



IT IS YOUR RIGHT TO BE HEARD

**WHY WOMEN'S VOICES GET SILENCED
AND HOW TO SET THEM FREE**

Veronica Rueckert

The voice is an amazing gift, both a privilege and a responsibility.

Using it takes courage, especially if you're a woman. We're given only a finite amount of time to figure out what it's for, to grow into ourselves enough that we can speak up when the time comes.

Yet a woman's right to speak in public is a right that hasn't been fully granted. Modern research backs this up. In a study of deliberative groups designed to mirror Congress in their gender makeup, women used only 60 percent of the floor time used by the average man. Women are interrupted more often than men, both by men and by other women. Women of color may be disrespected at even greater rates when they speak. A revealing study of the US Supreme Court found that women justices were three times as likely to be interrupted as their male colleagues. Things were even worse for the only woman of color on the court.

In 2012, a Yale University study found that when hypothetical women executives talked more often than their peers, study respondents rated their competency down by 14 percent. But when male executives did the same, their competency rating went up by 10 percent.

This is the tightrope women walk. If we speak too much, we're seen as pushy or aggressive; we face a backlash. If we don't speak at all, we're relegated to the sidelines and run the risk of being perceived as passive and ineffectual.

Young women in particular have it tough. Though Generation X had, like, Valley Girl Speak, millennial women have vocal fry. The gravelly tone is reminiscent, apparently, of bacon sputtering in a pan, and women—especially young women—are being criticized for having it and are facing real consequences. More than once, people have confided in me that they subtract IQ points when they hear it—even though they may not want to—and women with vocal fry may be less likely to land jobs or key assignments at work.

Culturally, vocal fry has gone from a pet peeve to a feminist issue, where it remains, at the moment, unresolved. Though vocal fry can on occasion cause real harm to the voice, it's a style that everyone dips into now and again, men and women alike. To fry or not to fry should always be a personal choice. For now, the controversy is one more cultural force compelling women not to talk.

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One study found that male attorneys are far more likely to do the talking than women—with women acting as lead attorneys only 25 percent of the time in the state’s private sector and criminal cases, and at low rates across the board. In a world where more than half of all law school graduates are women, the study suggests that male attorneys will do most of the talking, while female lawyers confer in whispers.

Women’s voices get the back seat even in the fictional worlds we weave from whole cloth. In Hollywood, women spoke less than a third of the time in the top nine hundred films between 2007 and 2016. And they were far more likely to be partially nude than men were. Undressed and mute: not exactly a nourishing vision for the next generation.

Imagine a world in which women speak half the time in politics. Half the time in board meetings. Half the lines in movies. Half the time on TV, on the radio, in the courtroom, at the United Nations. And when women do speak, they are taken seriously, judged not by the superficialities of their voices but by the content of their ideas. Where girls are used to hearing the sound of women’s voices in places of power and are raised knowing the value of their own voices. Culturally, we are working to close the wage and leadership gaps for women. It’s been a long time since women fought for the right to speak in public, but the data clearly show that those days aren’t behind us yet.

This preference for quiet women goes back thousands of years. Aristotle wrote, “Silence is a woman’s glory, but this is not equally the glory of man.” Hans Christian Andersen’s *Little Mermaid* willingly traded her voice to the Sea Witch for a pair of legs and a shot at the prince, even though she asked the Sea Witch a poignant question still relevant today: *But if you take away my voice, what is left for me?* Late in her life, Susan B. Anthony remembered women’s fight for the right to talk and share her mind in public spaces when she said, “No advanced step taken by women has been so bitterly contested as that of speaking in public. For nothing which they have attempted, not even to secure the suffrage, have they been so abused, condemned and antagonized.”

With a history like that, it's not hard to see why women are led into dysfunctional relationships with their own voices. At the lectures and workshops I teach, almost no one answers yes to the question: Do you love your voice?

The data is grim, but women can learn to love their voices. It starts by making friends with your own body, because the voice is housed inside our own physical form, the only musical instrument with such personal accommodations. That makes any ambivalences and insecurities we have about your bodies a part of our relationship with our voice. For women, one particular challenge is to make peace with the belly.

For men and women alike, returning to baseline—feet flat on the floor, knees slightly apart, shoulders back, lower abdomen released—is postural ground zero. It makes room for the breath and lets the body do its job. This released lower belly allows the diaphragm to work as it should, supporting the breath and calming the nervous system. When we suck the belly in and try to hold it there, as we were told to do from childhood onward, we cut off our connection to our seat of power in body, mind, and voice. Without the steadiness that deep, abdominal breathing gives the voice and the mind, we put ourselves in danger of a confidence collapse.

Collapsed body posture can be a sign of collapsed internal confidence. Learning to recognize the warning signals of internal confidence collapse is a key tool to holding ground for women. This kind of collapse can happen for a lot of reasons: internal self-talk, external circumstances, and as the body's natural response to stress. Your heart may start to beat more quickly, your breath become shallow, and your thoughts harder to lasso onto cohesive tracks. It can also thrust you into the danger zone for fight-or-flight mode. Thankfully, monitoring yourself closely is an easy, potent tool for successful self-management. In some cases, focusing too much on the reactions of the people around you can be counterproductive if you're working a tough room. Noting every vacant gaze or furrowed brow can translate into negative self-talk: Why does my boss look bored? My client looks angry—is it something I said?

It can take only a moment or two to spiral downward into dismal thought patterns that have the potential to derail you. When you feel the first tendrils of that kind of internal confidence collapse coming, it's time to zip back to your baseline as quickly as you can and work with your body. Do this even before you correct your thoughts. It's that important. Physically, a collapse can be subtle. Maybe your shoulders round and your spine slouches. You might find yourself balling up your fists and clenching your stomach. Or one of the biggest tells of all—holding your breath. Let's call this hedgehog mode. When you catch your body collapsing into hedgehog mode in any situation, it's time to consciously release your stomach and begin taking deep belly breaths. Then pull your shoulders back and straighten your spine. That's step one.

Now that you've unclenched your body and breath, you're out of defense mode. To pull the wheel in the other direction, to gather your power and assert it, it's time to take up more space. Sitting or standing, widen the space between your knees. Throw an arm around the chair next to you or begin to talk with your hands or arms in broad gestures—make sure you use your full arm, as gluing the elbows to the sides of your body and moving only your forearms tends to undercut the strength of the gesture and makes you look like a bit like an insecure Tyrannosaurus rex.

Warning: this will feel foreign. Your lifelong conditioning will scream at you to return to hedgehog mode at once and stop being so ridiculously and needlessly vulnerable. Uncurling yourself by expanding your chest and straightening your shoulders will make you feel exposed, but see it for what it is: strength.

And remember, open body posture is not, in fact, making you look like a rampaging silverback gorilla—it's simply projecting confidence. Stay the course. Remember, women aren't used to taking up space, which means those first steps toward a larger physical footprint are likely to feel strange and unsettling. At first you'll think you're in the red zone, overshooting the mark and moving the needle a full ninety degrees, when in fact you're usually just beginning to

budge it. We're terrible judges of ourselves. Your belly breaths will support your voice and help it stay strong. Resist the urge to talk sotto voce, or half voice. If it takes a while to restore your voice to its fullest dimensions, that's okay, too. This is a journey.

Nota bene: if you work in an open-space office, you will need to work extra hard to speak at full voice. The "whisper and wince" experience of open office spaces hits women especially hard, and if they're not careful, they can end up with a speaking voice more like a stage whisper that stays with them even when they're off the clock. It can help to buddy up with a friend who can give you feedback.

After the big meeting, when you ask your friend if you looked like an irate silverback gorilla, she will say something like "No—in fact, I didn't notice any difference." Or if you're getting good, she'll say you killed it in there and you looked strong and confident. Remember, as you move into more expansive postures, you can't gauge the success of this exercise by the response at the table.

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A breath is a beautiful thing. Take a moment to appreciate the fact of it happening right now, whether or not you're paying attention. As to what exactly goes on in the body when we breathe, here's how it works. When we inhale, air enters our lungs, moving from an area of high pressure to an area of low pressure. Oxygen from the air moves from small sacs in the lungs called alveoli into the pulmonary capillaries. In exchange, the capillaries produce carbon dioxide, which moves up the windpipe and into the environment. That last part is called exhalation.

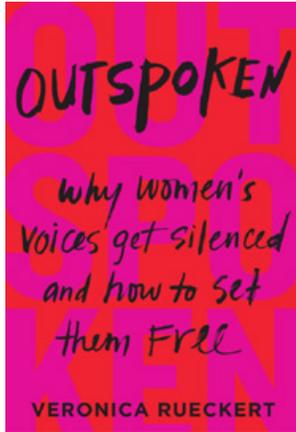
The diaphragm makes it all possible. The diaphragm is an underestimated swath of muscle and membrane separating the upper body, or thoracic area, from the lower, or abdominal, region. When we contract the diaphragm, it moves outward and downward and we inhale. Our rib cage and belly expand. My voice professor used to tell me to think of this movement as a “thunk,” to embed the idea of just how deeply we should feel the breath in the lower abdomen. When the diaphragm relaxes, it moves inward and upward again, and we exhale. Think of the parachute games you may have played in gym class when you were a little kid. Each child held a section of round, rayon parachute and flapped it up into the air in unison. When the nylon puffed up like the top of a hot air balloon, it looked like our belly during inhalation. When we brought it down to the ground, it flattened out, the model of exhalation. Fun fact: when the diaphragm spasms, we get a case of the hiccups. It's a key part of the whole setup to know that breathing is one of the few bodily functions we can consciously regulate. In other words, you can have a say in the process and direct your body when to breathe in and out, how deeply, and for how long. Your body will, of course, do this all by itself even if you do nothing. But why do nothing when you can work with your breath and make it an ally? The breath can be your genie, your secret weapon, your superpower. In a Robert Schumann song I studied years ago, the beloved I sang about was referred to as the “good spirit,” the “better self.” That's your breath. My voice professor in college was obsessed with breath. Sometimes in a dreamy half soliloquy, she'd lean into the grand piano from which she conducted lessons and muse about her death. “I just wonder,” she would say, “what that last breath will be like.” She was more drill sergeant than loving mentor, but I'm forever thankful to her for helping me to get in touch with my body again.

To sing, to extend a four-bar line with legato—a seamless, flowing style without any breaks between notes—there’s only one way to succeed: to breathe by supporting the voice with the muscles of the lower abdomen. I have found that this holds true in less theatrical settings, as well. When you’re getting ready for a big meeting, get in touch with your breath ahead of time. That means allowing the abdomen to grow bigger with breath before it helps produce sound. The human abdomen is built to expand and relax with the movement of breath, to move fluidly and deeply, like an elegant bellows. It helps to remember that the abdomen itself begins at the top hinge of the thighs, far lower than we’re used to engaging it.

As women respond to the pressure to be silent and small by taking up more space with their voices and bodies, there may be surprise, hostility, and a social pushback. Remind yourself that it is your right to breathe and talk and take up space. It is your right to share your voice and ideas and insights—even if they are not polished and perfect and vetted by committee. Remind yourself that it is time and that you are doing this for yourself and also for your daughters and sons and the generations to come. **It is your right to be heard.** 📣



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Veronica Rueckert is a Peabody Award-winning communications specialist. She was the host of Wisconsin Public Radio's statewide news magazine *Central Time* and the statewide call-in program, The Veronica Rueckert Show. She was also a senior producer and contributor on the national program *To the Best of Our Knowledge*, distributed by Public Radio International. Her essays have aired on NPR and PRI. She currently conducts media training and national media outreach at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

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