoting women more is one opportunity for leaders to practice what they preach and affirm female authority to the worldwide Church.

Quotation in general conference matters because general conference matters: it is the most important event on the institutional Church calendar, with millions of members viewing the talks live and many more engaging with them repeatedly in Church magazines and Sunday curricula over several years. Short of small and large changes to the leadership structure of the Church, general conference is one key avenue through which leaders could demonstrate that women's participation in the Church really is essential. Right now, their quotations show, it is not even ornamental.

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85. Dorice Elliot, "Let Women No Longer Keep Silent," in *Women and Authority: Re-Emerging Mormon Feminism*, edited by Maxine Hanks (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 209–11.

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