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Silence. Silence is one of the most powerful tools we have as human beings. It is used by politicians, musicians... teachers. And it can also be used to control and oppress a group of people. Our right to speak is a form of privilege, a form of social currency which makes some of us wealthier than others. For those who are silenced the world is a place in which the basic human right of having a voice is denied. For many hundreds of years women had little, or no voice. The history of women's rights and lack of rights is also a history of silence and of breaking that silence. This was the first and most powerful thing I learnt when I began a masters in Gender and International Relations. Five years ago I was sitting where you are sat right now - I had never had a reason to stop, and think seriously about what it would be like for my voice to not be valued. I ask you to take a moment now to imagine what it would be like if your words, your stories, your deepest cries for help were to be dismissed, belittled or deemed irrelevant. This morning I am going to present to you the perspective of those who have been silenced on the basis of their gender.

So to start with, me and you. How does the silencing of women feature in our day to day lives? We all know that it's far easier to dismiss issues of gender equality than to speak up about them. It is easier to make a joke out of sexism and misogyny than face the uncomfortable prospect of challenging it. There is also a belief that problems affecting women are imagined, or exaggerated, or not as important as other issues. When we grow up being treated as equals it is easy to overlook the reality - I know this because I did, I was fortunate enough to be brought up here, at Warminster School. My formative years were spent in an environment where being a girl wasn't treated as a limitation. I was never silenced, unseen or belittled because I was a girl. When I stood up to lead a group whether that was on the hockey pitch or during Enrichment Day I was not labelled 'bossy' and 'difficult' when a boy would have been called a 'leader'. There are so many ways that gender equality has advanced and educational institutions such as Warminster demonstrate this. The gender pay gap figures released recently demonstrate society's progression, not in the statistics revealed, but in the very fact that they exist. Companies are legally obliged to investigate, discuss and implement strategies to improve the gender parity of their workforce - this is fantastic. However, it is hard to not also see these discussions as a distraction from addressing deep set, structural inequalities that exist in society.

I have begun to understand this distraction more clearly since leaving school. I've witnessed the paradox that lies at the heart of university culture, a culture which publicly denounces sexism, but privately condones it by doing little to educate or challenge the actions of those committing serious acts against their female peers. I've seen a denial to acknowledge violence against women as a problem in the west - even when in England and Wales 1 in 4 women are affected by domestic violence and a report by the British Council states that 'violence against women and girls remains one of the most serious and widespread inequalities in the UK'. And I see a society within which victims of Harvey Weinstein have had to wait decades to feel as though they have a space to tell their story. In the developing world these issues become more pertinent and extreme. Two thirds of the 800 million illiterate adults are women - how can we expect women to use their voices powerfully when they are denied education time and time again? And a statistic that baffles me - 603 million women live in countries where domestic violence isn't even illegal.

These were facts that during my university career had increasing influence over me, not least as I personally experienced and witnessed numerous incidents of sexism ranging from sporting societies to the OTC dinner table, and the more educated I became about women's issues the more frustrated I became at the silencing of them. If a conversation was happening it was about women in other countries, religions or sectors of society. The uncomfortable conversation about our society and even the relationships we have with those closest to us, was never had. Often it was deflected by an eye roll, or a joke; in other words, a silencing. Eventually I decided enough was enough and that even when there are those who do not want to listen, I would start talking. It was at this moment that I started calling myself a feminist. This is no longer a word that I shrink from using, because I now realise that I have a strong and powerful voice that was never silenced growing up, and every time I call myself a feminist I am unapologetically standing beside those women who continue to be silenced. My kind of feminism is not bra burning or man hating - it's something called intersectional feminism. Intersectional feminism recognises that women's varying experiences of oppression is impacted by their race, class, religion and sexuality. With the ongoing and lively debate about the relevance of the word feminism to our world I am reminded of a statement I read recently - 'we don't have to share every contrary opinion and condone every extreme action to stand strong on behalf of women'.

Today I work for Women in Foreign Policy. An organisation founded on the belief that for foreign policy to evolve and be successful it needs to be fully representative of society. It is a perspective that views the experiences of women and minorities as bringing a fresh and invaluable insight to our world view. We view education and inspiration as essential for the breaking of silence and so we tell stories and share advice about women who have been successful and influential. Today I am going to share with you one such story of a woman who brought down a dictator and empowered oppressed women to have their voices heard.

Our story begins in Peru in the 1990s with the President, a man called Alberto Fujimori and our protagonist, a young woman named Monica Feria-Tinta. Monica Feria grew up in Peru during the times of conflict and civil unrest of the 1970s and 80s. She saw horrific acts against innocent people and these experiences drove her to see justice as the ultimate need of humanity, so, she became a lawyer. However Monica was no ordinary young lawyer, she was exceptional - and within a few years she made history by becoming the first Latin American lawyer to practise at the Bar of England and Wales. In 1992 she was unlawfully imprisoned in the high security prison Miguel Castro Castro due to a documentary she was filming about the conflict. Suspecting that the women inside the prison were terrorists, the Fujimori government launched an attack. Monica Feria recalls, 'The massacre began at 4 AM on the 6th May with a large explosion. Grenades, rockets and helicopters were used to enter the prison... Cell block 1A contained approximately 130 women, among these several pregnant and elderly. I crawled on my elbows over the top of dead corpses still warm and bleeding. Several prisoners were shot by snipers. On the evening of the 7th May the block was demolished floor by floor with shellfire and explosives. The wounded were taken outside but left to die. When the male and female prisoners came out of the prison block on the 9th May after four days under attack, deprived of sleep, water and food, security forces opened fire on the unarmed inmates. Female prisoners who were taken to hospital on trucks were subjected to unspeakable violence by hooded men... All survivors were subjected to systematic torture: to a system of slow death'.

When Monica was released the following year she travelled back to the UK but it wasn't long before she realised that nothing was being done to bring Fujimori to justice. She states, 'I tried to knock on every single door to attract awareness of what had happened, I talked to so many, but nothing happened. For a torture survivor it is the most devastating moment when you tell your story to the world but the world does not care. When I lived in Europe, I realised that people do not want to hear... In my own country the facts were denied by the Peruvian society'. So for almost ten years Monica Feria worked alone and without pay, preparing representations and collecting unprecedented data on the case to bring Fujimori to justice. Her hard work paid off, and on the 25th November 2006 the Inter-American Court on Human Rights unanimously concluded that Peru had been responsible for the victimisation of hundreds of individuals under detention. The case proved to be a landmark that led the way to understanding the particular violations of human rights that women in the region often suffer. Through this case she showed the world that, in her own words, 'dignity is a notion that is not gender neutral, that a woman's notion of dignity is distinct. And when you suffer pain or torture, gender is an important factor in how harm can be inflicted'.

Monica fought for ten years to give a voice to the indigenous women of Peru, including herself, who were the victims of gendered torture and violence. For her work she won the Gruber Justice Prize, at the age of 28. She is fierce and driven, but she is also an anomaly. She is an anomaly because she is a Latin American woman who has become one of the most successful and influential international lawyers of today. But she is also an anomaly because she was the one person who cared enough to speak up about the silencing of these women, and in doing so she gave them and so many others their voice.

We can all appreciate the enormity of what Feria-Tinta achieved. But in a small way this is still all I am calling on you to do today. Speak up and tell the stories of those whose voice is not as strong as yours. When you see something that you don't think is right, say something. If you have experienced harassment or discrimination, no matter how small or insignificant, have the courage to tell someone. The liberating power of breaking silence must not be underplayed - it can lead to inclusion and recognition, it can be a precondition to changing laws or even, as we have heard, it can bring down dictators. Data from the World Economic Forum suggests that at its current rate, it would take one hundred years to close the equality gap between men and women. But we are the generations that will push change on faster, we are the generations of gender equality. It's time that we embraced that. And women such as Feria-Tinta show the immensity that

can come from acting on those things we feel passionately about, and know to be right, rather than waiting for someone else to act for us.

A final thought to leave you with. You are the average of the five people you spend the most time with. Take a look around you - who do you see? I'll tell you what I see, I see a school made up of some of the most educated, compassionate and promising young adults in the world. Each of you are one of only 600,000 pupils attending an independent school in the UK. To put that in context, there are 75 million children in the world who do not attend school altogether. So just take a moment to think about your position, your privilege - contemplate the multitude of positive ways you can use this. Use your voice to make a difference in the world and affect change, if anyone can stand by those who are silenced, like Feria-Tinta has done, then its each and every one of you.