



## **‘WOMEN TALK TOO MUCH’ SIMPLY ISN’T TRUE, DATA SHOW**

By Professor of Leadership and Human Behaviour,  
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*In fact, men are more vocal but the sense many have is the opposite. A Professor of Leadership and Human Behavior gets to the bottom of why.*

The President of the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic organising committee Yoshiro Mori resigned amidst a furore created by his comments on female board members – but he is only the latest in a long line of misguided proponents of this idea that women speak more than men.

Researchers have been proving this idea wrong since the 1970s.

And yet the myth is so persistent it is embedded in linguistic expressions from one corner of the globe to the other. There's a German expression that translates as "One man, one word – one woman, one dictionary."

Empirical evidence suggests a nuanced picture, and one that is in fact more in line with the idea that men have the gift of the gab. In the 1980s and 90s, there were a number of experiments conducted by researchers from Drass to Drakich, concluding that women speak less than men.

Indeed, in my experience teaching, men both speak more and ask more. Research, too, suggests that from an early age, boys speak more than girls – perhaps something to do with the perception they gauge of their role in the family and/or of what they are entitled to.

A 2014 George Washington University study found that men are 33% more likely to interrupt a woman than they are to interrupt another man. And this happens at all levels of power: male Supreme Court Justices in the US interrupt women Justices three times as often as they do their male counterparts, according to a 2017 report. Last year audiences around the world witnessed an example of "maninterrupting" when Vice President Mike Pence interrupted Kamala Harris ten times over the course of the Vice Presidential debate (twice as frequently as she interrupted him).

### **If Mori is wrong, why do so many perceive that women talk beyond their remit?**

There are three major contributors to this misconception:

#### **1. Women are so few that their level of visibility increases**

This comes down to a concept called Tokenism, coined by Kanter in 1983, which says that when a minority (gender, race or other) represents less than 15% of group, they become 'tokens'. Women often find themselves in this category. Tokens are much more visible than anyone else, and whatever they do is registered strongly by the group. In other words, we zoom in on the one woman and – oh look, doesn't she talk!

If we then look at the distribution of roles, there are more males than females chairing meetings in positions of power. Therefore, more often than not women are asked questions [by these men] and asked to elaborate: more of the spotlight still.

## 2. Women's particular communication style means they say more

In the 1970s, Lakoff first spoke about women's language tendencies ("the female register") and how women tend to communicate slightly differently to men. They use more fillers ("sort of, well, you see") and more tag endings ("don't you think?"). That makes for more words, and why they do this brings us to point number three.

## 3. Women's motivation to interact is different to men's

Women's language is driven by a desire to engage the other party in a conversation. By contrast, men seek to inform and signal status.

### **The irony: women probably aren't talking enough**

Research suggests that we expect people in power to talk more. And yet, women in power do not. Why is this? Essentially, because women fear a backlash from doing so and in 2012, Brescoll published a paper proving they are right to do so.

When men observe women talking more than men, they ascribe a lack of competence to these women (based on a latent belief they do not have the status to talk as much).

Fascinatingly, women even penalise other women for talking more.

### **When progress comes in from a sideways angle**

Reports from Japan initially suggested that Mori had handpicked Saburo Kawabuchi, a former chair of the Japanese Football Association and current 'mayor' of the Tokyo Olympic Village, to replace him.

Then there was a U-turn, with Kawabuchi receiving pressure not to accept the position, amidst mounting criticism of the position being filled by yet another octogenarian male.

In the end, we have seen a woman appointed to the role, based on the recommendation from the panel composed of four women and four men, showing that these types of verbal faux pas can act as the impetus for institutional change. They can also make us reflect and move forward. And that applies as much to events in Japan as across the world.

*Ginka Toegel [directs programs for female executives at IMD](#). She is passionate about helping women navigate careers competence and confidence to move into more senior positions.*