

# Stop Telling Women How to Talk

by Carolyn Kiel

If you're a woman who podcasts, or a woman who speaks anywhere in public, you've probably experienced at least one moment where your voice has been criticized – not for the substance of your message, but for the way your voice sounds. Perhaps you've also heard people label other women's voices as “shrill,” “whiny,” “annoying” or a similar demeaning descriptor.

Typically, comments like these are rationalized as either “constructive feedback” for an individual woman or universal truths about how women's voices sound. This type of reasoning implies that if the individual woman (or women in general) would change the way they speak, then their voices would sound “acceptable” and people would stop complaining. However, the truth is much more complex. It doesn't matter what a woman's voice sounds like, or how much public speaking training she's received – it's almost impossible for her to escape this type of criticism. This stems from a long history of complaints that target and silence women's voices, in an attempt to prevent women from sharing their voices publicly at all.

Criticism of women's voices in podcasting has roots in the early days of radio, which Tina Talon describes in her New Yorker article “A Century of ‘Shrill’: How Bias in Technology Has Hurt Women's Voices.” As amplitude-modulated (AM) radio broadcasting became popular in the 1920s, frequent signal interference caused the U.S. Congress to regulate the bandwidth allotted to each radio station. Based on these limitations and the audio technology at the time, most broadcasters and audio equipment manufacturers limited their signals to a range between three hundred hertz and three thousand four hundred hertz. This “voiceband” range became regarded as the minimum amount of frequency information needed to transmit speech.

Unfortunately, voiceband did not treat all voices equally. Not only did voiceband favor lower voices, it also made women's speech less intelligible by cutting out many of their consonants, which women typically speak at frequencies above the voiceband range. This was worsened by a common stereotype that women speak more softly than men. As a result, whenever a woman got behind a microphone, the sound engineers would automatically crank the volume up. These technology and engineering failures made women's voices sound piercing and harsh to the listener, which reinforced already biased beliefs about women's voices being unfit for broadcast. Unfortunately, these limitations continue today: from the introduction of frequency-modulation (FM) radio that didn't significantly improve spoken voice broadcast quality, to data compression algorithms and Bluetooth speakers that make women's voices sound tinny by favoring low frequencies over high frequencies. Instead of being understood as a technology problem created and compounded by bias, it has been largely viewed as an explanation for why women don't sound good behind a microphone.

This bias exists in the podcasting world as well. In Amanda Marcotte's Daily Dot article “The War on Female Voices is Just Another Way of Telling Women to Shut Up,” she describes how women podcast hosts receive a disproportionate number of complaints about their voices, while male podcast hosts' voices rarely get criticized at all. When Katie Mingle was producing the

podcast *99% Invisible*, she got so many complaints about the women's voices on her show that she set up an automated message that replied to those emails and filtered them into a zero priority folder. She never got any complaints about the men's voices. The women on the show *This American Life*, with their pleasantly NPR-style voices, also got a high level of complaints, while the men got none.

When this inequity is pointed out, a common retort is that it's not due to sexism – instead, it's something specifically “wrong” with the way women speak. For example, women have been criticized for speaking with “vocal fry,” where they lower their voice to a rattle. People of all genders use vocal fry to emphasize certain parts of their speech, but women are the ones who get criticized for it most often. When men speak with vocal fry, not only aren't they criticized, but they are complimented for it. Marcotte points out how Ira Glass from *This American Life* has been widely praised for the way he speaks, despite using vocal fry frequently. The women on the show who spoke with the same amount of vocal fry as Glass, however, received listener complaints. It's hard to argue that this isn't sexism.

Women are also criticized for the pitch of their voice, which gets called “squeaky” or “shrill.” However, when women attempt to lower the pitch of their voices, this can cause more vocal fry – and more criticism. Additionally, women who try to deepen their speaking voices may be judged as sounding forced or unnatural, possibly because it's uncomfortable for them to speak that way. Even when women are coached to “sound more confident” by mimicking the direct communication styles used successfully by businessmen, their efforts backfire when the women are called aggressive and the dreaded “b-word” as a result. The trend is clear – for women, attempts at adjusting their voices in response to criticism typically brings about more criticism.

It's important to note that this criticism is not only coming from men. People of all genders police women's voices. It's no better (and perhaps even more disappointing) when women criticize other women for the way they speak. In a July 2022 tweet, actress Jane Lynch advised all women podcasters to lower the pitch of their voice because “women's voices can get into the annoying area if it gets too high.” Although her comment received some backlash, her opinion is far from rare. Too many women have bought into this type of policing and criticism of female voices. Sadly, we may even believe this sexist nonsense about our own voices!

If you are a woman podcaster who is getting criticism of your voice, I hope that this article helps you frame that feedback within the historical context of how women's voices are viewed. While this sexism and bias can be discouraging, it's important to remember that podcasting is a medium that includes all types of voices. To host a podcast, you don't have to sound or speak in a certain way. Of course, if you decide you want to try out some adjustments to your vocal presentation or audio setup, feel free to do that! However, please do not feel pressured to change your voice, and do not believe that you are less worthy of being a successful podcaster because of how you talk. Your voice is your power, so keep sharing it in a way that feels authentic to you. No matter what we sound like, women should not let criticism deter us from sharing our voices through podcasting.