

## The New York Times

# *The Universal Phenomenon of Men Interrupting Women*

By Susan Chira

June 14, 2017

For women in business and beyond, it was an I-told-you-so day.

The twin spectacles Tuesday — an Uber board member’s wisecrack about women talking too much, and Senator Kamala Harris, Democrat of California, being interrupted for the second time in a week by her male colleagues — triggered an outpouring of recognition and what has become almost ritual social-media outrage.

Academic studies and countless anecdotes make it clear that being interrupted, talked over, shut down or penalized for speaking out is nearly a universal experience for women when they are outnumbered by men.

A few statistics show that the questions directed at Uber about how women fare in the workplace extend beyond one company, and indeed beyond Silicon Valley. Women make up 6.4 percent of Fortune 500 chief executive officers and 19.4 percent of Congress this year. About a fifth of board members in Fortune 500 companies in 2016 were women, according to research conducted by Deloitte and the Alliance for Board Diversity.

After Arianna Huffington, an Uber director, spoke of how important it was to increase the number of women on the board, David Bonderman said that would mean more talking. He soon resigned from the board. Even in companies without notorious bro-cultures, however, women have had to struggle to feel heard and, as the numbers make clear, to advance to the top.

“I think every woman who has any degree of power and those who don’t know how it feels to experience what Kamala Harris experienced yesterday,” said Laura R. Walker, the president and chief executive of New York Public Radio. “To be in a situation where you’re trying to do your job and you’re either cut off or ignored.”

Senator Harris, a former prosecutor, assertively questioned Attorney General Jeff Sessions during his testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee. Senator John McCain, Republican of Arizona, interrupted and chided her to let Mr. Sessions answer her questions. Soon after that, Senator Richard Burr, Republican of North Carolina and the committee chairman, cut her off, saying her time had elapsed.

Women in a wide range of industries, at all levels, offered hundreds of such examples in response to an invitation from The New York Times for people to share their personal experiences on Facebook. “I can’t even count the number of times I’ve witnessed a woman being interrupted and talked over by a man, only to hear him later repeat the same ideas she was trying to put forward,” wrote one respondent, Grace Ellis. “I’d say I see this happen ... two to three times a week? At least?”

Joyce Lionarons wrote, “My female boss told me she needed to allow each man to interrupt her four times before protesting in a meeting. If she protested more often, there were problems.”

Erica Brown wrote that she has worked for three months as a distiller. Virtually every time she goes to pick up supplies, she said, the staff asked her husband what she needed.

Megha Banerjee said she used to work at a company with very few women. “When I would express my opinion, I was often interrupted, or my point was ignored,” she wrote. “It’s been six months that I’ve left that job, and I’m a much happier, more confident person.”





From top: Senator Kamala Harris, Democrat of California, speaking at the California Democratic Party convention; Deborah Gillis, right, chief executive of Catalyst, with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of Canada at a roundtable discussion for female entrepreneurs; and Arianna Huffington, then the editor in chief of The Huffington Post, at an event promoting the London tech industry. From top: Rich Pedroncelli/Associated Press; Sean Kilpatrick/The Canadian Press, via Associated Press; Andrew Burton/Getty Images

“I used to work for one of the 10 largest independent booksellers in the country,” Bianca DiRuocco wrote. “Often, a suggestion made by one of the female staff during meetings the owner attended would be shot down, only to reappear in a week or two as his own brilliant idea. It happened so often a few of us started joking privately about noting our suggestions in the calendar to see exactly how many days later it would take for our ideas to go from ridiculously impossible to sheer genius.”

A ream of studies affirm such anecdotes. Researchers consistently find that women are interrupted more and that men dominate conversations and decision-making, in corporate offices, town meetings, school boards and the United States Senate.

Victoria L. Brescoll, associate professor of organizational behavior at the Yale School of Management, published a paper in 2012 showing that men with power talked more in the Senate, which was not the case for women. Another study, “Can an Angry Woman Get Ahead?” concluded that men who became angry were rewarded, but that angry women were seen as incompetent and unworthy of power in the workplace.

Indeed, Jason Miller, a former adviser to President Trump’s campaign and a CNN commentator, described Senator Harris as “hysterical” and shouting during her questioning of Mr. Sessions. At times, Senator Harris cut Mr. Sessions off, but she spoke in an even tone.

That experience, too, resonated with many women responding to the Facebook callout.

“And if you complain, you are excluded,” said Paula Minnikin. “As the only woman on a particular corporate board, I asked the chair in private if we could consider finding another one or two women as we were seeking to replace three board members. He said there was no doubt I was one of our strongest members but that there ARE no good women. I was the exception. He then went on to share that this is because I’m tall and strong, like a man, and don’t confuse things like a regular woman. I was flabbergasted.”

Tali Mendelberg, professor of politics at Princeton University, is co-author of “The Silent Sex: Gender, Deliberations and Institutions,” compiling studies examining what happens when more women join decision-making groups. She and Christopher F. Karpowitz, associate professor of political science at Brigham Young University, found that, at school board meetings, men and women did not speak as long until women made up 80 percent of the school board. When men were in the minority, however, they did not speak up less.

“The fact that women are outnumbered in every room puts them in a position where they’re often coming up against gender-based stereotypes,” said Deborah Gillis, president and chief executive of Catalyst, which works for women’s advancement in business. “Women are too hard, too soft, but never just right. What that means is that women are seen as either competent or liked but not both.”

Some women are working to subvert these gender imbalances in their own organizations.

Ms. Walker, of New York Public Radio, said she pressed for more women at its senior level and on its board. “I think this not only empowers women throughout our organization, it also makes for better discussions,” she said. She is also pushing to increase the number of women who host podcasts.

Jacqueline Hinman, chairman and C.E.O. of CH2M Hill Companies, a Colorado-based engineering company that manages projects including light rail in Toronto and Olympic facilities in London, works in a field where women have typically been scarce. Now, however, women make up 30 to 40 percent of her board and are well represented in senior positions.

It took years of work to get to that point, Ms. Hinman said — and part of the push came from clients, increasingly women, who wanted to see diverse engineering teams. She said she made it clear to subordinates they will be judged partly on how many women and minorities they advance.

“Men who come to our companies from competitors are astounded by the number of women everywhere,” she said, adding, “They love it.”

A version of this article appears in print on June 15, 2017, on Page B1 of the New York edition with the headline: Women Interrupted

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