

“Hello Mam, Would You Like to Say Something”? but Only After I am done

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Abstract: *Women use their communication as a major tool to connect with people, empathize with them and foster a shared feeling. While this is true in informal spaces like home and neighborhood, it is quite the opposite at workplaces. Victoria L. Brescoll, in her research on volubility and power dynamics, describes several studies where volubility of men has a strong relation to their perception of power. Men talk more to establish their dominance while women refrain thinking that talking too much would result in negative consequences and backlash. Men also fail to understand that women are silent at workplace often, not because they lack the relevant stuff to talk about but because they are more concerned about how they would be perceived and if their likability would get affected due to their speech. Women comprise 50 percent of our humanity and their voice is equally important to be heard. Their silence should not be treated as compliance or submission to men’s ideas instead an atmosphere that fosters psychological safety has to be created that enables all women to feel safe, welcomed and respected within organizations.*

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During one of my internship experiences, I was briefed about the induction process by a panel who had a male as well as a female mentor. It was unique for me to note that during the entire discussion male mentor spoke for far more time, interrupted the female mentor often and appeared to be taking over the control of the process all on his own. While I politely sat through the session listening to him, I wondered if virtual sessions provide equal opportunity to men and women to speak or does the power dynamics still operates in a different covert form. In this article, I shall try to explore how men and women are differently provided the opportunity to speak in virtual meetings and do the offline power dynamics among genders affect their attitude during virtual meetings as well.

If you ask someone, who talks more, among men and women, in day-to-day conversations, I can almost say with certainty that you will get the reply “women”. John Gray’s famous book “*Men are from Mars; Women are from Venus*” has made an entire generation of people believe the importance of communication in a woman’s life. Such is its range that Louann Brizendine, in her popular title “*The Female Brain*” claimed that an average man speaks around 7,000 words while a woman says roughly about 20,000. Women use their communication as a major tool to connect with people, empathize with them and foster a shared feeling.

While this is true in informal spaces like home and neighborhood, it is quite the opposite at workplaces. Victoria L. Brescoll, in her research on volubility and power dynamics, describes several studies where volubility of men has a strong relation to their perception of power. Men talk more to establish their dominance while women refrain thinking that talking too much would result in negative consequences and backlash. Men also fail to understand that women are silent at workplace often, not because they lack the relevant stuff to talk about but because they are more concerned about how they would be perceived and if their likability would get affected due to their speech.

While such a skewed power dynamic is deeply entrenched in our society due to the ingrained inertia of patriarchy for generations together, COVID-19 had brought to us an

overarching shift in workplace structure. It took away the formal nature of workplace and interactions became far more fluid during these times. But did such a dynamic shift also rectify the “skewed communication pattern” among men and women? Or did the wine remain the same but just in a new bottle this time?

Many believed that online mode would change the dynamics of power hierarchy as it would enable more and more women to freely express themselves. Women, who are overburdened with work (with most of it being unvalued domestic work, even though it is a major pillar of our economy), have to deal with multiple chores at home and virtual meetings are not much different to alter the power dynamics. The annual McKinsey and LeanIn.org’s “*Women in the Workplace*” report, which in 2019 surveyed 329 companies and more than 68,000 employees, found that half of the surveyed women had experienced being interrupted or spoken over and 38 percent had others take credit for their ideas. That shows the pervasiveness of the problem and calls for ringing an alarm bell. Sheryl Sandberg, COO, Facebook, in her Opinion article in New York Times, has mentioned how corporate world is replete with inequities for women. Giving the example of hit TV series “*The Shield*”, she says that women writers in the show are encouraged to speak up more instead of sitting silent in the meetings but whenever they actually try to speak, they are interrupted more and shot down before they could finish. When a woman had a good idea, a male writer would jump in and run with it before she could complete her thought. Women are judged more frequently in organizations and their assertive nature, while pitching ideas, is viewed as a form of aggression. The paradox here is that when they remain silent their silence is not treated as a mark of their humility and agreeableness; instead it is viewed as their lack of mental ability to come up with ideas. Victoria L. Brescoll, in one of her research, conducted an experiment where she asked men and women to evaluate the competence of participants who spoke more frequently. As a result, it turned out that males who spoke more were judged more competent, while women executives, who spoke more than their peers, were punished much harsher in the form of lower ratings, interestingly by both men and women as well. Saga doesn’t end here, when men speak up more they are perceived to be more helpful by

their managers but leads to no increased in the perception when women does the same.

While we all had a hint of such biases affecting women in physical real world, the onset of virtual mode made me believe that this inequity may get reduced in online meetings. But my expectations were stable only till the time I came across some of the latest findings. Deborah Tannen has been studying the interaction among men and women for decades and her insights into virtual interaction patterns are significant. She says that women often go into a particular type of communication style- succinct, indirect, self-deprecating and the same has got transferred in online meetings too. And *“it turned out that women’s comments were often ignored online for the same reasons they were often ignored in person and people could guess who was a woman and who was a man,”* quotes Tannen. Men, in their pursuit of display of power, tend to forget when to pause and fail to gauge the mood of the meeting. Much of this could also be blamed due to the anonymity and challenges brought by online meetings as it has made it tough to gauge the body language of women and made it difficult for men to modify their talks based on reading the body language and expressions of others. So, I guess you would be assuming by now that a written form of communication as email and messages would be a better way to draw the line of equity. Well, not quite really, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has also been proven to be ineffective at equalizing gender-based power and status differentials. Research has found that even in such long-form written communication, men are more likely to post longer messages, assert opinions as facts and challenge others.

Changing the power dynamics that has got built up over centuries will surely take up decades to rectify. But we can certainly devise solutions that promote women to speak up and provide them incentives that encourage their voice. In the above-mentioned series “The Shield”, show runner, to solve the problem of these two women, brings out a rule that “no one would interrupt anyone in meetings” and it actually led to improved and effective meetings. We can set timer-based talks where each person gets a set time to speak and there are negative incentives to not participate. We should aspire for a society where feminine qualities like humility, respect, care, are equally respected and prioritized as masculine values like aggression, dominance, confidence etc. Till the time, we do not value every human for their unique set of values as equal, we are doomed to devise methods only to realize that they failed again. In the words of Tannen *“The bottom line is everything that we think is going to be an equalizer turns out not to be,”*

We all should remember that women comprise 50 percent of our humanity and their voice is equally important to be heard. Their silence should not be treated as compliance or submission to men’s ideas instead an atmosphere that fosters psychological safety has to be created that enables all women to feel safe, welcomed and respected within organizations. While these are short term measures, in long run we need more women leaders, more confident school going girls, girls who are intrinsically motivated to achieve their authentic self instead of relying on external validation from male dominated organizations.

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