# Who Gets to Speak? The Impact of Race and Gender on Classroom Participation Dynamics

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Classroom participation is positively linked to students' confidence in their intellectual abilities, hones their critical thinking and is self-reported as essential to learning processes (Tatum et al., 2016). It can drastically improve students' learning experience with cost-effective targeted interventions (see below in our recommendations). While a variety of factors influence students' participation, this research project is interested in investigating structural patterns of silencing linked to students' gender and race. Research shows the salience of gender and race in American university classrooms and therefore begs to interrogate their relevance at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) (Allan and Madden, 2006; Kim and Sax 2009; Rocca, 2010; Ruthotto, 2020). The Department of Government is used as a case study to answer the following research question: How do gender and race shape classroom participation dynamics?

## Literature Review

Research has discovered significant racial disparities in participation (Ruthotto et al., 2020). It suggests minority students are especially reluctant to participate because they perceive themselves as not good enough in terms of academic or linguistic skills (White, 2011) or have difficulties assimilating to university cultures perceived as historically and currently oppressive (Ogbu, 1987 and Ogbu and Wilson, 1990). Research also shows female students participate less than male students (Leraas et al., 2018; Fassinger, 1995; Rocca, 2010). This disparity is often attributed to women's fears of appearing not smart enough and concerns over poorly formulated ideas, thus in-directly linking to their level of confidence (Crawford & MacLeod, 1995).
The seminal work by Sandler et al. in 1996 coined the term' chilly climate' to refer to these different factors stifling women's classroom participation (Allan and Madden, 2006). The term has also been used to describe classroom practices disadvantaging sexual and racial minorities, as well as disabled students' participation. Allan and Madden's mixed-method approach (2006) identifies students' fields of study and whether women are minority or majority students as significant factors alongside faculty behaviour when considering drivers. However, varying methodological approaches confirm the existence of this chilly climate (Crombie et al., 2003; Allan and Madden, 2006).

When analysing the results of their quantitative surveys, Allan and Madden explain how chilly climates are relatively rare, as 'averaged statistics' obscure the intensity of negative experiences for female students. In contrast, their qualitative focus groups provide in-depth accounts of pervasive issues like sexist jokes, men monopolising space and men interrupting female

students. These discrepancies highlight the limitations of quantitative methods, pointing out the need for qualitative analyses and mixed methods to study how gender influences classroom participation dynamics. This conclusion guided our research design towards focus group methodology.

## Research design

This research conducted two focus groups in which broad themes relating to (1) general classroom participation, (2) the interaction between students' gender, racial identity and their classroom behaviour, and (3) measures that foster conversations were discussed. The first focus group sampled 8 participants identifying as women and non-binary students, and the second focus group sampled 8 participants from ethnic or racial minorities from all genders. Using the same structure for both interventions, while targeting different students, delivered comparable findings between the two groups.

## Findings and discussion

Both focus groups extensively discuss race and gender as meaningful categories that mediate classroom participation dynamics. There is a general diagnosis that male students speak more frequently and for longer amounts of time than their female counterparts. As a white woman from the U.S. discusses, ‘the male students tend to be dominant, and that doesn't just mean the number of times they speak, but it's the way they carry themselves in the classroom’. Similarly, there is a recurring idea that in the classroom, international, racialised students speak less than students whose native language is English. A female student from India succinctly captures this dynamic when she states, ‘I can clearly see there are two groups of people like one is obviously the Asians, Indian, Chinese […] And then the other people, English is their first language. […] They're more comfortable with the setup. So when they start speaking, I feel that they actually cover almost all the points of the question’.

The reasons for gender as a mediating factor in classroom participation are varied. An important factor that comes up in discussions is disparities in confidence, with participants believing that men have higher confidence, which leads them to participate more and in less self-conscious ways. An English female student explains, ‘I think that the males do have more of an innate confidence which [makes them] say things that they don't think before they show the rest of the class’. In response to this, a black female student adds, ‘I see the same things, the same patterns repeatedly […] because there is some sort of entitlement with some people and some mindlessness about the space that they take up’.

Several participants also discuss men monopolising participation. In this regard, a Black female student recalls that ‘if we have table discussions and there's maybe like two guys and more girls when it comes to sharing with the course, they do take it upon themselves to raise their hand and like, say, all of the ideas that have been said’. Whilst we have not found many instances of faculty creating a chilly climate, several participants ascribe importance to the role of teachers in moderating incidents of men dominating discussions or being demeaning towards gender issues.

Regarding the mechanism by which race shapes participation, racialised students often feel like they stand out in predominantly white settings, which can lead to discomfort and heightened self-consciousness when participating in discussions. A Black female student explains, 'most of the time, I'm the only person in the room who is Black, and so I do feel a bit more conscious of what I'm saying'. Echoing this sentiment, a Black male student from Canada shares, 'I've always been hyper-conscious of the fact that in every single one of my classes, I've been the only Black person'. However, he describes a slightly different response to this situation, asserting that 'instead of letting it intimidate me, I try to let it empower me and be completely authentic'. This response may be mediated by his native proficiency in English and his gender, potentially indicating underlying factors that influence the interplay between race and classroom participation.

Furthermore, racialised students often feel the pressure that they are expected to speak for their entire culture or country, which is a source of discomfort regarding participation. A black student says, 'I'm always getting these suggestions and nods to speak from that context, and I don't necessarily have a lot to tell you'. Many participants also discuss the significance of a language barrier in lowering participation levels, as illustrated by the following statement from a Chinese student: 'many of my classmates feel very nervous because of, well, accents, so they're also Chinese and having Chinese accent […] they feel that it's a shame'. A female student from the Philippines, following this intervention, asserts 'I also feel very nervous when I speak […] part of it's also the accent that intimidates me. I guess. […] maybe you don't understand me or something'. While a distinct classroom experience caused by the intersection of participants' gender and racial identity was not self-identified, similar participation patterns among minority women show the potential interplay of intersectionality in classroom dynamics. Intersectionality assumes differing experiences for minority women who are situated at the crossroad of their gender and racial identity (Hearn and Hobson 2020). Hence, their barriers to participate are the product of their intersecting identities. The focus groups highlight the interplay between women's lower confidence levels relative to men, and their language barrier, which prompts certain students to need more time to prepare their comments and participation in class. Moreover, these participants have shared concerns that their opinion and experience might not be backed and therefore feel more at 'risk' to share their experience. Consequently, *needing to feel well-read and prepared* is key to racialised women's participation, although should be subject to closer examination to determine as a product of intersectional dynamic.

## Conclusions and limitations

The small sample size limits representativeness and prevents us from exploring certain issues in depth, such as the variations among differently racialised students. Additionally, there is a sampling bias, as students were likely already interested in classroom participation. We have not explored in detail to what extent the intersection of gender and race—and potentially other categories—generates unique predispositions and experiences in class participation.
Despite these limitations, our research highlights that the classroom is not an equal playing field for women and racialised students as they speak less, for shorter times, and in a more self-conscious manner. Moreover, they often need more time to think than their white male

counterparts, and occasionally feel that they do not have enough space to participate due to masculinised and racialised dynamics in the classroom. Whilst many of these differences are rooted in systemic causes such as gendered socialization, language barriers, and larger societal inequalities, there are several initiatives suggested in the focus groups that can promote more inclusive participation and are not too costly or difficult to implement in all LSE departments.

## A non-exhaustive list of recommendations

These recommendations were derived directly from our focus group discussions and our staff meeting with the Department of Government. This is not a comprehensive guide on how to manage classroom participation but rather suggestions that can help create a safe space for all students to participate.

- Observe and interrogate the drivers and barriers to students' participation. Ask yourself who speaks more frequently and leads conversations, and do gender and racial dynamics stifle students' participation in my classroom?
- Set the tone in the first seminar! Students stress the importance of the first seminar in encouraging participation throughout the semester. Explicitly welcome individual and unique experiences or thoughts from less confident minority students to foster inclusive participation.
- Bolster students' confidence and legitimacy to speak up by assigning small groups of students a course week to hold them accountable. This encourages students to engage thoroughly with the readings and class participation on assigned weeks.
- Give students the time to formulate questions. This allows students whose native language is not English or who feel less confident to garner confidence, write down their contribution, and feel prepared to discuss.
- Learn to moderate incidents. Students turn to teachers and hold them accountable for managing incidents of racism, sexism or other intimidation. If you need help with how to act, turn to your department to learn how to navigate these situations and what course of action to take.
- Conduct further research on classroom participation in the Department of Government and other departments at LSE using more focus groups and examining more closely the intersectional dynamics of gender and race in classroom participation.

Bibliography