

Free Speech for All (not just the male power elite)

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Abstract

The ability to speak and be heard is a health issue. I focus here on the democratic principle of Freedom of Speech and demonstrate my contention that women are robbed of their right to free speech in a world where political and legal arguments in support of men's right to free speech are constant. Some of the 21st Century tactics used to silence women are discussed from a feminist ethical perspective: pornography, prostitution, sexualisation of women and girls, cooption of the feminist agenda by governments and the media, and the marginalisation and exclusion of dissenting feminist voices.

While the battle feminists are waging against the silencing of women today is different from that waged in the early decades of Second Wave feminism, it is no less critical in terms of women's health. The feminist message to all women, as well as to those who would silence us, must continue to be: We will not be silenced!

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Paper

The ability to speak and be heard is a health issue. That's why my focus today is on Speech. Second Wave feminism encouraged women to speak and insisted that women's voices be heard in every arena, because those early feminists knew that the ability to express oneself and the knowledge that one's voice is being heard brings a sense of satisfaction and completeness necessary for a healthy life.

However, if the 1960s, 70s and 80s could be identified as the decades of women's emerging speech, the 90s and Noughties would have to be called the decades of women's silencing. It's that phenomenon that I will analyse and discuss in this paper. If the democratic principle of freedom of speech really is for all, I ask, how come men get more of it than women? How come the mainstream gets more of it than those who are marginalised? How come those with political and economic power get more access to media than the rest of us?

Arundhati Roy, feminist activist and writer from India, said some very provocative things in her City of Sydney Peace Prize Lecture in 2004. Criticising the corporate media, she said "the doctrine of Free Speech has been substituted by the doctrine of Free If You Agree Speech". She also said in that same speech: "...there's no such thing as the voiceless. There's just the deliberately silenced and the preferably unheard" (1).

I contend that women are among the 'deliberately silenced' in our society and feminists who agitate for justice for women are among the 'preferably unheard'.

I'm a feminist psychotherapist. I'm also a feminist ethicist and activist, and my commitment to both of those disciplines – feminist therapy and feminist ethics – led me to write a book about women's and feminist's experience of speech and silencing. In *Unspeakable: a feminist ethic of speech*, I discuss what I see to be 'a feminist ethic of speech'. In a nutshell, it's this: for speech to be free, it must first be fair (2).

Even a passing glance at 21st Century democratic societies, let alone a detailed and in-depth analysis, reveals that there is no balance, no fairness in the degree to which women and men have access to speech.

I want to begin by looking at the democratic principle of Freedom of Speech and then move on to look at some of the many tactics used today to silence women. Next, I will focus briefly on the silencing of *feminist* voices, and conclude with a comment about the effect silencing has on women's health and wellbeing.

Freedom of Speech

The democratic principle of Freedom of Speech is something that we all guard jealously. For all its flaws, I wouldn't want to live anywhere else than in a democracy. Also, I value the intent of the principle of freedom of speech. I value the fact that I can criticise politicians and other public figures, I can criticise patriarchy, without fear of being arrested or killed. But the principles inherent in democratic forms of government must be scrutinised by people who care about human rights and must certainly be scrutinised by feminists. Why? Because we know that the power elite in any democracy has a way of taking these great principles and making them work for themselves. Without a doubt, the principle of Freedom of Speech has been hijacked by white middle-class males – both from the Left and the Right of the political spectrum.

In the literature, there are many arguments for Freedom of Speech but here I will mention just two of the mainstream arguments, plus the feminist argument.

1. The Argument for Truth, that is, Freedom of Speech is the sole path to Truth. The argument goes like this: Unrestricted speech creates the best chance for truth to emerge in any society. Granting people absolute freedom to give their opinions, to weigh up other people's opinions – with nothing covered up – will ensure that truth will emerge.

It doesn't take too much intelligence to see the main weakness in that argument, which is, that it is predicated on the assumption that people actually *speak* the truth when, today, we know that truth is often in short supply. There is a lot of spin, lies, half-truths, deceit, but not much truth.

However, the Argument for Truth has endured, using the metaphor of the Marketplace of Ideas. Just like in a market, everyone is able to set out their ideas, throw them out into the marketplace for others to pick up. When that happens, we have a society where everyone is encouraged to say and do as they please, with no restrictions. Other people will simply pick and choose between all those freely expressed ideas. Also, there's the metaphor of the Slippery Slope which argues that,

if you don't allow free speech, if you censor anything at all, it will soon follow that lots of other things are censored as well.

2. The Argument for Self-Determination. This is probably the best-known argument among the general population. It is a libertarian argument in support of self-determination, self-development, self-expression and individual autonomy. Freedom of Speech, as you will know, is more accurately interpreted as freedom of expression – freedom to say, to do, to write and so on. The argument for self-determination goes something like this: 'I have the right to say and do whatever I like by virtue of the fact that I am human - and if that bothers you, then that's your problem'.

It's an argument that is totally focused on the individual and ignores the fact that we live in a society and/or a household with other people. Whenever one person insists on the right to do and say as they please, you can be sure that there are others whose freedom is being limited because of that.

3. The Argument for Equality. This is the feminist argument, developed by Catharine MacKinnon and set out in her essay "Equality and Speech" (3). This argument is critical of mainstream arguments for ignoring issues of equality and inequality. It says that the absolutist approach to speech, that is, everyone should be allowed to do and say whatever they like, benefits the more powerful at the expense of the less powerful. It presumes an equality that does not exist.

The argument for Equality grew out of the experience Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin had in 1983 when they brought an Ordinance to the City Council in Minneapolis aimed at banning pornography. This is how they described their ordinance. It was a "sex equality law, a civil-rights law, a law that says that sexual subordination of women through pictures and words, this sexual traffic in women, violates women's civil rights" (4). What a lot of people don't know is that the Minneapolis City Council passed the ordinance but it was vetoed by the mayor on the grounds that it would restrict freedom of speech. The Ordinance was reintroduced the following year, 1984, passed again and vetoed again by the mayor. So, it failed. And since then, the pornography industry has flourished around the world, secure in the knowledge that the principle of freedom of speech is on its side.

Commenting on this some years later, Andrea Dworkin said: In vetoing the ordinance, the mayor "claimed that it would violate the constitutional rights of the pornographers, which superseded in importance the speech rights of women and children who were shut up by pornography" (5). So it's the pornographers' rights over the rights of women and children.

In an article published in *The Age* a couple of months ago, Macquarie University's Cordelia Fine made a similar point to the one made by Andrea Dworkin. Remember when stockbroker David Kiely was caught on TV viewing near-naked pictures of Miranda Kerr at his desk on his work computer? Channel 7 just happened to be there interviewing someone else and David Kiely and his computer just happened to be in the background for all the world to see him enjoying these near-naked pictures.

Paraphrasing Cordelia Fine, she said: Yes, feel sorry for David Kiely because he was really unlucky to be sprung in that way. But feel more sorry for his female colleagues, because there is ample research to show that male workers viewing those kinds of images of women, not to mention the more pornographic images of women so easily accessed on computers, *are* influenced in terms of the way they perceive and interact with their female colleagues. From her research, she makes the point that “The drip, drip, drip effect of male workers viewing porn is the creation of an environment that is hostile and degrading to women...” and, she says, “women are reluctant to complain, for fear of seeming prudish” (6).

Using the example of pornography, as well as of other practices in society that subordinate women, the Argument for Equality calls on law-makers and politicians to make the principle of Freedom of Speech into a meaningful concept by taking the necessary steps to ensure that speech is free for ALL, that nobody is harmed by the free speech of others, or as I state it in my book: that free speech is also fair speech (2).

Tactics used to silence women

Any study of *speech* requires, first, an analysis of the *silencing of speech*. I will, therefore, move now to focus on the tactics used to silence those whose voices the power elite prefers not to hear.

Women and all minority groups in society are silenced by what is, without question, a deliberate programme of silencing. If mainstream, or patriarchy as we sometimes call it, is to stay intact, those in power must devise tactics to silence those who are different and those who dissent from mainstream views. I have chosen three headings under which I will discuss some of the tactics used to silence women. They are: violence, subordination and exclusion.

Violence

Those who work with women who are victims of domestic violence know that many women are silenced by violence and the threat of violence. When a woman realises that giving her opinion about something could result in her partner bashing her, of course she learns that it's more sensible to keep quiet. Women *are* silenced by violence and the threat of violence. Also, by rape and the threat of rape. Sexual harassment in the workplace, the military, sports organisations. In all walks of life, women and girls are expected to figure out *when* it's OK to give their opinion and *how much* it's OK to say. That's silencing.

Subordination

Women are subordinated, that is, made less than men, made into second class citizens, by the presence in society of pornography, prostitution, sexualisation, fundamentalism and so on. And Freedom of Speech is the argument used to justify all of these activities.

It seems that men must be allowed to view as much pornography as they like regardless of how that impacts on others, because it's said to be a freedom of speech issue. Regardless of the harm pornography causes to women, to relationships between women and men and to society as a whole, they simply must have access to it. Also, they must have access to prostitutes. These and similar practices which subordinate women are now mainstream practices, supported by the law, by governments and by all who grow rich on the profits made at the expense of women and girls.

Women are subordinated also by sexualisation. From a very early age, girls are being sexualised. Padded bras for three-year-olds. Women are urged to gyrate on a pole in a sexualised way and call it exercise. Sportswomen are encouraged to wear skimpy and sexy clothes. There is a growing concern being expressed in the community today about the over-the-top sexualisation of women and girls by the fashion industry, the entertainment industry and, of course, the media. Rosalind Gill from the London School of Economics suggests that the sexual objectification of women has become sexual subjectification. Women are presented as confident and autonomous subjects, *choosing* to be sexualised. The implication is: nobody can be accused of exploiting women because they are choosing it for themselves and enjoying the attention (7).

As one of the contributors to the book *Getting Real: Challenging the Sexualisation of Girls*, edited by Melinda Tankard Reist (8), I make the point in my chapter that all of this sexualising of women and girls makes equality between the sexes impossible. It subordinates women to men and, in so doing, trivialises and silences women (9).

Exclusion

Still, in the 21st Century, with a new you-beaut modern Labor federal government, out of 20 ministers in Cabinet in the Rudd government, only 4 are women. Of 10 in the outer ministry, only 3 are women. Of 12 Parliamentary Secretaries, only 2 are women. And they call that "equality". The degree to which women are excluded is mind-blowing. I won't even begin to mention the percentage of women on Boards of Management in the private and public spheres.

Women's voices aren't being heard to any appreciable degree in the important decision-making arenas of this nation or, indeed, of the world. What that means is that women are excluded, and deliberately so. Tokenism doesn't count.

Reiterating what I said earlier: All of the tactics used to silence women are deliberate – violence, subordination and exclusion. If governments and community leaders had the will to change them, they would. The fact that they remain unchanged speaks for itself.

Silencing feminist voices

All that I have said so far prompts me to ask: What are feminists doing about this problem?

We are all aware that today there are many different kinds of women calling themselves feminist and many different ways that feminism is presented in the community. But an argument could be made to support the view that there are just two main categories of feminists: liberal, postmodern feminists on the one hand; and radical, political feminists on the other. And each group approaches the silencing of women's voices very differently.

Vivienne Jabri, in her article "Feminist Ethics and Hegemonic Global Politics", argues for a "feminism of dissent" (10). She stresses the absolute necessity for contemporary feminists to understand the 'structures of domination' involving powerful political figures and powerful business interests working together – and, rather than being coopted by those forces, feminists must be dissenters.

In answer to the question: What are feminists doing about all of the practices which subordinate and silence women? it must be said that those liberal feminists who support pornography, prostitution and the excesses of the fashion industry, appear to have been conned by the hype which describes such practices as empowering for women. Radical feminists, on the other hand, continue to speak out against the exploitation, subordination and silencing of women inherent in those practices.

The role the media plays in silencing dissenting feminist voices should not be underestimated. Those feminists who echo the speech of the power elite are given voice in the media while those who dissent are not. Free speech for some but not for others or, as Arundhati Roy said, "free if you agree speech".

Effects of silencing on women's health

How does all this silencing affect women's health and wellbeing? The effect of silencing on anyone's mental health can be extreme. There can develop a sense of alienation, a sense of estrangement from society, a withdrawing into the much smaller world of one's immediate family which is, sadly, a strategy adopted by many women. There can be feelings of powerlessness, helplessness, hopelessness, sadness, fear – all of which have the potential to cause serious depression and anxiety.

That is why it's imperative that those of us who call ourselves feminists choose the path of dissent. If we choose to be complicit, if we allow ourselves to be coopted by mainstream, we are in fact colluding with the power elite and condoning those activities which negatively affect the health and wellbeing of women.

Those of us who choose to be dissenters, however, must be aware that we will be marginalised and silenced, and we need to be prepared for the effect such silencing may have on us. Political activists are just as vulnerable as anyone else to feelings of alienation and estrangement and must, therefore, be careful to put in place the kind of supports they need to be able to continue the fight for justice.

I will conclude with this question: What do we do when what we say is continually misrepresented and when our voices are continually ignored and silenced? The answer is clear: We just keep on speaking. We speak in spite of the silencing. We speak *through* the silencing, believing that women who desperately need to hear the voice of fairness and equality will hear us and feel supported. Believing, too, that one day our voices will be heard in the broader society and that the result will be: justice for all.

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