

HAS THE GENDER BINARY AT WORK DISSOLVED? A STUDY OF INTER - GENDER SOCIAL INTERACTION IN THE WORKPLACE

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Abstract *The 21st century has become known for more fluid discourses on gender, leading to a certain level of exultation that the gender binary is finally dissolving. The digitisation of work has created several opportunities for a gender-neutral work field, although admittedly, it has also brought new challenges. Traditionally, workplace studies have revealed the presence of a sharp gender divide at work, even in terms of workplace interactions. This article derives from research among employees in information technology (IT) corporations in India, conducted to investigate different elements of organisational dynamics, including but not limited to, the changing nature of inter-gender organisational interactions and behaviour. It is found that although it is indeed the case that men and women have divergent conversational idioms, the nature of inter-personal communication in the workplace is not as perplexing as literature seems to suggest. Paradoxically, an upbringing in the close-knit Indian family system has already familiarised both men and women with the conversational rituals of either gender, creating conditions for more effective social interactions in the workplace.*

Keywords: *Communication, Gender, Information Technology Sector, Interaction*

INTRODUCTION

Communication on the job is a crucial component of a workplace's day-to-day and long-term dynamics. Many successful corporate careers have been built on the foundation of strong communication abilities. A certain degree of communication skill is innate, some is socially acquired, and certain elements are structurally tied to an individual's social identities, whether they be of race, social class, or gender. Women, particularly at higher levels in their employment, are frequently unable to advance to top executive positions due to a lack of social capital. Literature points to communication gaps among male and female colleagues, and a certain paucity of meaningful communicative interactions that often translate into significant impediments to the career advancement of women.

Women in the information technology industry are more educated than males on average (Catalyst, 2020). However, more women continue to work part-time, shoulder a majority of domestic and childcare obligations, and are underrepresented in positions of leadership in the workplace (Catalyst, 2019, 2020). According to a study undertaken by the Brookings Institution, "large gaps remain between men and women in employment rates, the jobs they hold,

the wages they earn, and their overall economic security". Apart from being a women's issue, this also affects the overall economy. In a publication from the Hamilton Project at Brookings, the authors conclude that "barriers to workforce participation for women are stifling the growth of the U.S. economy, and that future economic success hinges on improving career prospects and working environments for all women" (Burke, 2017). Women and men continue to be constrained by societal gender norms and conventional gender-based expectations (Braun et al., 2017; Hentschel et al., 2018; Hernandez et al., 2014; Morgenroth and Heilman, 2017; Triana et al., 2019). This impact is seen in organisational and family roles as well; for example, when it comes to parenting (Bear & Glick, 2017; Steffens et al., 2019). Men continue to earn a 'fatherhood bonus', whereas women experience a 'motherhood penalty' or the 'maybe-baby-effect' (Gloor et al., 2018).

These trends call for the development of new theoretical and empirical perspectives in order to get a more comprehensive knowledge of the existing situation, its foundations, and potential pathways of change, as well as rethinking gender at work. Second, the questioning of the gender binary requires new strategies to achieve gender equality. According to sociologist David Lyon, technology has an

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attribute of masculinity paradigmatically associated with it. He contends that the proliferation of digital technologies will not significantly alter the social-relational dynamics that have existed since the advent of industrial capitalism (Lyon, 1988, 2001). It is pointed out that computers and technology are strikingly male-dominated and the information technology industry continues to maintain the same pattern of gender differences and sustain male supremacy as in other workplaces and wider society (Haynes, 2006; Cohoon & Aspray, 2008).

This article investigates the nature of inter-gender, interpersonal work related communication in the workplace in information technology organisations in India. It explores both the dynamics and complexities of the interaction, and the nature and intensity of work-related interaction. It finds that the 2 genders do not mingle much within the workplace; relationships are superficial, transitory, work oriented, and with a slant towards mutual avoidance. This could also be due to work pressures and lack of extended leisure time. At the same time, misinterpretation of communication between genders, an element that has been highlighted for its ubiquity in the western context, is not so common or frequent an occurrence in Indian organisations.

GENDER AND CONVERSATIONAL DYNAMICS

Most of the organisational research has focused on the sociolinguistic component of the gender discourse. Research has extensively revealed many differences in communication styles between men and women in the workplace (Kendall & Tannen, 1997; Tannen, 1990, 1995a, b). Traditionally, women tend to use communication to enhance social connections and relationships, while men use language to assert social dominance (Leaper, 1991; Mulac et al., 2001). In general, women use more expressive, tentative, and polite language than men do, especially in situations of conflict (Basow & Rubenfeld, 2003); they often use less powerful speech, use fewer swear words, and use more tag questions and intensifiers (Lakoff, 1975). There is a wide range of off-line, backstage, or collaborative work that people do which goes largely unrecognised and unrewarded in the workplace (Fletcher, 1999), and this happens more often with women as they are culturally constrained into certain pacifist conversational and behavioural styles (Fivush, 1991; Coates, 2013). It is seen that men, on the other hand, are more likely to use linguistic communication for quick solutions in order to avoid further ‘unnecessary’ discussions of interpersonal problems (Basow & Rubenfeld, 2003). Studies show that men tend to be self-assertive and regard conversations as a means towards tangible outcomes, such as obtaining power or dominance (Maltz & Borker, 1982; Wood, 1996; Mason, 1994). Women, on the other hand, value cooperation; this communal orientation “involves a

concern with others, selflessness, and a desire to be at one with others” (Mason, 1994). Women are also thought to have a less clear understanding of where their relationship boundaries end and their individual identities, defined in terms of relational bonds, begin. Females value dialogue; for women, the process of communication itself is valued (Chodorow, 1989; Hartmann, 1991; Statham, 1987; Surrey, 1991; Tannen, 1990). Early research showed that, in general, women are more social-emotional in their interactions with others, whereas men are more independent and unemotional in conversations (Chodorow, 1978; Eagly, 1987; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976). Theorists have suggested that these gender differences in communication styles place women at a disadvantage when interacting with others, because they speak more tentatively than men, who speak more assertively, thus leaving the impression that men are more confident and capable as leaders (Lakoff, 1975). From their childhood, girls and boys are generally socialised according to distinct cultural patterns based on their gender, and learn to express themselves through speech in ways particular to their own gender’s rules and norms (Coates, 2013; Fivush, 1991; Tannen, 1990). Men and women often differ in the way they give orders. Many women are conditioned by a culture of maintaining harmony in relationships (Fivush, 1991). Many of these gender differences in communication styles outlined make women appear subordinate to men, suggesting they should be viewed as second-class to men. This also has implications for gender differences in leadership styles, making them appear unfit for leadership or managerial positions.

MISCOMMUNICATION BETWEEN GENDERS

This pattern of gendered socialisation is reinforced throughout life. As a result, men and women often interpret the same conversation differently. Culturally diverse ways of speaking, based on gender, can cause miscommunication between co-workers. According to Mullany (2011), despite advancements achieved by women in formerly male-dominated fields, they have yet to break through the glass ceiling in their professional advancement. Mullany examines how language and gender interact in the workplace, how men and women manage working reality using language in various ways. Men and women behave differently at workplace meetings, for example, in terms of verbal and non-verbal communication. In the workplace, modes of speech become strategic arbitrators in the workplace dialogue. What is seen as stereotypically feminine speech is used for the enactment of covert domination by both men and women, while what is perceived as typically masculine linguistic idiom becomes a strategy for exercising overt control.

Tannen (1995) opines that in any workplace, the ways in which people communicate are significant determinants of

professional success. The more effectively articulate they are in their speech, the more they are heard and advance in their careers. Using the linguistic perspective, she examines how indirectness of expression as a sociocultural norm is common in some cultures, and also in the feminine gender. It is these differences in the conversational rituals of men and women that distort communication in the business world. People unwittingly construct barriers to upward mobility and job advancement through mistakes in verbal engagement. Due to deficiencies in dialogic communication, work often goes unappreciated or even goes unnoticed. Men and women internalise language differently; it is so gender-centric that men and women often participate in non-productive or unproductive discourse by stating one thing but communicating a completely different meaning. Tannen (1990, 1995a, 1995b) gives several examples of how men's and women's communication and conversation routines differ. According to Tannen, "Men engage in report talk, women in rapport talk". Report talk is used to exhibit one's knowledge and competence. Rapport talk is used to share and build relationships. "For most women, the language of conversation is primarily a language of rapport: a way of establishing and negotiating relationships... For most men, talking is primarily a means of preserving independence and negotiating and maintaining status in a hierarchical social order" (Tannen, 1990). Men approach conversations with the goal of transmitting information and offering advice, whereas women aim to maintain interaction and largely seek understanding (Ibid.). Women request; men direct. According to Tannen, for example, in communicating a request, a female manager might say: 'Could you do this by 5 PM?' Typically, a male manager would say: 'This needs to be done by 5 PM'. Women are information focused; men are focused on self-image. For example, women are willing to ask questions to clarify understanding. Men tend to avoid asking clarifying questions, so that they do not appear ignorant and in order to preserve their reputation. Furthermore, women often use the phrase, 'I'm sorry', to express concern or empathy. Tannen points out that empathy is not an apology. Men, however, tend to interpret this phrase as an acceptance of responsibility for the situation, which it is not (Tannen, 1995a, b).

Tannen finds that these differences across gender start at a young age. Tannen observes that as children, boys create relationships with each other by doing things together; activities are central to their friendship. Girls, on the other hand, create close relationships with each other by simply talking; "talk is the essence of intimacy" (Tannen, 1990). Tannen also describes men as adversarial (having conflicting goals) and women as synergistic (having common goals). While men live in a world of status where conversations are merely negotiations for dominance and power, women live in a world of connections where the purpose of conversations is to negotiate for closeness and to preserve

intimacy (Tannen, 1990). Men aim to avoid failure and taking orders from other people, as they see it as a sign of losing independence, implying that they have a lower status (Tannen, 1990). On the other hand, women avoid isolation and are often fine with taking orders, as they see it as a form of connection and intimacy with the other person (Tannen, 1990). While men seek control, prefer inequality and asymmetry, and value differences between individuals, women seek understanding, prefer equality and symmetry, and value similarities as they see them as ways to connect with other individuals (Tannen, 1990). The main source of disconnect between men and women that Tannen highlights occurs when women and men hit a barrier when talking about conflict. Women talk about their problems with other women to foster a bond with them and to create and maintain intimate relationships, and they expect men to react in the same fashion (Tannen, 1990). However, when men hear women talking about problems, they offer solutions and quickly move to dismiss the problem (Tannen, 1990). This is the greatest observed gender difference in communication styles and has implications in the workforce as well. As a result, women are more likely to be hired in sectors such as service jobs that heavily rely on direct communication, empathy, and contact with customers, and this often creates organisational gender barriers for the upward mobility of women.

Waschatz (2012) opines that experts have found that men and women attach differing significance to messages and react differently in the office. For instance, when a woman says, 'Shouldn't we call a meeting?' she means 'let us call a meeting'. Men, however, respond to communication in a literal sense and do not comply unless a command is unambiguous and clearly stated. It is also presumed that women tend to have lower self-esteem and (therefore) react to praise more conservatively than their male co-workers. It is these different communication behaviours that get in the way of a woman's success in an organisation. However, according to Davidson and Cooper (1992), women who defy these behavioural stereotypes are frequently assigned pejorative labels such as iron maiden, which is often used for strong and powerful women that bring to question their very feminineness. The solution, the authors opine, lies in the adoption of an 'androgynous management style' which incorporates elements of conventionally 'male' and 'female' behaviour patterns. Furthermore, women who adopt a male leadership paradigm have been socially penalised in many organisations as they are perceived as unfeminine (Eyring & Stead, 1998: 247).

Gray (1992) suggests that men and women are so different in their approaches to communicating that it is as though they hail from different planets: they have different needs, goals, and values in the way they communicate (Gray, 1992). Understanding these differences is the key to creating and maintaining successful relationships, by being aware of how

the other gender communicates and thus adapting one's style accordingly. The most common communicative mistake made by both males and females occurs when talking about and resolving conflict. When attempting to resolve a problem, men follow their natural tendency to offer a solution, while women seek empathy and understanding and are naturally inclined to offer unsolicited advice (Gray, 1992). Krotz (2016) opines that misunderstandings between the sexes typically revolve around themes of power, advocacy, and managing the team.

METHODOLOGY

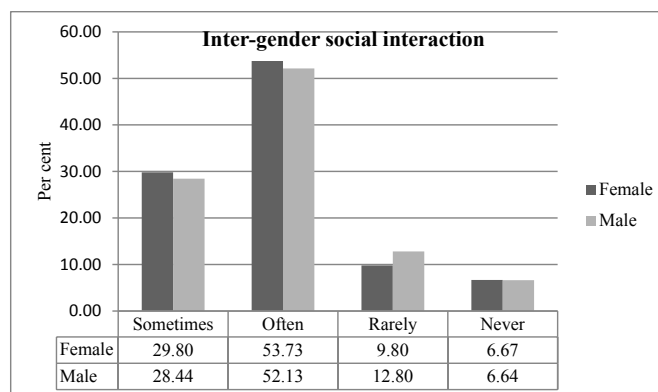
The study's primary data has been collected through a survey of executives working in the information technology sector in Bangalore (Bengaluru) and Mysore (Mysuru). Responses were collected from 510 executives from diverse IT firms, including 273 women and 237 males. The sample was chosen via a network method, and exclusive talks consisted of comprehensive interviews with a number of respondents on various elements of organisational functioning and social life. Respondents include serving employees from well-known IT giants, as well as some lesser-known smaller firms and start-ups. The questionnaire itself is the product of conversations with members of the target demographic, as well as a test-run of the survey on a sub-set of the population. The poll was then updated to gather razor-sharp replies on the chosen issue. As possibilities for direct observation are restricted in the IT sector, the study was carried out using network analysis. A network can be described as "a specific set of linkages among a defined set of persons, with the additional property that the characteristics of these linkages as a whole may be used to interpret the social behaviour of the persons involved" (Mitchell, 1969: 2). In general, network analysis investigates the connections between people, as well as the method and intensity of their interaction. Barnes (1954) was the first to use network analysis, particularly for sociological research, in his study of the Bremnes, a small Norwegian fishing and farming community. This is the network concept as it is utilised in its methodological sense. Networks may be employed as a methodological device in two ways: (i) as the location of interaction and therefore, the unit of inquiry; and (ii) as the medium of inquiry (Hannerz, 1980). Both of these meanings are not objectively distinct; rather, they are intricately linked. When we look at society through its maze of networks, it is these networks that give the researcher the means to continue the inquiry. As a result, the network serves as both the object and the mechanism of investigation. Working with networks allows one to extract a set of relationships from the wider universe. This set widens and provides the researcher with both the field and potential recruits, including 'action sets' for data collection due to its interconnectivity. The intermediaries help the researcher gain access to a number of participants. In this case, because

individuals engaged in the interviews are members of the author's social network, the communication has gained depth and forthrightness. As aforementioned, access to IT organisations is generally challenging, and possibilities for direct observation on the ground are restricted. Employees, too, have limited access outside their own departments; all entry is through the technique of 'swiping', and only a select few have digital signatures to travel across departments. In some companies, employees are not allowed to leave the building except during specific break times. As a result, the method of data collection through personal networks has proved highly useful in gaining profound insights from the field. Other primary data sources, such as from Catalyst Inc., NASSCOM, and the Brookings Institution, have also been used to supplement the analysis. Some of the study's findings are addressed in the section that follows.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Inter-Gender Social Interaction

Regarding the frequency of interaction, according to the data received, more than half of both men and women report often interacting with co-workers of other genders. Only 9.8% of female employees said they rarely socialise with their male co-workers at work, while 12.8% of males said the same. The frequency of inter-gender social interaction among employees is seen in Fig. 1.



Do men and women socialise with each other at the workplace, such as during lunch/tea breaks, and so on?

Fig. 1: Inter-Gender Social Interaction

The number, duration, and intensity of encounters are all important factors in gauging how successfully peers communicate in the workplace. Female employees said that during tea/coffee breaks at work, the women go together in their own sub-groups, regardless of position or team, and men do the same. In this regard, a common refrain among female interviewees was: 'We don't hang out together... We rarely meet socially except if our husbands are friends.'

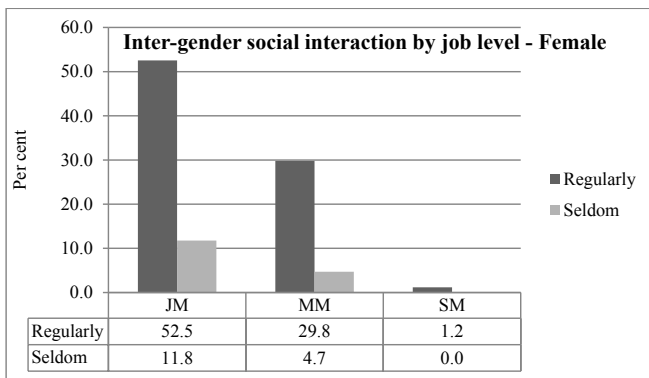
Some early-career professionals admitted that they had a proclivity to establish romantic ties, although this is not encouraged by organisational policy. Further, when it comes to exclusively work-related interactions, the discourse is primarily driven by need. A majority of friendships precede their arrival in the organisation, such as from college days or as neighbours. The degree of interaction between married workers outside of work is significantly reduced. The service position of men and women employees has an impact on the amount of social mixing as well. When data is evaluated in relation to employee job level, it is discovered that this contact occurs more frequently and intensely among those in junior management, and diminishes in frequency and intensity as one progresses up the organisational ladder. There is less free time at the higher employment levels; the hangover from shared backgrounds and alma maters is more or less finished, and professions take on a competitive aspect. What used to be communal places have been replaced with office meetings. Some men, on the other hand, continue to maintain their own internal informal networks, like being beer pals or weekend golfers and are able to maintain access to informal sources of information that others, including many women, begin to lose. Fig. 2 and 3 show female and male employees’ perspectives on the frequency of inter-gender social interaction at the 3 major managerial positions.

According to the study’s data, around 53% of female junior managers have good connections with colleagues of both genders, while approximately 30% of middle managers have frequent interaction with co-workers. Only in top management does this contact appear to be lacking. However, even at the junior management level, only around 37% of men have continuous contacts, and this number remains relatively steady until middle management. Similarly, when they advance in their careers, their interaction rate drops to just 9%, which is still significantly higher than that of women in senior management. Male executives told me that they are ‘afraid’ to interact with female co-workers because sexual harassment rules are strict and, simply, ‘we don’t want to entangle’ with female employees. These findings were validated by a senior Human Resources Manager and the Department Head. She claimed that while male and female managers seldom interact socially in the office, institutional measures are sometimes undertaken to guarantee that there is a certain level of free mingling to establish a good work environment. “People actually have to be persuaded to mix with one another,” she adds. For example, she pointed out that even while standing for a group photograph of a team or a staff picture, men and women segregate on either side. Women, in particular, are hesitant to be photographed standing next to a male co-worker. She herself confessed that she seldom socialised with co-workers. Her point of view, however, was that this lack of closeness was not detrimental to job advancement. She insisted that she, too, had achieved success by adhering to the same paradigm.

Communication on the Job

When it comes to explicit career-oriented communication, both men and women quickly acknowledged that they had created a level of communication and information exchange that was satisfactory. In reality, most inter-gender contact would consist of shop chatter and nothing more. While much has been written about a lack of good communication in the workplace in the West, men and women managers stated to me that work-related communication was not handled in the traditional paradigm. In many organisations, the world of communication is fairly impersonal, with co-workers interacting via cyber technologies such as instant messaging (IM), email, text messages, and so on. Even among their respective genders, there is not much camaraderie or informal communication happening. As most people are stressed for time and limited by strict deadlines, there is minimal interaction during working hours. In that sense, even in higher-ranking jobs, the traditional manner of communication at work does not appear to play a significant role. Women’s access to opportunities does not appear to be reliant in any way on their level of dialogic engagement with colleagues.

When it comes to non-formal on-the-job communication, women revealed that they are as good as men at unearthing



JM: Junior Management; MM: Middle Management; SM: Senior Management

Fig. 2: Women’s Perceptions of Inter-Gender Social Interaction by Job Level

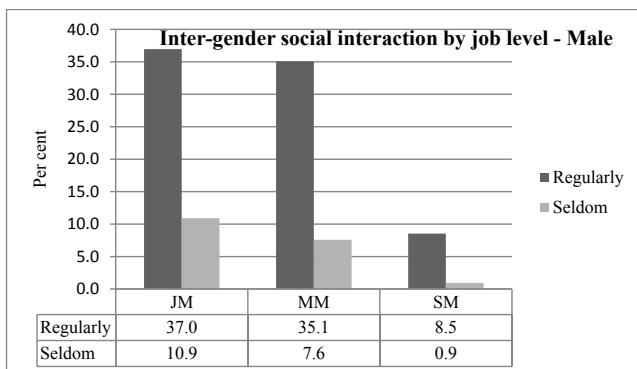
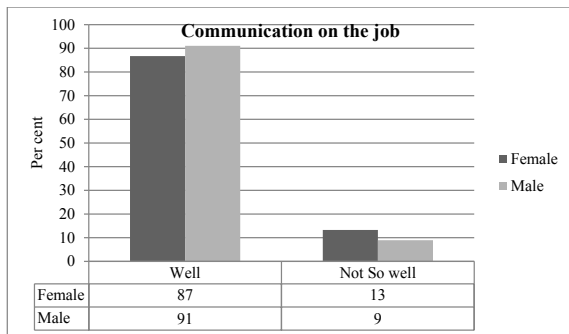


Fig. 3: Men’s Perceptions of Inter-Gender Social Interaction by Job Level

office gossip. Women also get informal access to information from their partners, as many have spouses or family members working in various IT organisations. Thus, even without official mentors or membership in any ‘old boys club’, people interested in news and rumours can obtain informational assistance and sponsorship through these informal arrangements. Overall, 87% of women said that they had a satisfactory degree of work-related communication and information exchange, while 13% disagreed. Around 91% of males said they had good work-related communication. Fig. 4 depicts employees’ perceptions of the degree of job-related communication among peers.



Do peers communicate with clarity with one another in accomplishing tasks, irrespective of their gender? (Such as team work, information sharing, and achieving common goals.)

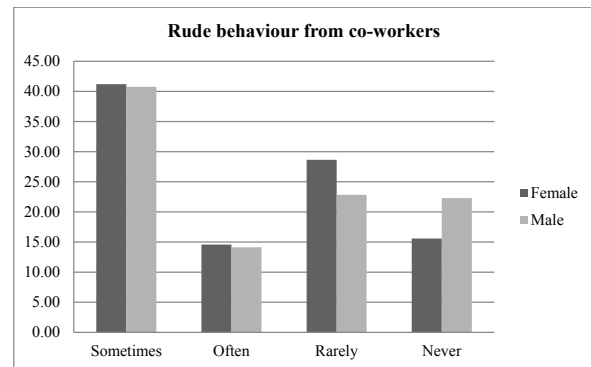
Fig. 4: Communication on the Job

In interview conversations, men revealed that they are aware that women have ‘an indirect style’ of speaking. The interviewed male managers opined that although the women have a somewhat different way of speaking regarding the same issue, the men are by and large ‘used to’ these style differences and have learnt not to interpret feminine speech in the literal sense. A male team leader revealed: “It happens at home also. I find that my wife is not ‘straightforward’ in her speech.” Further, both men and women asserted that women are equally work driven and career-minded at work. Women managers confessed that it is easier to handle workplace stress than the home stress, which is in fact the reason for their career compromises and not so much their conversational deficiencies or perceived lack of ambition or ability.

Peer-Group Hostility

Literature has highlighted how successful women face the burden of aggressive behaviour from their peers, both men and women. In this survey, 41.2% of the women thought that their co-workers occasionally behaved hostilely towards them, whereas 40.8% of the males felt the same way. The reaction is not so much one of animosity as it is of professional rivalry, which may frequently lead to cutthroat competition. Very few, and significantly similar percentage

of men and women (14.6% of women and 14% of men) reported being frequently subjected to aggressive peer behaviour. Fig. 5 depicts the level of animosity towards co-workers’ professional achievement.



How often do you face rude behaviour (speech or language) from your colleagues?

Fig. 5: Rude Behaviour from Co-Workers

Antagonisms and resentments among peers are common in a highly competitive work environment, although they are not always gender-based. Co-workers are not unfriendly to women just because they are female. Success elicits amazement, envy, and a tinge of hostility, and this is true for both men and women.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In the West, the empirical fact is that the idioms of organisational communication employed by men and women are completely different and convey different meanings to men and women. As a result, in spite of most organisations’ efforts towards inclusivity, and despite the use of presumably ‘genderless’ technology, the binary fissures between men and women, as reflected in workplace behaviours, continue to persist. The present study, however, shows that in India, this may not be the case. It is found that some of the assumptions generated through western paradigms are not entirely relevant in the Indian context. Through this study, it is found that insofar as office communication is concerned, women are not carrying the load of their culture and socialisation in a patriarchal social structure to the domain of the workplace, but are in fact able communicators. Women’s access to opportunities, therefore, cannot be considered to be significantly reliant on their level of dialogic engagement with colleagues. In most situations, the world of communication is very impersonal, with co-workers interacting via cyber technologies such as instant messaging, email, text messaging, and so on. Furthermore, due to the severe sexual harassment regulations that organisations staunchly follow, men are restrained in their verbal behaviour, and men and women avoid excessive personal intermingling at work. Organisations are also making efforts to foster efficient

communication among a varied workforce to overcome gender disparities in communication patterns. Although men and women follow different conversational practices, Indian men, through socialisation in a close-knit family system, are already familiar with the conversational rituals of women and, in that sense, seem to be better at 'reading between the lines' and do not interpret women's speech literally. This fact, combined with organisational policies to encourage women and strong sexual harassment legislation, has largely ensured that women have a level conversational playing field in the information technology sector in India.

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