

# How Gendered Communication Norms Shape Professional Participation in Nigerian Workplaces

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.913COM0036>

Received: 05 August 2025; Accepted: 11 August 2025; Published: 11 September 2025

## ABSTRACT

The research examines how social expectations shape gendered communication norms that influence workplace participation in Nigerian organizations. The investigation employs grounded theory to analyze qualitative data from 24 professionals across IT, marketing, customer service, and market sectors, which reveals that communication patterns derive from Nigeria's patriarchal and hierarchical cultural systems. Women professionals choose deferential and cautious language to prevent negative judgments, while men use assertive communication to demonstrate their leadership competence. The existing norms maintain unequal power relations which suppress women's visibility and restrict their career progress. Research findings show that gendered workplace communication patterns in Nigeria extend beyond language differences because they represent established social frameworks. The study provides value to global gender and communication research by showing why specific cultural elements matter and by opposing Western model generalizations. The research recommends culturally specific solutions, which include inclusive policies together with unconscious bias training and mentorship programs to build fair communication spaces and help women advance professionally.

**Keywords:** Gendered Communication; Professional Participation; Nigerian Workplaces

## INTRODUCTION

Communication is a global human phenomenon which transcends borders and is useful for forming human relationships. It exists on the wings of language, which is used for the creation, exchange, and interpretation of meanings or information in a culturally informed human interaction. Depending on the channel employed, it can either be verbal or nonverbal (Littlejohn & Foss, 2007; Beebe, Beebe, & Ivy, 2010; Gamble & Gamble, 2020). Without effective communication, society would be lifeless because communication is essentially paramount to interpersonal relationship building, maintenance of order and the day-to-day operations of institutions (Kennia Wikanditha & Alma Huwaida Ramadhani, 2023). Although all humans communicate, they do so differently. Men and women, because of the biological, cultural and social constructions, have their unique way of transmitting information (Wood, 1994). According to Tannen (1994), the gender norms in which such individuals are socialized. These norms influence the nature of body language, tone and even words they employ in interaction (Mikesell, 2004).

As a result, this argument points to an indisputable concept of “gendered communication”, which has often been described as the socially constructed patterns of communication expected and expressed by men and women in the field of communication and gender studies and sociolinguistics (Merchant, 2012; Wood, 1994). Studies have shown that women, unlike men who are assertive, practice inclusivity in their speech, especially in formal situations. These unique styles of communication are not fixed biologically. Rather, they are a result of the cultural realities prevalent in such situations, which have been internalized through socialization (Tannen, 1994; Coates, 2015). It is further established that these differences instituted by norms determine the nature of power and leadership roles for both genders (Merchant, 2012). For instance, in the West, the visibility of men in organizational settings is far higher than that of women, whose contributions are often undervalued and less assertive or perceived as aggressive when assertive (Karpowitz & Mendelberg, 2014). These differences in communication styles in the workplace give rise to stereotypical viewpoints that influence who maintains authority, is promoted or is included in decision-making processes.

In agreement with this claim, a study by Greenwood (2017) reveals that gendered communication varies. This is true, as evidenced by the fact that, for instance, the cultural realities in America differ significantly from those in Africa. So, American realities cannot measure African gendered communication norms. In the same vein, it would be wrong to employ the gendered communication realities in Somalia to judge or analyse communication in Senegal. Therefore, since gendered communication is socioculturally influenced, the findings in global discourse on the concept cannot, on every occasion, be generalized to countries like Nigeria. For example, Nigeria is predominantly a patriarchal society which has a cultural, religious and socio-political system where men dominate and often repress women's voices. This trait is exhibited in public and professional settings where men are often expected to be more assertive than women, who are expected to be respectful in their communication (Makama, 2013).

In simpler terms, this means communication in the Nigerian organizational setting is not a matter of fluency or competency; it is rather a product of socio-cultural experiences and expectations which has shaped gender hierarchies in the country. This study is situated in the Nigerian context to explore the dynamics of gendered communication norms in Nigerian workplaces. This will contribute to the global discourse on gender and communication.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Gendered Communication Norms

Scholarly works on gendered communication have argued that the communication styles of men are different from women. This assertion, according to scholars, is a result of the sociocultural norms prevalent in how and where they are socialized. They argued that although all humans communicate, they do so differently. Women's communication methods and expressions differ from those of men. This means gendered communication norms vary. Tannen (1990) suggests in her work that this is because of different socialisation processes they experience. She further argues that these processes result into "genderlects" or "gender dialect", a unique style in how each gender has conversations.

Consequently, many scholars have since argued to support her claims that indeed the patterns of communication between men and women are different, not as a result of their biological differences, but their social construction. Their studies suggest that unlike men who assert dominance through the use of direct language and portray independence in their language use, women are more relational because of their style of communicating, which embodies mostly the use of indirect language, collaboration, empathy and politeness. They do this mostly to negotiate civility and establish relationships, unlike men. (Wood 1994, Lakoff, 1975, Holmes, 2006, Coates, 2016). Another study also revealed specifically that women also employ hedges such as "probably" and tag questions like "Nice day, isn't it?", which depict their self-doubt (Hancock and Rubin, 2015). However, some still hold the view that women sometimes communicate like men and vice versa (Wood, 1994 & Coates, 2016). These gendered communication differences justify the term "gendered communication norms," which refers to the distinctive patterns of communication as they exist in men and women.

### Gendered Communication Norms in Workplaces

This socially constructed pattern of communication among men and women is reflected consistently in many professions because communication in professional settings extends beyond the transmission of information. It encompasses authority, identity, and professionalism. For example, the study by Mullany (2007) reveals that male managers, compared to female managers, employ direct language. Female managers, on the other hand, emphasise inclusivity. This distinction pushes the view that men are more qualified to lead, which is a gendered perception of leadership competence. This, according to Merchant (2012), in a similar study, promotes gender disparity where males are more valued and women are undervalued. For women, there is a complexity they encounter while communicating in professional settings. As Baxter (2010) put it, this is a communication paradox where women are perceived as unfeminine when they communicate assertively and are considered incompetent when they employ polite strategies like hedges and soft tones.

In the same vein, previous studies have shown that the way men and women communicate contributes to their

career progression. Weinberg, Trevino and Cleveland (2015) created a method to measure "gendered communication style", which differentiates masculine and feminine characteristics among professional adults. The investigation revealed that masculine communication styles lead to higher chances of hierarchical advancement, such as promotions to higher levels, while feminine style leads to non-hierarchical rewards such as compensation. The results show that a feminine communication style has some positive effects on hierarchical career success, but mainly benefits women through complex communication-gender patterns. Therefore, understanding the distinct intricacies of how each gender negotiates communication reveals the effectiveness of their style of communication in professional settings and how it shapes career progression.

### **African and Nigerian Gendered Communication Norms in Workplace**

Existing literature on the examination of gendered communication, especially in professional settings, has argued that sociocultural norms shape communication in such settings. These norms influence the disposition of women and men because they promote or hinder their participation and career progression at their workplaces. In the African and especially Nigerian context, this issue is even more complex as it is worsened by the patriarchal nature entrenched in the system and the many culturally influenced norms that promote gender roles, hierarchy and respect.

Furthermore, Greenwood (2017) in her exploration of gendered communication styles reveals that gendered communication styles are not the same globally. This is backed by the fact that, for instance, the cultural realities prevalent in America differ tremendously from African realities. Therefore, American realities cannot be used to measure African gendered communication norms. Likewise, it would be wrong to employ the gendered communication realities in, for instance, Somalia, to judge or analyze communication in Senegal, even though they are both African countries, because according to Greenwood (2015), gendered communication is socioculturally influenced. This means the findings in global discourse on the concept cannot, on every occasion, be generalized or applied to every country.

For the sake of this research, Nigeria is the focus. Predominantly a patriarchal society, Nigeria has a cultural, religious and socio-political system where men dominate and often repress women's voices (Onyeizugbo, 2003). This reality in Nigeria manifests in professional settings where women are expected to be respectful in their communication, while men are often expected to be the assertive ones. They tend to employ deference, in the manner of indirect forms of language, to avoid being perceived as arrogant or disrespectful and to embrace culture. The study by Sifianou (1999) demonstrates that their deference reflects through their silent behaviour. This form of communication does not indicate harmony or passivity because it serves as a meaningful communicative gesture. People interpret silence in various ways because it carries multiple meanings. However, in Nigerian society, this communication method represents either deference or respect as well as resistance, which commonly appears among women. Professional settings commonly misinterpret this behaviour as signs of incompetence or lack of confidence or disinterest. Meanwhile, women utilize this approach to survive within environments that are primarily controlled by men (Omoniyi 2006, Brescoll, 2011, Aina 2012, Makama 2013).

Karpowitz and Mendelberg (2014) also argue that women speak less in male-dominated groups because they are more likely to be interrupted or have their contributions dismissed. And that oftentimes affects women the most as they are restrained and often misinterpreted when assertive, unlike men who are perceived positively (Adisa et al., 2024). In some cases, this happens even when women are more competent than men. And this reality limits the career advancement and visibility of women in their workplaces. This means communication in the Nigerian organizational setting is not a matter of fluency or competency; it is rather a product of socio-cultural experiences and expectations which have shaped gender hierarchies in the country.

However, this reality has evolved. Some women have created coping mechanisms in such an environment. Female professionals now combine confidence and politeness in forming their speech in professional settings. They have become adaptive, which has allowed them to assert their authority without breaking cultural norms (Ojo and Olaniyan, 2015). This justifies the assertion by Greenwood (2015) that gendered communication is fluid. Nonetheless, there is still a gap in localized perspective on gendered communication norms. There is a need for the examination of gendered communication norms, especially in Nigerian workplaces, because this is crucial as it will enhance understanding of these norms and improve culturally sensitive policies that address

workplace gender inequality. Therefore, this study will investigate gendered communication norms which affect workplace relationships and career advancement and leadership among Nigerian men and women.

## METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach, drawing on grounded theory to investigate workplace gender communication patterns through the online survey responses of 24 participants, who represent equal numbers of men and women from IT, marketing, customer service, and market work roles. Grounded theory, as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), served as the methodology because it allowed data-derived themes to emerge naturally, thereby avoiding predefined hypotheses about respondents' unique workplace experiences (Charmaz, 2014). The survey featured open-ended questions that examined communication culture, including gender differences, comfort with expressing opinions, interruption patterns, cultural impacts, leadership attribution, and inclusion recommendations. Data collection took place anonymously to uphold ethical standards and promote the full participation of respondents.

Also, the thematic analysis, a step-by-step process, was used. This theory method includes open and axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding revealed initial concepts, which included “hierarchical respect” and “gendered communication styles” through direct analysis of respondents' language. During axial coding, the identified concepts became linked to the categories of “cultural expectations” and “leadership attribution.” Through selective coding, the original categories transformed into essential themes, including “constrained participation” and “patriarchal biases.” The constant comparison method ensured themes remained data-driven. To preserve the original meaning of participant response, verbatim quotes from respondents were displayed as Male Respondents or Female Respondents. The methodology enabled a comprehensive participant-based understanding of workplace gendered communication patterns, which matched the research objective to examine Nigerian professional settings from a local perspective.

## ANALYSIS

### Findings

The respondents described their workplace communication culture as “professional”, “formal”, “respectful”, and often featured “hierarchical” structures. According to male respondents, the hierarchical structure of meetings puts the boss first, followed by the director, before employees communicate. The communication channels include presentations, emails, and verbal discussions. Depending on the occasion, professional and traditional language are used. Male participants stated that all employees maintain equal status without any differences in association. Meanwhile, female respondents pointed out cultural limits by stating that frequent interactions between women and men lead to assumptions of romantic involvement, while women modify their speech to avoid appearing aggressive in meetings.

Furthermore, the majority of the respondents (men and women) acknowledged that men and women communicate differently. One respondent said this is true because “They communicate based on gender roles and backgrounds.” A female respondent also stated that professional communication exists between men and women yet their styles sometimes differ. The way women express themselves through details contrasts with the direct approach of men in some cases. The way someone communicates depends on their personal traits rather than their gender identity. A male respondent also states, “Women are more expressive. Men tend to have this fear of losing their jobs, so they are cautious when speaking to superiors at the workplace.” Another respondent said the difference in communication is based on the fact that men and women perceive issues differently, sharing, “Females tend to have more emotional intelligence and males do more of logical reasons over emotional”.

However, those who think otherwise shared that the prevailing professional way of communicating in their organization creates a balance in the way they communicate. For example, a male respondent stated, “There are equal professional channels and etiquette for workplace communication.”

Most importantly, most participants shared that they always feel at ease sharing their opinions in their

organization since their workplace provided a team culture where ideas are welcome and appreciated as long as it is workable. For instance, a female participant shared, "I usually feel comfortable expressing my opinions during meetings because the environment was supportive and respectful. Everyone's ideas were listened to, and I felt encouraged to contribute". The majority of the male participants also shared the same opinions. Furthermore, only very few participants stated that their gender led to being interrupted when sharing their opinion. A participant explained she had never seen someone face gender-based interruptions or dismissals because workplace interactions treated everyone with respect. Most participants confirm that cultural along with societal norms affect how they express themselves at work according to their responses to the survey question. A female participant expressed that cultural and societal expectations have some influence on her behaviour. At my workplace showing respect to senior colleagues alongside speaking politely and dressing modestly serves as crucial elements. At work these values help maintain professionalism and create harmony between employees.

Most respondents modify their communication tones because they follow ethical standards established in their workplace. One respondent explained that her workplace forbids aggressive speech and rude behaviour. A participant explained that the manner in which she addresses her subordinates differs significantly from her communication style with superiors. The way she expresses herself changes according to the people she is talking to. When interacting with supervisors, she uses formal language yet when she talks to close colleagues, she uses informal language. Good communication and respect remain intact through different situations because it maintains proper conduct. The data showed no evidence that any gender adjusted their tone based on their gender identity.

Most participants agree that workplace communication among men and women depends on expectations regarding respect and modesty. A participant stated that women need to use more polite words, and men feel the need to be assertive in their speech. People modify their communication style based on these expectations, but a workplace needs to develop free speech opportunities for all employees to communicate with respect. According to multiple participants the expectations place more restrictions on women than men because stereotypes in the workplace create obstacles which affect female workers. To maintain their modesty and avoid being seen as aggressive women typically use softer language in their interactions while avoiding self-promotion. Men encounter less severe judgment than women when they communicate assertively in the workplace. The way people speak confidently in professional settings stems from societal norms.

Several participants gave concrete examples about how particular communication approaches affected their evaluation of competence. One respondent shared that a colleague would present information with clarity and assurance during team meetings even though they lacked complete answers. The respondent added that their consistent clarity led others to rely on them for advice and perceive them as capable. Another respondent also stated that a person received respectful interruption during a presentation when their correct information was presented without confidence, which resulted in better presentation outcomes.

Furthermore, respondents connected leadership to assertive communication through their responses. Female respondents described leadership as being linked to people who express themselves with clear, confident and assertive communication. Male respondents stated that professional settings favor men who express themselves in an outspoken manner. Women believed that assertive behaviour receives better reception when men display it. Male respondents shared examples that showed a presenter with confidence received better competence ratings than a colleague who appeared more hesitant.

These findings indicate that Nigerian workplace communication develops through hierarchical power dynamics, together with cultural values about respect and modesty, and these combine with gender expectations to determine professional involvement. Research participants explained that their workplace communication system features "professional," "formal", and "respectful" elements and maintains "hierarchical" patterns that prefer men's direct communication but challenge women's cautious communication, which stems from societal expectations. The participants state they feel comfortable sharing their thoughts in supportive environments although they shared there are difficulties with gender interruptions and assumptions about male-female romantic relationships. The recommendations such as the deployment of active listening approaches, equal participation procedures and gender equality, unconscious bias training as well as moral and body language

instruction demonstrates the need for systemic changes to establish inclusive communication and professional equality within Nigerian workplaces.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to explore the gendered workplace communication norms at Nigerian organizations by addressing four specific research questions: (1) How do gender-based communication standards manifest within Nigerian professional settings? (2) What perceptions do Nigerian workplace personnel hold regarding different communication styles that male and female professionals employ? (3) What impact do gendered communication standards have on meeting participation and decision-making processes and leadership development? (4) What organizational and cultural factors either promote or resist gendered communication norms? The grounded theory analysis of survey data from 24 Nigerian professionals revealed three main findings: hierarchical communication patterns, gendered communication variations with cultural boundaries and leadership recognition through assertive behaviour. Through iterative coding, these themes reveal how gender interacts with cultural elements and organizational dynamics to answer these research questions while affirming or extending previous studies (Tannen, 1990; Holmes, 2006; Baxter, 2010).

Results from 24 Nigerian professionals show that gendered workplace communication patterns within cultural hierarchy impact workplace professional involvement. The respondents describe the workplace culture as having a formal, respectful and hierarchical structure with meetings led by the boss, followed by department directors and subhead instructions passed down from the boss. Organizational dominance structures identified by Baxter (2010) demonstrate how hierarchical norms give preference to senior voices while suppressing junior staff members and women. The statements from male respondents about equal employee status do not match the actual hierarchical communication patterns, thus showing a gap between stated equality and real workplace interactions. The difference between stated equality and actual communication patterns supports Tannen's (1990) genderlects theory, which demonstrates how socialized power structures shape communication styles to strengthen male authority in hierarchical settings.

Most participants in the study recognized unique communication styles between men and women by stating that women express themselves more and females show greater emotional intelligence, while men express themselves directly. The participant responses match the views of Holmes (2006) and Coates (2015) regarding gendered communication styles. A male participant stated that "men have this fear of losing their jobs, so they speak cautiously to superiors", which indicates that hierarchical pressures shape male communication patterns as well.

The recognition by some respondents that workplace communication protocols and professional channels operate equally for all genders indicates that organizational professionalism can handle certain visible differences in specific situations. Female respondents described cultural limitations through their statements about gendered assumptions regarding romantic relationships between men and women during professional interactions and their need to adjust speech patterns to avoid aggressive perceptions, which demonstrates how patriarchal norms restrict women's professional exposure and engagement (Makama, 2013 & Adisa et al., 2024). The common suspicion of romantic connections between women and men blocks female employees from building networks, which perpetuates gender-based inequalities in professional interactions (Baxter, 2010).

Although some participants maintain that professional communication channels function equally across workplaces, female participants identified cultural barriers which stem from male-female social contact, resulting in romantic relationship assumptions and speech adjustments to prevent aggressive perceptions. The findings support the conclusions from Makama (2013) and Adisa et al. (2024) regarding patriarchal barriers which restrict women's visibility. Cultural elements within society create barriers which limit women's participation in meetings and their ability to network effectively.

The cultural standards of respect and modesty that exist as fundamental principles and include showing respect to senior colleagues and speaking politely significantly shape communication patterns. Survey respondents modified their communication style by avoiding hostile language and by communicating with their lower-level employees differently than they would with higher-level employees. Women face stronger effects from

workplace norms because gender stereotypes influence how others view them during professional interactions. There are societal expectations for women to maintain modesty, while men receive encouragement to speak assertively. This creates barriers for women to demonstrate confidence, according to Makama's (2013) study on Nigerian workplace gender inequalities. The workforce standards for gender-specific tone adjustments remain unreported because both genders make ethical adjustments, but women tend to adapt more based on social expectations, which diminishes their professional visibility.

The data established a connection between leadership and assertive communication. It revealed how people communicate stands as an important factor which affects how leadership skills and career progression are perceived (Weinberg et al. 2019). According to female participants, the reception of assertive conduct is more favourable when men exhibit it, and this observation aligns with Baxter's (2010) communication paradox regarding female assertiveness. The example of the respondent who received correction which elevated confidence to pursue additional tasks demonstrates how feedback develops leadership potential, yet hierarchical organizations limit these growth opportunities for women.

The recommendations from the respondents for inclusivity through the following suggestions: "promote both active listening and equal participation," "workshops that address gender equality and unconscious bias," and "training on moral and body language." will provide a framework of systemic interventions to eliminate patriarchal biases when implemented. These recommendations present a method to reduce the obstacles which women face when they use assertive communication while also helping every employee understand how to work within Nigeria's respect-focused professional culture.

## Implications

Based on the findings of this research, organizations need to solve hierarchical culture issues by implementing meeting structures which enable participation from all organizational levels. The male respondents state that meetings begin with hierarchy as a primary factor that organizations should mitigate through their restructuring of discussions. Female respondents recommend controlled discussions which emphasize equal participation and active listening to ensure diverse input is given priority. The implementation of cultural sensitivity training, according to Male Respondents' "Workshops on gender equality and unconscious bias", can help address the interruptions of Female Respondents by educating employees about bias prevention (Merchant, 2012). Organizations should establish protected areas for junior employees because this addresses the statements from Male Respondents about junior staff opinions being disregarded. Female respondents recommend including body language and moral training in professional development programs, which aids women when they assert authority while following cultural norms. The implementation of mentorship programs should help women build confident communication skills to fight against stereotypes that men speak more while ensuring equal participation and improved team productivity.

## Limitations and Future Research

During the process of this research, certain hindrances were encountered. The research draws its findings from 24 survey respondents, whose results do not generalize well to larger populations, but the grounded theory method provides detailed insights into specific localized experiences. The uncommon occurrence of interruptions, which male respondents reported, may result from cultural norms that prevent people from reporting such incidents, thus requiring additional research through observational methods. The study suggests future research should investigate nonverbal communication because Female Respondents mentioned "Training on moral and body language" to better understand its impact on gendered interactions. Research should explore how different cultural variations across Nigerian regions and industries affect communication norms by conducting comparative studies.

## CONCLUSION

The way people communicate based on gender roles strongly affects workplace participation in Nigeria because cultural values about respect and hierarchy, alongside modesty, maintain traditional gender expectations. The qualitative study, which uses respondents' direct quotes, shows that women face limitations in expressing

assertiveness because workplace norms require deference, according to Female Respondents. Hierarchical structures and unspoken methods of silencing work together to restrict participation levels according to both Male and Female Respondents, while leadership roles tend to Favor male assertiveness due to patriarchal biases. The suggestions from respondents about participation equality and training serve as routes for creating inclusive work environments. The current research establishes a Nigerian perspective that supports the development of culturally appropriate workplace policies to promote equal opportunities and team cohesion, workplace efficiency.

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