

FORUM ARTICLE

Rethinking silence, gender, and power in insecure sites: Implications for feminist security studies in a postcolonial world

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Abstract

My current interest in silence, gender, and power owes much to discussions with Marysia Zalewski over the years. Much of my work has focused on masculinity, gender relations, and gender hierarchies with a focus on security and development in conflict zones. More recently, I have begun to explore silence not as a sign of disempowerment, but as a powerful force that can be used in many ways. This approach enables a more multi-levelled understanding of silence and voice and their many interactions. It has much to tell the Global North, where we prize voice and often underestimate the power of silence.

Keywords: Silence; Gender; Insecurity

Introduction

My current academic focus on silence as a form of power and the surrounding issues is largely the result of a discussion with Marysia Zalewski in the mid-1990s, at an International Studies Association meeting. An acrimonious debate over a passing remark by the sole male discussant on a gender and International Relation (IR) panel had raised serious questions about the gender imbalance on most feminist panels. To address this lacuna, we decided to organise a double panel on masculinities and gender at the next IR meeting. Placed on the last day of the conference in a popular resort town, we grimly predicted we would just be talking to each other. Instead, a large crowd arrived, and lively discussions ensued. Buoyed by the interest, we decided to produce an edited collection based on the panels. The success of *The Man Question in International Relations* inspired *Rethinking the Man Question*¹ ten years later. Both reflected an increasing interest in the roles of men, masculinities, and gender relations in international conflicts, policy-making, and power struggles.

Both books raised many questions, not only about men and masculinity, but also about how gender and gender relations of power relate to International Relations and Security Studies. Zalewski's introduction in the first volume set the stage for chapters that revealed the potential of this new and exciting approach. Charlotte Hooper explored masculinist practices and gender politics; Luke Ashworth and Larry Swatuk interrogated masculinity and the fear of emasculation in IR theory; Steve Niva explored new world order masculinity and the Gulf War; and Carol Cohn produced a path-breaking article on LGBTQI members of the military. All of the authors raised important debates and inspired further research on masculinity and power in IR. *Rethinking the Man Question* encouraged further investigations. Kimberly Hutchings explored

¹Marysia Zalewski and Jane Parpart (eds), *The Man Question in International Relations* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998); Jane Parpart and Marysia Zalewski (eds), *Rethinking the Man Question* (London: Zed Books, 2008).

how masculine language and assumptions have shaped IR scholarship, international policy, and politics. Kevin Dunn interrogated white privilege; Sandra Whitworth explored militarised masculinity and post-traumatic stress disorder – a subject with global implications. Dibyesh Anand investigated porno-nationalism and the male subject in India. Both volumes have inspired discussions and writings about men and masculinities in IR, particularly regarding security, political economy, and feminist analyses.

Marysia Zalewski and I continued to explore masculinity and IR with Penny Griffin in a special issue on ‘Men, Masculinity, and Responsibility’ in *Men and Masculinities*.² Zalewski has continued to write, both alone and with feminist allies, exploring feminist analysis and international relations, particularly militarisation, violence, race and terrorism; taking feminist violence seriously; and race and terror.³ Her pioneering book, *Feminist International Relations: Exquisite Corpse*,⁴ established a benchmark for interrogating the often fraught relationships between femininity(ies) and International Relations in a complex, unpredictable, and often dangerous world.

Masculinity/ies, militarisation, and terror have continued to be ongoing priorities for Zalewski as well, inspiring new scholarship in both single authored and collaborative scholarship. A recent think piece on the concept of military masculinities in *Critical Military Studies* (2017) argues that this phrase has become too comfortable and familiar. Zalewski questions the stability of the term, calling for readers to abandon comfort for a more global, critical view of military masculinities.⁵ The remarkable collection, *Sexual Violence against Men in Global Politics*, edited by Zalewski, Drummond, Prügl, and Stern, reflects Zalewski’s commitment to high-quality intellectual teamwork. Indeed, her entire career has been shaped by this commitment.⁶ Alone and with collegial co-authors, Zalewski has built a scholarly community that has produced remarkable, innovative publications.

Sexual Violence against Men revisits some of the issues raised by the *Man Question* books. The editors argue that sexual violence against men in conflict (both in war and peace) has been severely underestimated. In fact, it has often been seen as a sign of weakness that undermines male authority and the patriarchal status quo. The book calls for a deeper interrogation of this frequently silenced topic. The chapters focus on the long-term and more immediate harm sexual violence has caused for many men caught up in conflicts. They examine issues a range of issues, including sexual assaults against men in the military, sexual violence against men during the Peruvian civil war, and torture that includes sexual violence.

This scholarship coincides with my own concerns about masculinities, gender relations, and gender hierarchies in insecure sites.⁷ Roisin Ryan-Flood and Rosalind Gill’s groundbreaking book on silence and secrecy in the research process offered an opportunity for rethinking the role of silence in insecure sites.⁸ My chapter, ‘Choosing Silence: Rethinking Voice, Agency and

²Penny Griffin, Jane Parpart, and Marysia Zalewski, ‘Men, masculinity and responsibility’, *Men and Masculinities*, 16:1 (2012), pp. 3–8.

³Maria Stern and Marysia Zalewski, ‘Feminist fatigue(s): Reflections on feminism and familiar fables of militarization’, *Review of International Studies*, 35:3 (2009), pp. 611–30; Marysia Zalewski and Anne Sisson Runyan, ‘Taking feminist violence seriously in feminist International Relations’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 15:3 (2013), pp. 293–313; Marysia Zalewski and Anne Sisson Runyan, ‘“Unthinking” sexual violence in a neoliberal era of spectacular terror’, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 8:3 (2015), pp. 439–55.

⁴Marysia Zalewski, *Feminist International Relations: Exquisite Corpse* (London: Routledge, 2013).

⁵Marysia Zalewski, ‘What is the problem with the concept of military masculinities?’, *Critical Military Studies*, 3:2 (2017), pp. 200–05.

⁶Marysia Zalewski, Paula Drummond, Elisabeth Prügl, and Maria Stern (eds), *Sexual Violence against Men in Global Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

⁷Jane Parpart, ‘Exploring the transformative potential of gender mainstreaming in international development institutions’, *Journal of International Development*, 26:3 (2014), pp. 1–14; Jane Parpart, ‘Militarized masculinities, heroes and gender inequality during and after the nationalist struggle in Zimbabwe’, *NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies*, 10:3–4 (2015), pp. 312–25.

⁸Roisin Ryan-Flood and Rosalind Gill (eds), *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process* (London: Routledge, 2010).

Women's Empowerment',⁹ argued that silence could be a form of protection, a useful tool when voice was either silenced or inoperative. Further reflections inspired a more nuanced approach to silence as a form of agency. I began to explore the possibility that silence was not simply about being silent or silenced; it could also be a form of power. My initial focus centred on women's utilisation of silence as a survival strategy and where possible, a source of power and influence. Lene Hansen's revolutionary discussion of the silent power of the Little Mermaid statue in Denmark inspired further reflection.¹⁰ Some feminist scholars have also explored silence as a potentially powerful form of expression and action, particularly in insecure sites.¹¹

While the focus on men and masculinities has largely assumed male voice/power and underplayed the role of silence, broader considerations of masculine silences and their potential power have begun to emerge. Dubravka Zarkov discovered denials and silences by men who had been raped and tortured in the Yugoslavian conflicts.¹² Silence thus became a form of resistance as well as a coping mechanism. It could erase unwelcome stories and reinforce the normality of male power. Sophia Dingli,¹³ in her discussion of silence and IR theory, calls for a deeper and broader understanding of silence, arguing that silence is always an important aspect of the theory and practice of international politics. She emphasises the power of male use/choice of both speech and silence. Xavier Guillaume¹⁴ expands the discussion of silence, challenging the common assumption that it is simply the absence of speech/voice. He regards silence not just as the absence of sound/voice/speech, that is, the opposite of speech. Rather, Guillaume argues that both verbal and non-verbal acts affect the way people understand themselves and each other, calling for greater attention to both silence and voice in security studies and International Relations. While nation states/and/or the powerful often define what silence means, he points out that silence can also destabilise the relations between the powerful and the less powerful, thus potentially challenging the established notions of hierarchy and power. Thus he presents a challenge for scholars interested in considering both the power and weakness of silence in a complicated post-colonial and gendered world.

Inspired by this scholarship, Swati Parashar and I joined some like-minded scholars keen to explore the role of silence, voice, and agency in contested arenas. *Rethinking Silence, Voice and Agency in Contested Gendered Terrains*¹⁵ brought together scholars from around the world to explore the potential of silence in a troubled world. While acknowledging the importance of feminist (and masculine) struggles to gain public voice, we argue that silence is not simply a sign of weakness, nor is it dominated solely by masculine voices. The collection argues that in our increasingly global, postcolonial world, silence, as well as voice, has emerged as a tool of empowerment, not just for handling danger, but also for reconsidering one's situation, developing strategies for resistance and change, and challenging patriarchal and class privilege, oppression, and social injustice. Silence has become an alternative source of protection, power and action for many men and women – both individually and in groups. It has often been entwined with voice, but is powerful in its own right. Silence-in/behind voice also reveals silent meaning/power

⁹Jane Parpart, 'Choosing silence: Rethinking voice, agency and women's empowerment', in Ryan-Flood and Gill (eds), *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process*, pp. 15–29.

¹⁰Lene Hansen, 'The Little Mermaid's silent security dilemma and the absence of gender in the Copenhagen School', *Millennium*, 29:2 (2000), pp. 285–306.

¹¹Sheena Malhotra and Aimee Carillo Rowe (eds), *Silence, Feminism, Power: Reflections on the Edges of Sound* (London: Palgrave, 2013).

¹²Dubravka Zarkov, 'The body of the other man', in Caroline O. N. Moser and Fiona C. Clark (eds), *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors: Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence* (New York: Zed Books, 2001), pp. 69–82.

¹³Sophia Dingli, 'We need to talk about silence: Re-examining silence in International Relations theory', *European Journal of International Relations*, 21:4 (2015), pp. 721–42.

¹⁴Xavier Guillaume, 'How to do things with silence: Rethinking the centrality of speech to the securitization framework', *Security Dialogue*, 49:1 (2018), pp. 476–92.

¹⁵Jane Parpart and Swati Parashar (eds), *Rethinking Silence, Voice and Agency in Contested Gendered Terrains* (London: Routledge, 2019).

behind spoken words, enabling a deeper understanding of silence and voice, their complicated relationship, and the power of both in an often insecure and gendered world.

The chapters explore silence in many sites and forms, concluding that our increasingly global and complex world requires an understanding of both silence and voice. Writings on gender in the Global South are increasingly challenging Western liberal assumptions and complicating analyses of gender, silence/voice, and power around the world.¹⁶ *Rethinking Silence, Voice and Agency* contributes to these debates, exploring the power of silence in a world where voice is too often seen as the ultimate sign of power. Zalewski's scholarship, both alone and with co-authors, raises crucial questions that speak to this broader discussion, particularly about male/masculine power and voice. The conversation has often focused on being silenced. I would like to invite a discussion that considers silence as potentially empowering, as well as disempowering, in an often conflicted, dangerous, unpredictable, and gendered world.

Reconsidering gender, silence, voice, and agency in a turbulent world

Mainstream liberal, Marxist, and radical feminists, as well as gender and development advocates, have generally framed their understanding of women's agency in relation to the power of men, the inequalities facing women, and the need for women to speak out against inequality in order to achieve a more gender equal world. These concerns remain central to the feminist project, and are legitimately seen as core issues for achieving gender equality around the world. However, mainstream feminisms have been deeply embedded in Western enlightenment thought, with its emphasis on individual actors, rational scientific perspectives, and democratic processes. As a result, the women's movement, particularly in the Global North, has largely focused on challenging patriarchal power in order to achieve more gender equality.¹⁷

Women's voice and agency have been at the heart of this project. Mainstream feminists focused on increasing women's access to male dominated institutions, especially those controlling political and economic power. They fought against perceptions of women as weak, often irrational, in need of protection and best suited for domestic life. Salvation was sought from revolutionary feminist heroines willing to stand up for women's rights and to speak out against patriarchal authorities and power structures.¹⁸ This perspective reinforced the binary underpinnings of mainstream feminism, divided between vocal feminist warriors and complicit, often silent/silenced, supporters of the status quo.

Gender and development (GAD) advocates also placed women's voice and agency at the heart of the struggle for gender equality, defining agency as the ability to recognise social injustices and to act/speak out against it.¹⁹ GAD experts encouraged women in the Global South to be change agents for gender equality, framed within the assumptions of neoliberal modernity/development. Mainstreaming gender became the new 'solution' for achieving gender equality.²⁰ Practices reinforcing gender hierarchies and masculine dominance have largely been ignored.²¹

¹⁶Anna Agathangelou and Lily Ling (eds), *Transforming World Politics: From Empire to Multiple Worlds* (London: Routledge, 2009); Annica Kronsell, 'Methods for studying silences', in Brooke A. Ackerly, Maria Stern, and Jacqui True (eds), *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2006), pp. 108–28; Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Sumi Madhok, Anne Phillips, and Kalpana Wilson (eds), *Gender, Agency and Coercion* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

¹⁷Saba Mahmood, 'Feminist theory, agency and the liberatory subject', in Fereshteh Nouraei-Simone (ed.), *On Shifting Ground: Muslim Women in the Global Era* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2005), pp. 111–52; Tillie Olsen, *Silences* (New York: Delacourte Press, 1978).

¹⁸Olsen, *Silences*; Madhok, Phillips, and Wilson (eds), *Gender, Agency and Coercion*.

¹⁹Naila Kabeer, 'Resources, agency and achievements', *Development and Change*, 43:5 (1999), pp. 435–64.

²⁰Sumi Madhok and Shirin Rai, 'Agency, injury and transgressive politics in neoliberal times', *Signs*, 37:3 (2012), pp. 645–69; Parpart, 'Exploring the transformative potential of gender mainstreaming', pp. 1–14.

²¹Andrea Cornwall, Jerker Edstrom, and Alan Greig (eds), *Men and Development: Politicizing Masculinities* (London: Zed Books, 2011).

Development agencies have turned to women and girls for answers, claiming ‘girl power’ as the new ‘solution’ to gender inequality and underdevelopment.²²

Feminist postcolonial and de-colonial scholars have raised serious questions about this approach to attaining gender equality. As Saba Mahmood points out, the focus on the ‘political and moral autonomy of the subject in the face of power ... sharply limits our ability to understand and interrogate the lives of women whose desire, affect and will have been shaped by non-liberal traditions’. She calls for a new approach that defines ‘agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create’.²³ She suggests that gender policies should be framed by ‘how one would imagine the politics of gender equality when situated within particular life worlds, rather than speak from a position of knowledge that already knows what the undoing of inequality would entail’.²⁴

This more nuanced, grounded approach to gender equality and feminist activism offers new insights into the many ways gender relations are understood and lived around the world. For example, many African feminists reject Western feminists’ preoccupation with struggles against patriarchal privilege, arguing that African approaches, often labelled as ‘Womanism’, balance gender equality and traditional values such as *Ubuntu* (the interconnectedness of each human being, consensus-building, and social solidarity, with particular attention to alliances against racism and imperialism).²⁵ Mahmood highlighted the power of Pietist women in Egypt who gained respect and theological knowledge, and embodied power through attention to religious practices, modesty, and silences, as well as voice, in a largely patriarchal institution. Lin-Lee Lee highlights Chinese women’s strategies for gaining respect and agency through understanding the limits and possibilities for both silence and voice. Keith Basso explored the powerful role of silence so deeply embedded in Western Apache culture, shaping both interpersonal relations and social values.²⁶

Postcolonial scholarship argues that gender relations and practices are deeply embedded in cultural, economic, and political institutions and cannot simply be read off liberal/neoliberal assumptions about gender equality. They require close attention to local definitions of gender relations, an interrogation of patriarchal power and the forces that reinforce or inhibit gender equality and security, and a more nuanced, grounded understanding of silence as a means for dealing with complex, difficult, and often dangerous circumstances.

Understanding silence in a postcolonial world

In the 1830s, Angelina Grimke was condemned for writing and speaking in public against racism, slavery, and women’s inequality in the United States.²⁷ European women’s rights advocates endured similar critiques. Thus, it is not surprising that the ability to speak out publicly on issues that mattered to women became a central pillar of the early feminist movements in North America and Europe. The ability to speak out, through writing and speech, especially in

²²Sarah Radcliffe, ‘Gender and postcolonialism’, in Anne Coles, Leslie Gray, and Janet Momsen (eds), *The Handbook of Gender and Development* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 35–46.

²³Saba Mahmood, ‘Feminist theory, embodiment, and the docile agent: Some reflections on the Egyptian Islamic revival’, *Cultural Anthropology*, 16:2 (2001), pp. 202–36 (p. 203).

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 224; Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.

²⁵Heidi Hudson, ‘Peacebuilding through a gender lens and the challenges of implementation in Rwanda and Cote d’Ivoire’, in Laura Sjoberg (ed.), *Gender and International Security* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 258.

²⁶Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*; Lin-Lee Lee, ‘Inventing familial agency from powerlessness: Ban Zhao’s lessons for women’, *Western Journal of Communication*, 73:1 (2009), pp. 47–66; Keith Basso, ‘To give up on words: Silence in Western Apache culture’, *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 26:3 (1970), pp. 213–30.

²⁷Carol Berkin and Mary Beth Norton, *Women of America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979); Susan Zaeske, ‘The “promiscuous audience” controversy and the emergence of the early women’s rights movements’, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 81:2 (1995), pp. 191–207.

male-dominated public spaces and on controversial subjects, has long been seen as a crucial litmus test of feminist agency.²⁸

In contrast, women's silence has often been associated with disempowerment and lack of agency. As Cecile Jackson points out, 'social justice and well-being indicators depend on "voice" in public life, and notions of power generally equate speech with power and silence with weakness'.²⁹ When silence is used as a verb, as in 'to silence' or 'to be silenced', a person who is silenced, who cannot say what is on their mind or speak out against injustice, can quite rightly be seen as lacking agency. Indeed, much Western scholarship has regarded silence and speech as polar opposites. Silence has been largely regarded as 'the background or field that frames speech'.³⁰ Yet, when we move beyond the binary defining voice as agency and silence as disempowerment, the possibility for more complicated understandings of silence, voice, and agency emerge. Silence can be a gesture, a form of communication, as powerful in many ways as speech. It also can be a source of comfort and reassurance, as well as a site for strategising and resistance. These possibilities are particularly relevant in our increasingly interconnected and unequal world.³¹

At a basic level, silence can be a coping mechanism, a choice/action that can help resolve toxic and often dangerous situations. As Cheryl Glenn points out, silence is not a meaningless void, it is a choice; it is what she calls 'the deliberately unspoken'.³² Silence is often seen as a void or absence that is the polar opposite of speech. Yet, it can be a refuge from danger, a site for contemplation and a source of healing. In my paper, 'Choosing Silence ...',³³ I argue that silence can provide room for agency in the face of threats as it enables 'victims' to choose between acceptable speech and the unsayable. This choice can be life saving. During the Balkan conflict, many females denied they had been raped, using silence as a way of coping in a world that judged rape victims harshly. Male victims were particularly determined to deny rape in order to protect their masculine status.³⁴ Silence often helped people to survive and resist 'the oppressive discourses and apparatuses structuring their lives'.³⁵ Thus silence can be a crucial survival strategy, a source of comfort, and an effective mechanism for dealing with hostile and dangerous environments.

Yet silence can be more than simply coping; it can create a space for reflection, for healing, and for rethinking one's position, values, and identity. As an informant recalled, 'There is a silence in which you have no voice, but there is also a silence in which you have chosen not to express your voice That's a nice place ... it's a place of freedom, ultimate and total freedom – so much that it is a much more spacious voice'.³⁶ Silence can also provide a space for seeking the internal guidance and calm necessary for making intelligent choices at an appropriate time. It can be a place of refuge, time for oneself, a site where competing voices can be pushed away and new dreams and visions are born.³⁷ Silence can become an integral part of life, woven into religious and social

²⁸Olsen, *Silences*; Madhok and Rai, 'Agency, injury'.

²⁹Cecile Jackson, 'Speech, gender and power', *Development and Change*, 43:5 (2012), pp. 999–1023 (p. 1000).

³⁰Kris Acheson, 'Silence as a gesture: Rethinking the nature of communicative silences', *Communication Theory*, 18:4 (2008), pp. 535–55 (p. 536).

³¹Ibid.; Agathangelou and Ling, *Transforming World Politics*; Malhotra and Rowe, *Silence, Feminism, Power*.

³²Cheryl Glenn, *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press, 2004), p. 536.

³³Jane Parpart, 'Choosing Silence: Rethinking Voice, Agency and Women's Empowerment', Working Paper 297 (Center for Gender in a Global Context, Michigan State University, 2010).

³⁴Dubravka Zarkov, 'Body of the other man: Sexual violence and the construction of masculinity, sexuality and ethnicity in the Croation media', in Moser and Clark (eds), *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors*, pp. 69–82.

³⁵Valerie Palmer-Mehta and Alina Haliliuc, 'The performances of silence in Christian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*', *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 31:2 (2011), pp. 111–29 (p. 112).

³⁶Elena Stone, *Rising from Deep Places: Women's Lives and the Ecology of Voice and Silence* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), p. 35.

³⁷Audrey Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Toronto, Canada: Crossing Press, 1984), pp. 36–7.

institutions in deeply meaningful and helpful ways.³⁸ Indeed, Max Picard regarded silence as spiritual rather than material, arguing that ‘there is more help and healing in silence than in all the “useful things”’.³⁹ The Buddhists have long used silent meditation as a path to reflection and peace.⁴⁰ Others argue that silence can create a transformative space, providing precious time and solitude for gathering one’s thoughts, thinking in new ways and developing inner strength.⁴¹

Silence can also be a platform for strategising and organising resistance to oppression. It can provide the mental and physical space to think calmly and critically, and to develop strategies for challenging oppressive forces.⁴² As Adrienne Rich points out, ‘Silence can be a plan/rigorously executed Do not confuse it / with any kind of absence.’⁴³ Glenn reminds us that ‘silence can be a specifically feminist rhetorical act, often one of resistance’. She cites Anita Hill’s decision to remain silent about Clarence Thomas’s sexist behaviour towards her in the workplace, until he was nominated for the Supreme Court. Only then did she decide to speak publicly about his abusive behaviour. Her deliberate use of silence and voice demonstrates the power of both, reminding us that purposeful silence ‘resonates with meaning and intention – just like that of the spoken word’.⁴⁴ Many African American women have used silence to consolidate their internal resources and strategise in order ‘to cope with, and in most cases, transcend, the confines of race, class and gender oppression’.⁴⁵ Thus deliberate silence has often strengthened and reinforced resistance to injustice and harmful behaviour.

Collective embodied silence can also be very powerful. It can challenge oppressive regimes and social injustice. Some see it as a style of ‘speaking’,⁴⁶ but collective silence is at the core of this power. These silent vigils and protests occur in circumstances where direct, vocal challenges cannot succeed, and where silent vigils, symbols, and placards have proven effective weapons against tyranny. Using their authority as mothers, many women have found ways to publicly hold regimes accountable without speaking. In Argentina, the mothers of the disappeared (*Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*) gathered silently in the Plaza de Mayo, across from the presidential palace, where they walked silently round and round wearing white headscarves, symbolising the diapers of their lost children. Their numbers grew, and the vigils built awareness and gradually helped to bring down the government.⁴⁷ Women in Black, established by a small group of Israeli and Palestinian women soon after the first Palestinian *Intifada* in the 1980s, organised vigils once a week, at the same hour and at the same location: a major traffic intersection in Israel. The protestors dressed in black, holding up black signs of a hand with ‘Stop the Occupation’ written in white. Vigils soon sprang up throughout Israel and around the world, providing solace, shaping public opinion, and strengthening solidarity against injustices.⁴⁸ As Cynthia Cockburn reminisced, ‘there is something calming about vigiling, holding yourself in silence and stillness as city workers and tourists mill around you and the taxis and buses stream past. ... What restores

³⁸Wendy Urban Mead, *The Gender of Piety: Family, Faith and Colonial Rule in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2015); Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.

³⁹Max Picard, *The World of Silence* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1952), p. 19.

⁴⁰Youru Wang, ‘Liberating oneself from the absolutized boundary of language: A liminological approach to the interplay of speech and silence in Chan Buddhism’, *Philosophy East and West*, 51:1 (2001).

⁴¹Colum Kenny, *The Power of Silence: Silent Communication in Daily Life* (London: Karnac Books, 2011).

⁴²Kennan Ferguson, ‘Silence: A politics’, *Contemporary Political Theory*, 2:1 (2002), pp. 13–14.

⁴³Adrienne Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems: 1974–1977* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), p. 5. This position surfaced more in her poetry than her scholarly writing.

⁴⁴Cheryl Glenn, ‘Silence: A rhetorical act for resisting discipline(s)’, *Journal of Rhetoric, Culture and Politics*, 22:2 (2002), pp. 261–91, pp. 262, 282.

⁴⁵Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 92.

⁴⁶Naila Kabear, ‘Voice, Agency and the Sounds of Silence: A Comment on Jane Parpart’s Paper’, Working Paper 297 (Center for Gender in a Global Context, Michigan State University, July 2010), pp. 16–20.

⁴⁷R. Anavy, ‘Hope ends 29-year March of Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo’, *San Francisco Chronicle* (2 February 2006); Matilde Mellibovsky, *Circle of Death*, trans. M. Proser (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1997).

⁴⁸See {www.womeninblack.org}.

me as I stand there once again is the presence of other women at my shoulder ... the carefully thought-out message we are trying to put across; and more than anything, the feeling that women are doing this in hundreds of similar vigils around the world.⁴⁹ Men and the LGBTQI community have played important roles in these vigils as well.

Silence can also work with voice, not silence as the powerless 'other', but as another kind of power. The silence-in-voice, lurking behind spoken words, is often telling. These silences can provide powerful messages. They remind us that silence and voice are often interwoven; both are powerful, one spoken, the other unspoken. Around the world, women often speak less frequently than men in public arenas. This is often taken as proof of women's weakness; yet, it can be interpreted in different ways. The silences behind women's public speech can support male authority, but they can also be a strategic performance for ensuring family status, making claims and even expressing different conceptions of 'proper' gender relations.⁵⁰ Moreover, cultural contexts that value modesty and restraint for women in public may support a patriarchal system, while simultaneously offering women a sense of achievement and value.⁵¹ Women's public voices and silences in markets, churches, courts, and informal public talk are also often ignored. Yet they can offer a very different picture of women's agency, such as Anna Tsing's⁵² research on the inventive, powerful creativity of women shamans in Kalimantan, Indonesia.

When women speak in public, or in private, they are often keenly aware of the dangers of speaking frankly and openly. Women, more marginal men, and the LGBTQI community living in conflict zones often deliberately edit their speech to avoid potential harm.⁵³ Many women live in societies where gender inequality requires judicious decisions about what should/should not be said.⁵⁴ Choosing when and where to speak (or not) can provide a sense of control for people living with violence and danger. Indeed, Rwandan genocide survivors regained some of their dignity by choosing when, how, and to whom they would tell their stories.⁵⁵ Yet the silences behind these stories also 'speak'. They can provide clues to inner contemplation and struggles for managing both voice and silence. Attention to the silences behind voice as well as the voicing of silences demonstrates how they can work together, not as opposing forces of power, but as two different but interrelated forms of power, particularly in insecure sites.

The simple dichotomy between voice and silence is often complicated by performance as well. Indeed, Judith Butler claims silent performances can be a form of 'speaking' – not only as a challenge to patriarchal privilege, but also to reveal complex gender relations in different contexts.⁵⁶ Embodied resistances can surface/speak through performances critiquing power without words. Embodied silent performances can reveal the complexity of gendered practices.⁵⁷ They can also reveal the ways 'silence realizes its potential for power and confronts authority',⁵⁸ demonstrating the power of silent opposition, even against powerful opponents.

⁴⁹Cynthia Cockburn, *From Where We Stand: War, Women's Activism and Feminist Analysis* (London: Zed Books, 2007), p. 51; see also Cihan Ahmetbeyzade, 'Negotiating silences in the so-called low-intensity war: The making of the Kurdish diaspora in Istanbul', *Signs*, 33:1 (2007), pp. 535–55.

⁵⁰Jackson, 'Speech, gender and power'; Soran Reader, 'The other side of agency', *Philosophy*, 82:4 (2007), pp. 579–604.

⁵¹Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety*; Mahmood, 'Feminist theory'.

⁵²Anna Tsing, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

⁵³Parpart, 'Choosing Silence', p. 1; Chris Coulter, *Bush Wives and Girl Soldiers: Women's Lives through War and Peace in Sierra Leone* (Ithaca, NY, New York: Cornell University Press, 2009).

⁵⁴Glory Joy Gatwiri and Anne Mumbi Karanja, 'Silence as power: Women bargaining with patriarchy in Kenya', *Social Alternatives*, 35:1 (2016), pp. 13–14; Lee, 'Inventing familial agency from powerlessness'.

⁵⁵Jennie Burnet, *Genocide Lives in Us: Women, Memory and Silence in Rwanda* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 2012).

⁵⁶Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).

⁵⁷Jackson, 'Speech, gender and power'; Agathangelou and Ling, *Transforming World Politics*.

⁵⁸Roi Wagner, 'Silence as resistance before the subject, or could the subaltern remain silent?', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 29:6 (2012), pp. 99–124 (p. 103).

Silence, as well as voice, is best seen as a tool for operating in an increasingly transnational world, where local gendered practices are often complicated, patriarchal, and resilient. Moreover, our increasingly interconnected and mobile world places many people in complex and often difficult situations. Direct opposition is often impossible. For example, South African teenage women facing sexual demands that risk HIV infections have often sought ‘an accommodation with men’s power whilst seeking to negotiate greater respect and non-violence within relations with men’.⁵⁹ Accommodation thus includes both adaptation and resistance. Chinese women often use both words and silences in order to have some leverage in a fundamentally patriarchal system.⁶⁰ The female (and some male) Pietists in Zimbabwe use both voice and silence to discipline their bodies, speech, and manner in order to achieve a desired form of spiritual life.⁶¹ These examples demonstrate the importance of adopting a more grounded, open-minded, and nuanced approach to silence/voice, gender and power.

Exploring the power of silence in insecure sites: Concluding thoughts

While keenly aware that speaking out and naming oppressions and oppressors is critical for challenging injustice, the naturalised link between voice and agency privileges the ability to speak out against tyranny and injustice. Yet, this assumption is difficult to sustain in a volatile and insecure world where conflicts have often enabled gender-based violence against women, many men, and LGBTQ communities. In such a world, can we assume that masculinist privilege can be openly challenged only through ‘voice’? Do we need to consider other forms of voice/agency/empowerment? Can silence be more than simply disempowerment and lack of agency? Can silences, partial truths, and secrets provide a basis for developing survival strategies, reassessing possibilities and limitations for action and even organising to protect and/or challenge the status quo?

Rethinking Silence, Voice and Agency in Contested Gendered Terrains raises questions about how silence operates, particularly the capacity of silence, alone or alongside voice, to challenge gender oppression and enhance gender equality around the world. The authors adopt a broad lens to explore the various ways silence and voice are experienced and utilised in insecure and often dangerous sites, particularly in postcolonial contexts. Silence is often seen as a feminine weapon, but *Rethinking Silence, Voice and Agency* demonstrates the power of silence for men, particularly males in insecure positions/situations. Silence is indeed a weapon for both sexes, often used in different ways, but equally powerful. The writings of Marysia Zalewski and her co-authors also raise many important questions about the silences forced on people, especially in dangerous situations. They highlight the dangers of enforced silence in a neoliberal era of spectacular terror,⁶² and worry about the erasure of sexuality in wartime rape, dissociating the ‘sexual’ from ‘violence’,⁶³ and other themes. *Sexual Violence against Men in Global Politics*⁶⁴ investigates the sexual violence committed against men in armed conflicts, revealing widespread violence against men in conflict settings around the world. These findings highlight the need for further research into the voices and silences required to handle difficult and dangerous situations.

Both volumes have much to offer and gain from these debates. Complicating silence enables greater understanding of both the power and limitations of silence in a world where silence is often a misunderstood, but powerful, force – both for good and evil. Silence also emerges as a tool that can be used by both men and women. Silent protests can make a difference. They

⁵⁹R. Jewkes and R. Morrell, ‘Sexuality and the limits of agency among South African teenage women: Theorising femininities and their connections to HIV risk practices’, *Social Science and Medicine*, 74 (2012), pp. 1729–37 (p. 1729).

⁶⁰Lee, ‘Inventing familial agency from powerlessness’.

⁶¹Urban-Mead, *The Gender of Piety*.

⁶²Zalewski and Sisson Runyan, ‘“Unthinking” sexual violence’.

⁶³Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, ‘Why do soldiers rape? Masculinity, violence and sexuality in the armed forces in the Congo (DRC)’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 53:2 (2009), pp. 495–518.

⁶⁴Zalewski, Drummond, Prügl, and Stern (eds), *Sexual Violence*.

can bring men and women together in a common search for a more equitable world. We look forward to bringing these perspectives together to explore the power and limitations of silence in difficult and dangerous circumstances. Both volumes have much to say about new epistemological, methodological, and empirical paths for understanding the power (and limitations) of silence. Moving beyond the silence/voice dichotomy enables a much-needed shift for navigating our gendered world of conflicts, contestations, and possibilities. We hope these parallel, and sometimes divergent, efforts to understand and utilise both silence and voice, can provide an effective platform for encouraging future research into gender, (in)security, and international relations in a complicated, postcolonial world.

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