

Though patriarchy often claims a monopoly on rationality and reason, those committed to it will discount the most verifiable, coherent, ordinary story told by a woman and accept any fantastical account by a man, will pretend sexual violence is rare and false accusations common, and so forth. Why tell stories if they will only bring forth a new round of punishment or disparagement? Or if they will be ignored as if they meant nothing? This is how preemptive silencing works.

To have a voice means not just the animal capacity to utter sounds but the ability to participate fully in the conversations that shape your society, your relations to others, and your own life. There are three key things that matter in having a voice: audibility, credibility, and consequence.

*Audibility* means that you can be heard, that you have not been pressed into silence or kept out of the arenas in which you can speak or write (or denied the education to do so—or, in the age of social media, harassed and threatened and driven off the platform, as so many have).

*Credibility* means that when you get into those arenas, people are willing to believe you, by which I don't mean that women never lie, but that stories should be measured on their own terms and context, rather than patriarchy's insistence that women are categorically unqualified to speak, emotional rather than rational, vindictive, incoherent, delusional, manipulative, unfit to be heeded—those things often shouted over a woman in the process of saying something challenging (though now death threats are used as a shortcut, and some of those threats are carried out, notably with women who leave their abusers, because silencing can be conversational or it can be premeditated murder).

To be a person of consequence is to matter. If you matter, you have rights, and your words serve those rights and give you the power to bear witness, make agreements, set boundaries. If you have consequence, your words possess the authority to determine what does and does not happen to you, the power that underlies the concept of consent as part of equality and self-determination.

Even legally women's words have lacked consequence: in only a few scattered places on earth could women vote before the twentieth century, and not so many decades ago, women rarely became lawyers and judges; I met a Texas woman whose mother was among the first women in their region to serve on a jury, and I was an adult when the first woman was appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court. Until a few decades ago, wives throughout much of the world, including the United States, lacked the right to make contracts and financial decisions or even to exercise jurisdiction over their own bodies that overrode their husbands' ability to do so; in some parts of the world, a wife is still property under the law, and others choose her husband. To be a person of no consequence, to speak without power, is a bewilderingly awful condition, as though you were a ghost, a beast, as though words died in your mouth, as though sound no longer traveled. It is almost worse to say something and have it not matter than to be silent.

Women have been injured on all three fronts—as have men of color and nonwhite women doubly so. Not allowed to speak or punished for speaking or excluded from the arenas—courts, universities, legislatures, newsrooms—where decisions are made. Mocked or disbelieved or threatened if they do find a place in which to speak, and routinely categorized as inherently deceitful, spiteful, delusional, confused, or just unqualified. Or they speak up and it is no