
From the editor

Our silences have not protected us.

—Audre Lorde¹

Silence is a feminist issue. It is also a nursing issue. In the feminist literature, scholars have recognized, named, and studied the silencing and the silences of women. Spender,² for example, has documented how women are silenced and silent in conversation, how little girls are silenced during their early schooling, and how women as writers, artists, and scientists have been silenced for centuries. Her analysis reveals underlying values and world views that silence women by rendering the thoughts and actions of women invisible, unheard. She traces historically persistent social and political phenomena that silence women.

There are as yet no systematic studies of the silencing and silence of nurses.³ One barrier for nurses is reluctance to name our silence as a problem, and failure to recognize ways in which nurses are rendered silent. When nurses turn away from an identity as “feminists,” or claim to value much about feminism but not want to be called “feminists,” an extreme form of silencing happens. Turning away from a label is a virtue when the label serves to diminish and dehumanize. Turning away from a label is a political act of silence when the label stands for values that you believe need to be exercised more fully in the world. By claiming an identity as a feminist, you take responsibility for values and acts that move the world more toward a full accounting of the human experience.

In the interest of prompting readers to contemplate how well the label might fit them personally, I share a list, created in a spirit of serious humor by a group of feminist nurses.⁴ If you cannot claim to know some of what this list names, get a group of friends together and have some fun exploring!

You know you’re a feminist when:

- You can discuss Nightingale’s essay *Cassandra* over afternoon tea.

- You cringe when your best friend says, “My husband is my best friend.”
- You know who Fannie Lou Hamer, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Emma Goldman were.
- You search for a woman plumber.
- You buy every recording of Ferron, Lucie Blue Tremblay, and Sweet Honey in the Rock.
- You prefer comfortable shoes.
- You frequently quote Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and Marge Piercy.
- You realize that the six o’clock news is a study of the patriarchy.
- You regularly read *Woman of Power* magazine.
- You celebrate Solstice.
- You prefer pasta prima vera to prime rib.
- You observe Rosa Parks Day and Susan B. Anthony Day.
- You know the origin of Women’s Equality Day.
- You frequently ask “Equal to what?”
- Your words are no longer stuck in your throat.

REFERENCES

1. Lorde A. *The Cancer Journals*. New York, NY: Spinsters Ink; 1980.
2. Dale Spender has several books addressing women’s silences. See: *Man-Made Language* (1980) and *Women of Ideas and What Men have Done to Them* (1982) both published by Routledge Kegan Paul (New York), and *Invisible Women: The Schooling Scandal* (1984) published by the Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative Society. (London).
3. Gena Corea does include an analysis of the silence of nurses in her study of medical malpractice. See Corea G. *The Hidden Malpractice*. New York, NY: Harper-Colophon Books; 1985.
4. Individuals who have contributed to the much-longer list include Charlene Eldridge, Elizabeth Berry, and Debby Thomas.

—Peggy L. Chinn, RN, PhD, FAAN
Editor