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Choosing Silence: Rethinking Voice, Agency, and Women's Empowerment

by

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With Comments and Reply

Voice, Agency and the Sounds of Silence: A Comment on Jane L. Parpart's Paper

by

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Choosing Silence:
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Introduction

Voice, or the act of speaking out, is often identified in the gender and development literature, and much of the feminist literature, as one of the key conditions demonstrating women's empowerment. Indeed, while silence has its defenders (Gal 1991; Mahoney 1996),[1] for most feminists women's ability to make choices and speak their minds has been seen as proof of agency and empowerment (Gilligan 1982; Olsen 2003 [1978]), while silence has been deplored as "a symbol of passivity and powerlessness" (Gal 1991:175). The language of choice/voice also frames the thinking and writing about women's agency and empowerment produced by development scholars, policymakers, and practitioners. Women who cannot speak out are seen as disempowered, unable to act and to effect change. The search for empowerment has thus become a search for women's voices, particularly the moments when women demonstrate agency[2] by speaking out against patriarchal authority (Kabeer 1999).

While keenly aware that a willingness to speak out and name oppressions and oppressors is a critical factor for challenging injustices, especially gendered injustices, I believe the assumption that voice equals agency needs to be rethought. The literature on women's empowerment, with its emphasis on voice and agency, is embedded in neo-liberal assumptions that individuals who speak hard truths will be protected by international and national institutions devoted to democracy, freedom of speech, and human rights (Bishai 2004). Yet these assumptions are hard to sustain in a world where challenges to women's advancement and gender equality abound and where the World Health Organization warns of an epidemic of violence against women in "private" and "public" life (WHO 2002; UNRISD 2005). In such a world, can we assume that masculinist privilege can always be openly challenged?[3] Do we need to consider other forms of voice/agency/empowerment? Can silences and secrecy be legitimate and even empowering strategies for dealing with difficult situations?

This article argues that the uncritical identification of silence with disempowerment, and voice with agency/empowerment, so common in the gender and development literature (Cornwall and Brock 2005), as well as much of the wider feminist literature, dismisses and obscures the potential of many subtle strategies attempting to improve women's lives and to foster gender equality. The chapter explores the possibility that silences and secrecy may be essential strategies for negotiating gender relations (Kandiyoti 1998; Mohammed 2002) and considers the ethical, analytical, and methodological implications of researching and writing about silence/secrecy as empowered choices/agency for women in an often masculinist, dangerous, and conflict-ridden world.

Agency/Voice/Empowerment and Development

Empowerment, particularly women's empowerment, has not always been regarded as a development issue. Initially associated with the critical thinking of educationalists such as Paulo Freire (1970), empowerment was seen as a tool for the liberation of the poor and marginalized, particularly women. While initially dismissed by mainstream development agencies as a minor sideshow to the real issues—economic growth and modernization—the failures of neo-liberal solutions, particularly structural adjustment programs, encouraged a search for new solutions. By the 1990s, empowerment had moved into mainstream development discourse, affirmed by the 1995 Beijing United Nations conference on women, and supported by the United Nations and other key development agencies (UNDP 2003; Batliwala 2007).

Despite the notoriously slippery character of the term, a core set of assumptions/definitions about empowerment emerged, with an emphasis on the ability to choose, act, and speak out. The UK Department for International Development (DFID) defines empowerment as "individuals acquiring the power to think and act freely, exercise choice, and to fulfill their potential as full and equal members of society" (2000:11; Smyth 2007:584). In a similar tone, Kabeer, a well-known development scholar, argues that "To be disempowered means to be denied choice, while empowerment refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability" (2005:13). The ability to voice concerns and to exercise choice in ways that challenge patriarchal power thus became the litmus test for "true" empowerment (Cornwall and Brock 2005:1055; Kabeer 2005:13–16).[4]

The tone of this literature has been optimistic, even triumphalist; gender equality and women's empowerment are framed as laudable *and* reachable goals—encouraged by technical "fixes," such as gender mainstreaming (GM) and micro-credit schemes. Women who fail to speak out and challenge masculinist power structures are portrayed as disempowered failures. The persistent, deeply held resistances to gender equality and women's empowerment are rarely discussed, despite repeated failures to achieve either of these goals (Heyzer 2005; Rao and Kelleher 2005); nor is the fact that openly voicing dissent and opposition is often dangerous and even suicidal for many women (and men). Clearly new ways of thinking about agency and voice are needed, ones that take into account the many subtle forms of agency required to cope with an increasingly dangerous world.

The Limits of Voice: Silence as a Survival Strategy

As we have seen, the discourses of gender equality and empowerment have focused on women's ability to make choices, to speak out, to choose, and to challenge established gender hierarchies. This is understandable given development agencies' commitment to solving the problems of poverty, conflict, and inequality, especially through expanded individual freedoms and democratic processes. Yet in many situations—particularly conflict and post-conflict zones, as well as societies characterized by deeply masculinist practices, widespread criminal activities, and gender violence—the choice to publicly challenge the powerful is often extremely dangerous and even foolhardy. Indeed, as Everjoice Win concludes for Zimbabwe, "As any woman in a violent situation will tell you, there are no prizes for speaking out. If anything, you are ostracised by your own family and community. You are branded a bad woman, or worse, you are violated all over again for daring to open your mouth" (2004:76). Often personal survival is all one can seek, especially in a subverted state

with no active civil society (Chan 2005:372). At the same time, choices and actions are made, if not in easily recognizable forms. As the WHO study on health and violence points out:

> Most abused women are not passive victims …. Some women resist, others flee, while others attempt to keep the peace by giving in to their husbands' demands. What may seem to an outside observer to be a lack of positive response by the women may in fact be a calculated assessment of what is needed to survive in the marriage and to protect herself and her children (2002:95).

How do we understand women's agency and empowerment in an increasingly dangerous and often sexist world, particularly given the widening gap between poor and rich, the rise in civilian casualties in conflict and "post-conflict" societies, and the worldwide increase in crime, gender-based violence, and health risks? Wars, of course, have long been sites of violence against women. The supposed "civility" legislated by the rules of engagement and codes of war in interstate conflicts has never stopped gender-based violence during war, and while some men suffer as well, most sexual violence in war is perpetrated by men against women, particularly rape. Indeed, both domestic violence and sexual violence generally increase in militarized societies, especially during wars (Enloe 1993:127; Kelly 2000). The diary of a German woman caught in the Russian occupation of Berlin towards the end of World War II reveals the limits of voice in war conditions. Rape became an everyday experience, undermining women's sense of security and personhood. The threat of starvation, homelessness, and loss of safety soon drove many women, including the author, into the arms of Russian soldiers. The women she knew "reached an unspoken agreement—all of a sudden no one is bringing up 'that subject'" (Anonymous 2005:18). Thus, silence became a survival strategy for dealing with the horrors of rape and war. While shared moments discussing private traumas provided some solace, survival depended largely on learning to seal off feelings, negotiating better conditions for sex, and just keeping going (Anonymous 2005:18; Bletzer 2006). Speaking out was not an option; judicious silence was a key survival strategy in a dangerous and brutal world—a strategy that may not have changed conditions but did promote/enable healing and allowed some women to carry on.

Since the end of the Cold War, conflicts have become even more deadly, particularly for civilians. Often led by warlords and other adventurers, these new wars are sustained through terrorizing and looting civilians while also benefiting from global economic connections, both legal and illegal. Fought largely by disaffected, under- and unemployed young men who see war as a way to gain prestige and money, and led by men seeking enrichment and power, these new wars are characterized by a strong, often adolescent, sexualization of violence, "ranging from almost daily orgies or veritable strategies of rape through to the ever more common mutilation of victims and the displaying of body parts as trophies" (Münkler 2005:14–15; Kaldor 2001). Rape as an act of war continues to be a way to humiliate their male opponents by symbolically (and physically) "marking" enemy women's bodies with semen and physical domination. Group rape is frequent, providing an opportunity to assault enemy women while also *performing* loyal masculinity to one's comrades (Kelly 2000). Indeed, rape camps in Bosnia were vehicles for educating/training reluctant soldiers in the practices of violence (Kaldor 2001:44–53). Sexual violence is thus one of the key characteristics of the new wars around the world, with Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Rwanda being particularly gruesome examples (Dolan 2002; Pederson 2008). For most women, direct confrontation poses the risk of swift and terrible revenge. As in Berlin, silence and secrecy have been one of the few choices for negotiating survival. Even deliberate

attempts to thwart authorities, such as girls' education under the Taliban, have only survived under conditions of strict secrecy (Hans 2004:235; Armstrong 2002; Povey 2003).

Post-conflict societies have often proven little better for women and girls. Even the transition to peace has often been marked by increased sexual violence. In Liberia, both government and rebel forces engaged in a "frenzy of rape" during the "transition to peace" (African Women and Peace Support Group 2004). Yet little has been done to address the epidemic of sexual violence characterizing many post-conflict societies, particularly when it has been and is being perpetrated by the new "heroes of the nation" (Jones 2008; Kelly 2000; Silber 2005). Despite a supportive constitution and a significant female presence in parliament, post-Apartheid South Africa has one of the highest rape rates in the world (du Toit 2005). Moreover, the much praised Truth and Reconciliation Commission for the most part ignored evidence of sexual violence (Goldblatt and Meintjes 1998), and young men continue to believe women out alone after dark are "asking to be raped" (field notes, Cape Town, 2006). In Rwanda, many rape survivors are trying to rebuild their lives in communities with the very people who raped them. "There is little judicial redress and little sympathy from others," who blame them for choosing rape over death (Kelly 2000:55). Sexual violence continues, often carried out by current government forces (Twagiramariya and Turshen 1998). Despite women's key role in the peace process, and a woman president, post-conflict Liberia is experiencing an epidemic of violent rapes, particularly of young girls (Jones 2008; Pedersen 2008).

Many women and children have fled war and post-conflict zones,[5] yet refugee camps have provided disappointingly little protection. Sexual violence, particularly rape, is a common occurrence. Many refugee camps have become caught up in the new wars, inadvertently providing food and supplies as well as sex for marauding "warriors." Even the camp administrators and peacekeepers demand sexual favors. For many women refugees, sex has become one of the few commodities they can "sell" for survival. Yet such activities are widely censured; once again, silence and secrecy are weapons for survival (Hyndman 2004; Münkler 2005; WHO 2002). Even applicants for political asylum often experience sexual violence, but tend to deny it publicly, both to deal with the trauma and to minimize the consequences of disclosure (Crawley 2000:93).

Sexual violence, particularly rape, threads through all these stories. The development literature on women and empowerment urges rape victims to become empowered by speaking out, taking their persecutors to court, and obtaining retribution. Yet this "solution" has largely been empty rhetoric given the trauma of rape, the unreliability of police and courts, and the widespread, entrenched cultures supporting sexual violence. In post-conflict Yugoslavia and Rwanda, for example, women have been encouraged to take their assailants to court, but no provisions have been made to protect them. Not surprisingly, most women have chosen to exercise agency "by choosing to remain silent" (Kelly 2000:54; Twagiramariya and Turshen 1998). A UNRISD study concluded that "Somali women do not confess to having been raped because social rejection and divorce will follow" (2005:215). South African rape victims are often reluctant to speak out in public (du Toit 2005). Public disclosure is particularly dangerous in societies where honor killing is the norm (Mojab 2004). For example, in 2002 almost half the women raped in Alexandria, Egypt, were killed by a relative after the rape (WHO 2002:93). Thus, given the high cost of disclosing rape or sex with the enemy, the decision to remain silent cannot simply be dismissed as disempowerment. Indeed, silence and secrecy offer one of the few possibilities for rebuilding lives and renegotiating gender relations, if often in precarious, highly militarized contexts.

Silence can also provide a private space to deal with trauma, to regain self-esteem, and to build a sense of empowerment in an often unpredictable and dangerous world (El-Bushra 2000; Kelly 2000; Mojab 2004; Silber 2005).

Conflict and post-conflict zones are not the only danger zones for women. The rise in violence against women around the world, including beatings and non-consensual sex, is well documented (WHO 2002; Jejeebhoy, Shah, and Thapa 2006). In South Asia, "one in every two women faces violence in her daily life, and social customs and attitudes that support violence against women are entrenched and institutionalised at all levels—home, family, community, society, and the state" (Mehta and Gopalakrishnan 2007:41). In Latin America, a study reported one-fourth to half of the women interviewed had been abused by their partners (Sagot 2005). Although patterns of gender-based violence vary by class, race, age, and other factors, societies with rigid patriarchal hierarchies and established cultures of violence are the worst offenders (Armstrong 2002; Sagot 2005). For most victims, open challenges and public disclosure are dangerous strategies. Choosing silence and secrecy, policing one's voice and body, are well-established survival strategies. It seems unfair to dismiss these choices as passivity and disempowerment as they are often the best (and sometimes the only) tactics available for building internal strength, for negotiating survival, and sometimes for ultimately participating in more open challenges in a hostile world (Sagot 2005; Silber 2005).

Silence and secrecy also have a long history as survival strategies for women (and men) in marginal positions. Sexuality has been a key case in point. For example, Sarda discovered that in Latin America the reaction to disclosure of lesbian sexuality—with a few remarkable exceptions—goes "from disclosure to firing." Understandably, many choose to hide their sexual preferences, masking it by dating men, dressing in very feminine ways, and avoiding talk about their personal lives (2008:113–117) The intersection of race and sexuality has been particularly toxic for Black women in racist societies. Pornographic stereotypes about Black sexuality have been met with steely silence—a tradition that has provided solace and a sense of community but has also encouraged reluctance to speak out against Black male patriarchy (Collins 1991:92, 117). This same tradition has informed Black lesbians' reaction to widespread homophobia in both Black and White communities. As a general rule, this "politics of silence," this tradition of "silence, secrecy, and a partially self-chosen invisibility," has remained a key strategy for Black women dealing with racist and homophobic environments (Hammonds 1997:171; Lorde 2007 [1984]; Collins 1991:192–196). The HIV/AIDS pandemic has silenced many people as well. Gendered discourses blaming women/prostitutes for the epidemic in Africa have fueled expulsion from families and communities, despite class, ethnicity, or race (Win 2007). Not surprisingly, many African women (and men) deny their HIV/AIDS status, especially health care professionals (field notes, Zimbabwe, 2005). Clearly these silences emerged under severe constraints, but are they merely symptoms of disempowerment? The evidence suggests that silence and secrecy can be crucial survival strategies, offering protection and sometimes spaces for renegotiating harmful gender relations and practices. While ideally voices should be heard and challenges launched, voice is not the only weapon available.

Challenging Power/Maintaining Power through Silence and Secrecy

Indeed, silence and secrecy can be a means for both maintaining and challenging gendered inequities. At an institutional level, secret societies reinforce the power of those who "know" and exclude those who do not. They can build trust within groups while casting suspicion on others. This is often a gendered process. In Papua New Guinea, for example, while women

gain some authority through their secret societies, overall, secret societies have reinforced and legitimated the power of men over women (Herdt 2003:xii–xiii). Development agencies often use silence to stonewall controversial policies, especially regarding gender. The persistent gap between implementation and official support for gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment raises questions about commitment to gender transformation. Yet little is said about the possibility that subterranean resistance to GM may silence critics trying to implement GM. Indeed, Joseph (2008), in her study of UNDP/South Africa's gender mainstreaming policies and practices, discovered powerful unspoken resistances to GM at the highest levels. Her findings resonate with Smyth's observation that, "If words are important, silences are important too and a reflection of what is excluded from daily exchanges—verbal or written—among development practitioners and policy makers" (2007:583). Thus silences can undermine official policies without openly challenging them, reminding us that they can control meaning/knowledge and thus deserve study in themselves (Kronsell 2006).

Oppressive regimes have often silenced critics and denied wrongdoings against women, thus perpetuating masculinist practices and gender hierarchies. During the Dirty War in Argentina (1976–1983) the military junta carried on a secret war against its critics, kidnapping, torturing, raping, and killing many young men and women. The struggles between the Palestinians and the Israeli government have also been marked by considerable gender-based violence—frequently denied by all parties. Nationalist movements, and the governments they form, have often refused to acknowledge widespread sexual abuse during and after conflicts, especially once victory has given them the power to define the "truth" of the struggle (Cockburn 2007; Chan 2005; Silber 2005).

At the same time, silence and secrecy have sometimes played a critical role in challenges to oppressive regimes and social injustice. In circumstances where direct, vocal challenges cannot succeed, silent vigils, symbols, and placards have proven effective weapons against tyranny, especially for women. Using their authority as mothers, women have found ways to publicly hold regimes accountable without saying a word. In Argentina, for example, some of 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 head scarves, symbolizing the diapers of their lost children. The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo grew in number, building awareness and gradually helping to bring down the government (Anavy 2006; Mellibovsky 1997). In Istanbul, Kurdish Mothers of the Lost sat silently every Saturday, providing a space for people to publicly condemn both state injustice and Kurdish patriarchal practices (Ahmetbeyzade 2007). Women in Black, established by a small group of Israeli and Palestinian women soon after the first Palestinian *Intifada* broke out in the 1980s, organized vigils once a week, at the same hour and at the same location—a major traffic intersection in Israel. The protestors dressed in black and held up a black sign in the shape 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 (www.womeninblack.org). As Cynthia Cockburn reminisced, "there is something calming about vigilling, holding yourself in silence and stillness as city workers and tourists mill around you and the taxis and buses stream past. … What restores 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" (2007:51).

These demonstrations and vigils, and others like them around the world, illustrate both the power of collective silence and the importance of symbolic performances for challenging social injustice and mobilizing public opinion. The white headscarves symbolizing the diapers of the children of the disappeared reinforced the silent message of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. At the height of the second Liberian civil war, for example, the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) mobilized thousands of women around the country to protest the war and deeper systemic disregard for women through silent protest, symbolic dress as well as media campaigns. They wore white t-shirts with the WIPNET logo and peace slogans on the back, traditional dress, no jewelry or makeup, and lay on their bellies with their backs to the sun, fasting and praying. Sometimes they wore sack cloths and ashes for months. Their dress and manner deliberately highlighted their identification with traditional values, their rejection of class divisions, and their group solidarity, particularly as mothers. These protestors' silent performance of resistance to the war and gender violence once again reminds us that voice is not the only form that empowerment and struggles for gender transformation can take (Pedersen 2008). As one member reported, it was sitting in the sun and rain "that really caught people's heart … and played a major part in the peace process" (Pedersen 2008:6).

Resistance also often takes the form of silent acts/performances in daily life. Just as wearing a veil may be a form of symbolic opposition to colonial rule or to the right-wing politics emerging in many parts of the world, particularly in opposition to Muslim minorities (Sullivan 1998:228), so too are acts of resistance to patriarchal oppression around the world. In Afghanistan, for example, some women wear white socks, western clothes, and platform shoes under *burqas* as silent challenges to Taliban rulings (Armstrong 2002:3, 112). Wearing makeup and jewelry, painting one's toenails, and other prohibited practices can be small signs of resistance in an oppressive situation. Afghan women in exile in India move about without veils, dress in the latest fashions, and wear makeup (Hans 2004:244). In French immigrant housing projects, as another example, many young Muslim women challenge patriarchal authority "by continuing to wear revealing clothing, by dressing in fashion, by using makeup, sometimes outrageously. They want to live in a modern society, to exist as individuals, and to command personal respect on equal footing with young men." For many young women in the housing projects, "makeup has become war paint, a sign of resistance. It is their way of fighting" (Amara 2006:75). They pay a price, often being roughed up, even raped. Some give up, others police their bodies to avoid rape, wearing a big sweater or baggy coat, which they then take off when they get to school (Amara 2006:111–112).

While these institutional practices, vigils, and performances may seem like small gestures, they can be powerful vectors for change (both individually and collectively). Some scholars and activists have questioned the transformative potential of silent protests. Blacklock and Crosby (2004:45) argue that "political contestation engaged in and through silence has not proved a unifying, cohesive strategy of resistance." Indeed they see silence as a defensive rather than a progressive strategy, arguing that Guatemala has changed little since the civil war, and blame women's lack of engagement and willingness to speak out on this failure to progress. Highlighting the limits of silence and secrecy as a vehicle for social transformation, they ignore the importance of incremental change, particularly given the well-documented limits of revolutionary struggles for improving women's status (El-Bushra 2000; Silber 2005). Silence and secrecy are, by their nature, employed in contentious circumstances little given to dramatic transformations. Yet incremental change can occur. Daily performances of resistance can suggest new patterns of living and stabilize new patterns of empowerment—individually and collectively (Kesby 2005:2052; Butler 2004).

Silent vigils and symbols can disrupt and challenge the discourses of the powerful while providing space for solace, sharing, and collective empowerment. While acknowledging the importance of voice, it is important to remember that "silence can also be a means of resistance, a way of holding one's ground against the encroachments of oppression" (Stone 2002:19). Moreover, as Lorde (2007 [1984]) reminds us, silence "is a site not only of resistance but also of transformation, the home where new dreams and visions are born" (cited in Stone 2002:20). Silence and secrecy can be evidence of desperation and disempowerment, but they can also be strategic choices offering tools for gradual, subtle renegotiations of gender hierarchies and practices. The question remains: how can we discover and analyze such elusive and secretive strategies?

Researching Silence and Secrecy

As we have seen, silence and secrecy can take many forms and serve many purposes. They can reflect disempowerment as well as innovative strategies for survival in dangerous circumstances, mechanisms for renegotiating gender relations, collective challenges to oppressive regimes, and ways to resist oppressive circumstances and find space to breathe and find strength. They can foster performative challenges to the status quo and subtly undermine patriarchal and class hierarchies. The challenge facing researchers interested in investigating this realm are many. Firstly, it is important to recognize that the use and expressions of silence and secrecy intersect with class, race, ethnicity, and other factors. They are also shaped by specific circumstances over time and place (Das 2000).

Obtaining research permission may require lengthy diplomatic discussions with powerful gatekeepers, especially when those same gatekeepers have a vested interest in maintaining secrecy and silence. It also requires attention to local sensitivities, gaining support from local partners, and careful pruning of contentious language in the research proposal (Thomson 2009). Gatekeepers in patriarchal institutions often block interviews or provide vague, unhelpful information. The researcher has to learn how to read silence and dissembling by deconstructing discourse and texts emerging from such institutions, paying attention to the unwritten, as well as what is "between the lines" or expressed as symbols and in procedures (Kronsell 2006).

Once in the field, asking informants to reveal their secrets and silences is both difficult and ethically challenging. The research goals have to be explained immediately and complete anonymity guaranteed. Safeguards must be put in place from the beginning (Thomson 2009). Gaining trust takes time and consistency, requiring repeat interviews as well as efforts to engage in informal discussions wherever they occur. Sexuality and sexual violence are particularly difficult subjects to discuss openly (Hans 2004). Ethnographic and participatory methods are crucial, but patience and tact are required as well. Providing a safe, empathetic space for discussions—a leisurely pace that allows for silences, detours, and tears—is essential (Ghorashi 2007; Harrison 2006). Moreover, reading fragmented comments and bodily signs is crucial, as the pain and fear associated with silence and secrecy often inhibit sustained open discussions (Das 2000).

Finally, evidence of secrets and silences must be carefully analyzed and written up. For example, many women keep secrets from their husbands and these secrets/silences are key survival practices. In Calcutta, many women keep their economic activities, especially their income, secret from their husbands. This money provides much-needed goods as well as feelings of freedom and independence (Tenhunen 1999). Women admitting domestic

violence or rape risk further violence and even death (Hans 2004; Mheta and Gopalakrishnan 2007; Sagot 2005). Such revelations place a responsibility on researchers to write up their findings in ways that will not harm informants' lives. This ethical responsibility must inform information gathering, analysis, and writing, whether by academic researchers or development analysts and practitioners aiming to facilitate change and improve lives.

Conclusion: Rethinking Agency and Empowerment

The preoccupation with voice as a sign/symbol of women's agency is understandable given the long struggles of feminists to gain entry into male-dominated public spaces, to speak out, and to be taken seriously. Yet, as this article demonstrates, open challenges to masculinist power are not always possible. Indeed, incremental steps towards gender transformation are often the most one can hope for. While silence and secrecy can be symptomatic of passivity and disempowerment, as well as a means for reinforcing gender hierarchies, as we have seen, they can also provide the space for discovering and consolidating inner resources, questioning the status quo, and developing long-term strategies for renegotiating gender relations. At an individual level, silence and secrecy can protect women from disempowering contexts where their voices have no institutional or collective power. Silent vigils and the use of appropriate symbols can reinforce group identity, build collective strength, and subtly challenge oppressive behavior. Every-day practices/performances, both individually and in groups, can also challenge long-established gender practices (see also Gal 1991; Mahoney 1996).

These incremental, subtle strategies may not satisfy the goals of feminists calling for global gender equality. Nor do they sit well with development agencies' assurances that gender mainstreaming will transform gender relations and ensure women's empowerment. Yet in our increasingly unequal, often violent and masculinist world, such ambitious promises have limited purchase. Change is at best a messy, incremental, and unpredictable process, often requiring a judicious mix of voice and silences/secrecy. To privilege voice over silence and secrecy as evidence of empowered agency ignores the transformative potential of a complex mix of choices. Indeed, Gal argues that the relationship among silence, speech, gender, and power must be taken into account (1991). With their need to measure outcomes and "prove" results, development policies and practices tend to privilege measurable behavior and to ignore subtle, less obvious strategies for change (Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland 2006). The choice to speak out against gender oppression may be easy to measure, but as this chapter demonstrates, agency with a transformative agenda may take surprising forms, including the judicious use of secrecy and silence.

NOTES

[1] Both authors argue that silence can be a form of power and agency, although Gal emphasizes the relationship among silence, speech, and power.

[2] Kabeer sees agency as exercising choice in ways that challenge power relation (2005:14). Feminists such as Kandiyoti (1998:147) see it as "embedded in the messiness of social reality."

[3] Of course, some women support masculinist privilege and "necessary" violence against women.

[4] Kabeer acknowledges the cultural, material, and institutional constraints to empowered agency, but looks to education, employment, and political representation for solutions—all spaces where voice is crucial for transformative agendas (2005). Participation, with its emphasis on voice, is also closely linked to empowerment (Cornwall and Brock 2005).

[5] Over three-quarters of the world's 11+ million refugees in 2007 were women and children (www.unhcr.org).

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Voice, Agency and the Sounds of Silence: A Comment on Jane L. Parpart's Paper

Naila Kabeer

I enjoyed reading Jane Parpart's exploration of the question of silence in relation to women's empowerment but I also welcome her invitation to comment on the paper for a number of reasons. Parpart cites my work—among others—as an example of the kind of analysis that fails to acknowledge the significance of silence as an aspect of empowerment. While she has a point, I believe that she somewhat simplifies my views and some of the others she associates with this failure. Parpart has relied on two of my papers for her interpretation of my views, both abbreviated versions of longer pieces. This is fair enough since my work is certainly not the subject of her paper. But her representation of my understanding of empowerment, even in so far as they are drawn from the papers she cites, blurs areas where our understanding of voice and silence might overlap as well as areas where our views might diverge. The opportunity to comment on her paper allows me to address the misrepresentations as well as to clarify areas of overlap and divergence.

Let me begin with a discussion of two forms of conflation which I believe weaken Parpart's critique and then go on to sketch out where I believe the lines of overlap and divergence might be. The first conflation is between the views of feminist academics who have chosen to engage directly and critically with official policy making agencies and the views of those representing these agencies. There is certainly some commonality of concerns between these groups but they are also distinct institutional actors, driven by distinct institutional imperatives and, in many cases, bringing to bear a very different politics (see Razavi 1997 for an excellent discussion of the complexities of this engagement; see also Standing 2004 and Kabeer 2008). Parpart talks about the "optimistic, even triumphalist" tone of the "voice and empowerment" literature and its reliance on technical "fixes" such as micro-credit schemes and gender mainstreaming for policy solutions. Ironically, Andrea Cornwall, one of my colleagues whose work is cited as an example of a "voice-privileging" feminism, has recently edited a collection of articles critiquing "gender mainstreaming" as an approach and the alibi it has provided official agencies to utilize the language of women's empowerment without following it up with action (Cornwall, Harrison, and Whitehead 2004, 2007).

My own work on "gender mainstreaming" has been largely confined to "conceptual mainstreaming," seeking to centralize feminist insights in mainstream theories and policies but I have a great deal of sympathy for the gender equality advocates who struggle within large-scale and influential bureaucracies with the practical challenges of mainstreaming equality concerns within their organization's agenda. I have also carried out extensive research on microfinance programs and while I am certainly far more positive about its empowerment potential than its many feminist detractors, my main interest has been in when, where, and how such a potential is realized (see, for example, Kabeer 2005). My most recent paper deals with the *lack of* transformative potential of particular microfinance interventions in Bangladesh and some of the reasons why this might be the case (Kabeer, Mahmud, and Isaza Castro 2010).

Parpart suggests that I limit my solutions to the problems of women's oppression to the fields of education, employment, and political representation. However, she bases this on

her reading of an article that, as its title suggests, is a critical analysis of Millennium Goal 3 on gender equality which equates women's empowerment with *precisely* these three areas of policy. I do not have solutions for women's empowerment—and I doubt anyone has—but I am interested in the various kinds of policy interventions that might contribute to it as well as in feminist strategies (Kabeer 2008). However, because a great deal of my research is concerned with poor people and their livelihoods and with questions of material survival, it is certainly true that women's work has often constituted the entry point into my analysis of empowerment.

The second conflation that appears in Parpart's paper is the conflation between agency, choice, voice, and empowerment—or the attribution of such a conflation to authors such as me. Examples of this abound: "women's ability to make choices and speak their minds has been seen as proof of agency"; "the language of choice/voice"; "the search for empowerment has thus become a search for women's voices, particularly the moments when women demonstrate agency by speaking out against patriarchal authority". Let me disentangle these concepts as they appear in my writing.

My own writings on empowerment do in fact take "choice" as their starting point, but I am aware of its widespread and often unreflective use within mainstream liberal theory. I have therefore sought to qualify the idea of choice so that it is conceptually useful for the analysis of empowerment (Kabeer 1999). First, choice is clearly only meaningful if it is possible to have chosen otherwise. Material alternatives are undoubtedly important but I give particular stress to the importance of alternatives at the conceptual level, the ability to imagine possibilities other than those that are prescribed by the norms and conventions of one's society.

Second, we need to distinguish between the myriad of largely trivial and inconsequential choices we all make on a daily basis and choices that have strategic implications for our lives and relationships. It is the increased capacity to exercise some degree of control over the issues that matter that make the exercise of choice empowering. This may not always take dramatic forms; they may be hidden and incremental precisely in the way Parpart describes. Indeed, I have written in great depth about the various ways in which women in Bangladesh seek to expand their capacity for strategic choice, including some of the ways that Parpart mentions: withholding information on what they earned, hiding their savings with neighbors, opening hidden bank accounts, as well as walking out on abusive husbands or refusing to cook their food (Kabeer 2001, 2004).

And finally, for choice to be empowering, it needs to challenge rather than reproduce inequality. Women who may make strategic choices about joining fascist parties might be considered empowered from a politically neutral point of view but from a feminist perspective their choices serve to reproduce the oppression of others. Women who decide to abort their female fetus because they know daughters are considered a liability may be acting strategically but they are also reproducing the culture of female devaluation.

Agency for me is the operationalization of choice. Just as all forms of choice are not empowering, so too there is nothing inherently empowering about the exercise of agency. Agency is relevant to empowerment in so far as it represents the operationalization of strategic choices. It encompasses both consciousness—what I have called "a sense of agency" or "the power within"—as well as practice. In studying the motivations that led women to take in factory work in Bangladesh, a country where women's mobility in the

public domain has long been constrained by norms of female seclusion, I made a distinction between the active agency exercised by women who sought out such work as a means to achieve valued goals and the passive agency exercised by those who were forced into such work by the loss of the male breadwinner. While the former experienced their decision as an expansion of choice, the latter discussed it as the absence of choice.

A great deal of my work on empowerment has revolved around different manifestations of women's agency, both collective and individual, covert and overt. It is certainly true that versions of voice have featured prominently, but I have also dealt with the absence of voice, the failure to protest injustice and oppression, without dismissing the women in question as "disempowered failures." Let me use the rest of this commentary to reflect on both voice and silence as it has featured in my work.

I was initially drawn to the concept of "voice" because of my own early disciplinary training in neo-classical economic theory (my critique of this body of work is discussed in some depth in Kabeer 2001. The economic agent of orthodox economic theory never speaks. He is, as Hirschman (1985) puts it "a silent scanner," surveying his full range of economic options, engaging in breathtakingly complex calculations about their relative costs and benefits and then making his decisions, all apparently without uttering a word. Even when the decision is collectively taken, it is presented as an essentially wordless exercise, the tacit recognition of the superior bargaining power of dominant actors leading to their preferences prevailing in final outcomes. Such theories would find it hard to explain how subordinate groups, like women, might be able to bargain from a structural position of weakness to ever achieve goals that went against dominant interests. Yet my analysis of women's agency in different domains—extending from the intimate domain of the family to the public work of work and politics—suggests that they *have* been able to make such gains and it is very often precisely through the use of "voice," the skilful capacity to draw on discursive resources, their powers of persuasion, the politics of advocacy, as well as the creative use of symbolism, that they done so, even in the face of powerful opposition (Kabeer 2008).

From this reading of voice, I do not see the actions of the mothers of the disappeared in Argentina, the Kurdish mothers of the lost in Turkey or the Women in Black in Israel as "choosing silence," as Parpart suggests, unless we interpret silence in a very literal sense. On the contrary, these women chose to make a very visible and public *statement* about injustice and to me that counts as "voice." For the same reason I do not see the actions of young Muslim women in French immigrant housing projects challenging patriarchal authority through their makeup and dress as an expression of "silence." On the other hand, I would need more evidence to be persuaded that Afghan women in exile in India wearing makeup and dressing in the latest fashion are behaving any differently from well-to-do and fashion-conscious women anywhere in the world.

Let me turn to my views on "silence," which I interpret as the absence of protest in the face of injustice. In my own work, I have found Scott's (1990) distinction between "thick" and "thin" hegemony a useful one. In one case, silence is born out of a failure to recognize injustice, even to actively embrace one's subordinate position as part of the natural, divine or immutable order of things. In the other, it is a strategic silence born out of a calculation, often based in fear, of what the costs of protest might be. I have written about contexts in which women do not claim their legally recognized land rights because they fear for their lives; they put up with violent marriages because they have nowhere else to go; they do not protest violations of their rights in the workplace because their economic options are

so limited. They may know that they are victims of injustice but they cannot protest because the costs are too high. Contrary to what Parpart suggests, neither they nor I assume the protection of international and national institutions devoted to democracy, freedom of speech, and human rights. Such institutions are extremely remote from most of their lives. Many of Parpart's examples may be from more politically charged contexts than the situations I am dealing with, but the principle is the same. The costs of voice are too high.

What is at the heart of empowerment for me is a critical consciousness, the ability to recognize oppression and injustice. It is also about the willingness and ability to protest injustice where the protest can take the form of speech or action, may be hidden or open, individual or collective, incremental or radical. And if women do not protest injustice, if they are silent, we need to know lies behind their silence. Judicious silence may indeed be the only feasible survival strategy in a dangerous and brutal world, as Parpart suggests, but it is a choice only in a very restricted sense of the word, enforced by extreme oppression and the closing down of alternatives. However, it is only if we treat the distinction between empowerment and disempowerment as a stark dichotomy that we have to describe these women as disempowered. A more fruitful analytical approach in such circumstances would be to explore the meanings of their silence, exactly as Parpart suggests. Are these women who have been silenced by their circumstances but rage within themselves at the denial of voice and continue to hope for a better world? Does their silence reflect a fear of the consequences, the absence of alternatives, or the futility of protest? Or does it reflect failure to recognize injustice or acceptance of it as part of an unchanging or unchangeable order of things? Parpart is right to say that we have not paid enough attention to the different meanings of silence, but wrong to believe that we automatically equate silence with "disempowered failure."

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Response to Naila Kabeer's Comments on "Choosing Silence: Rethinking Voice, Agency and Women's Empowerment"

Jane Parpart

I would like to thank Naila Kabeer for her thoughtful and thorough response to the arguments I have put forward in "Choosing Silence." Indeed, her comments have sent me back to the literature, particularly on agency, to revisit some of my claims and contentions. There are many areas where we agree. I too believe it is important to avoid conflating scholarly writings on development with the reports and policies of development agencies. Kabeer (1999) has warned development agencies of the dangers of trying to measure empowerment, while Andrea Cornwall (2007, 2008) and contributors to her excellent collections on development have highlighted the disconnect between development policy on gender mainstreaming and implementation/practice. Nevertheless, while the gap between gender policy and implementation is increasingly acknowledged, few scholars or practitioners have persistently explored the structural and ideological forces reinforcing and maintaining that gap (Parpart 2009). This silence suggests that all of us who write on gender and development, as well as development in general, need to be conscious both of our own reluctance to engage seriously with deeper resistances to gender transformation, and of the possibility that our analyses are providing support (even if indirectly) to the assertion that development goals such as gender mainstreaming, women's empowerment and gender equality can be achieved with the "right" frameworks, tools and definitions.

I recognize that most of us who engage in intellectual critiques of gender and development are also concerned with and often involved in (or thinking about) the messy, challenging business of trying to mainstream gender into individuals' everyday lives, communities and societies. Kabeer has played an important role in these efforts, including her recent critique of the limits of a microfinance intervention in Bangladesh. I agree with Kabeer that despite such failures, it is important not to give up on policy interventions attempting to foster women's empowerment and gender mainstreaming. Yet it is Kabeer's use of *choice* as a key pillar for understanding and evaluating gender policies and programs that has inspired my essay. Kabeer argues that choice is only meaningful if it is possible to have chosen otherwise. For her, choice also requires the recognition of social injustice, the ability to imagine possibilities outside this situation and the ability to choose actions that will challenge injustice and lead to empowerment and transformation. For Kabeer, agency is the operationalization of empowered choice. This approach reflects Sherry Ortner's (2001, 78) *agency of power*, wherein agency is equated with the ability to dominate and control people, communities and events, as well as the capacity to resist such domination. In Kabeer's writings, resistance to domination and injustice is at the heart of empowered choice and agency.

Yet, in our increasingly unequal, violent and interconnected world, such a clear-cut definition of empowered agency leaves many actors, actions and impediments to empowered agency out of the picture. As Kalpana Wilson (2007, 2008) argues, agency must be seen as playing out in a world where neoliberal ideology and practices, as well as particular postcolonial cultural contexts, often constrain the possibility for interrogating and challenging local, national and global power structures and ideologies. In a similar vein, Belinda Leach (2005) warns that agency and choice are affected by the different experiences and meanings which arise from unequal access to wealth and power. Moreover, the comparison between

those who can make empowered choices and those who either cannot see their problems or cannot act on them, whether consciously or not, tends to create a binary that privileges the "empowered" over the "disempowered." In "Choosing Silence" I sought to explore the possibility that agency could (and should) also be understood as a process, as the partial, tentative moves that people often take as they attempt to move towards understanding and subverting injustices, recognizing that "injustice" is affected by local contexts, particularly in dangerous and highly constrained circumstances. I struggled to find a more nuanced, situated and multi-leveled way of thinking about empowerment, agency and choice, one that would allow me to identify and analyze the *empowering potential* of many actions which, while neither fully conscious nor openly confrontational, offer beginnings and nourishment for growing consciousness and subversions and eventual challenges.

In my effort to think about empowerment and gender justice in more nuanced ways, I realized that both feminists and gender and development scholars have often equated voice with agency. Moreover, poor women's voices have been presented as evidence of empowerment by development agencies, including the World Bank (Parpart 2002). An exploration of silence and secrecy offered the possibility of thinking about the finer distinctions of empowerment and the search for gender justice. Could silence help us understand the limits as well as the possibilities for tentative steps towards consciousness and action? While silence and secrecy can be seen simply as a strategy for survival in dire circumstances, I began to see other possibilities. My examples suggested that silence (and secrecy) can (sometimes) provide a secure space, a place where people who cannot speak out safely are able to regroup, where consciousness can grow (if often unpredictably and unevenly) and plans for new practices and new ideas can be developed. Ortner (2001, 80-81) provides a frame for thinking about this form of agency which she calls the *agency of intention.* It grows out of the daily experiences of inequality and injustices, but requires neither full consciousness nor explicit actions. It often takes place in secret, or in silent reflections, sometimes shared, sometimes not, in some cases gradually leading to new thoughts and possible actions, even if often initially hesitant and poorly formed. This more nuanced approach provides an entry point for thinking beyond *agency of power*, to consider agency as a more tentative, complicated and evolving set of understandings and intentions.

While I am delighted that Kabeer acknowledges the need to explore the meanings of silence and the possibilities that empowering potential can be found in such contexts, I do think that a broader definition of agency is required. The focus, I believe, has to be not on the end product (empowered awareness and action), but rather on the often hesitant, fitful and unpredictable possibilities for growth in consciousness and actions. This requires new ways of evaluating empowered agency, voice and choice. While voicing protests, individually, in groups and in public, is a crucial force for change, attention to silence has to dig deeper than trying to determine when silence becomes a form of agency, when it "speaks." Kabeer interprets the public protests by the Mothers of the Disappeared or the Women in Black as a form of voice. She regards the use of make-up by French immigrant women as a form of speech/assertion—as silence only in the most literal sense. Nor does she regard Indian-based Afghan women's choices to buy and wear dresses proscribed by Afghan culture as silent agency and resistance. Yet I have come to see silence as more than just a strategy for survival. Indeed silent performances of protest seem to have a particular impact and power. They shame their critics. The symbols and performances are not distracted by words, intensifying their impact. Cynthia Cockburn (2007) speaks of the peculiar power of collective silence. The silent protests of French immigrants and Afghan refugees over make-up and clothing are also powerful but subtle displays of resistance to patriarchal expectations and

values. But again, their silent persistence enables the possibilities for finding safe spaces where transgressive thoughts and actions can be nurtured and explored. These safe (or at least safer) spaces can also provide a platform for considering the limits of transformation, for devising alternatives that alter rather than destroy cultural contexts that also offer many a sense of identity and belonging. As Lisa Mazzei (2003) points out, when we risk letting silence speak rather than forcing silences to say what we want to hear, then we open the possibility for disrupting traditional boundaries and making space for transgressive thoughts and actions, albeit often in unexpected and surprising ways.

It is also important to consider the possibility that silence can be a form of power. As Kabeer points out, the "silent scanner" who calculates and decides about economic policies and priorities is carried out in "an essentially wordless exercise." That ability to exert influence and shape actions without words reflects the power of the scanner. Moreover, respect for the power of silence, of control over voice is influenced by culture. In many Asian cultures as well as among the indigenous peoples of the Americas, silence is often associated with respect and authority. Perhaps our Western perspective on voice and silence could benefit from interrogating cultural practices that interpret both in different ways. Clearly, writing "Choosing Silence" has provided new possibilities for thinking about the intersection between silence, agency and voice. I thank Naila Kabeer for challenging me to explore further and look forward to future discussions with her and other colleagues, as I continue to engage with the transformative possibilities and limits of silence and secrecy, particularly the reminder that challenges to injustice can take many forms.

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