

Opinion

Will Ghislaine Maxwell get a fair trial?

She should not be punished for Epstein's crimes

BY [KAT ROSENFELD](#)

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November 16, 2021



Accomplice, partner or mastermind: how much credit should we give her?

Credit: Mathieu Polak/Sygma/Sygma via Getty Images

In a world where history is dominated —and often written —by men, feminism has long cautioned us to look to the shadows to see the real heroes, lurking there unseen. Out of the spotlight, shunted to the sidelines, trapped beneath the glass ceiling, forever playing a supporting role to a man who takes all the credit for doing half (or less!) of the work. Think of all the women there would be monuments to, if only the men had given them their due.

At its best, this is a noble impulse: to recognise how women, so often denied direct access to the levers of power, have had to find other ways to wield it. To give credit to the mothers, sisters, wives, and girlfriends of great men who had to content themselves with pulling strings behind the scenes rather than wielding swords on the front lines. But at worst, this feminist narrative has a dark underbelly: if behind every great man is an even greater woman, then who will you find standing in the shadow of a man who did terrible things?

Two years ago, the internet was on fire with debate about the disgraced financier and sexual predator Jeffrey Epstein, who killed himself while awaiting justice for his crimes. The investigation into his death is ongoing, but meanwhile the investigation into his misdeeds has found a new villain. Epstein isn't just gone; he's quickly being forgotten, relegated to a supporting role in the scandal that bears his name. Our focus has turned to Ghislaine Maxwell, whose status has grown so great in the wake of Epstein's death that she has all but eclipsed the man without whose bad acts there would never have been a story at all.

Much has been made of Maxwell's relationship with Epstein, including her possible complicity in his crimes. The charges against her include enticement of minors and sex trafficking of underage girls, with several women alleging that Maxwell recruited them to work with Epstein in full knowledge that he would abuse and assault them. (She has denied all the allegations.) But it's Maxwell herself who is increasingly the object of fascination and derision.

In 2019, when Epstein was arrested and charged with sex trafficking, Maxwell was covered as more of a curiosity than an accomplice —let alone a puppeteer pulling his strings. Even Vicky Ward, who has said her reporting on the sex abuse scandal was removed from her *Vanity Fair* profile of Epstein —allegedly because he put pressure on then editor Graydon Carter—did not seem comparably suspicious of Maxwell's character at the time. "Full disclosure: I like her," Ward wrote. "Most people in New York do. It's almost impossible not to."

SUGGESTED READING

Why Jeffrey Epstein deserves to be forgotten

BY LOUISE PERRY

Needless to say, there are no such disclosures to be found in coverage of the case today. Instead, Maxwell's guilt is treated as a foregone conclusion in most public conversation about the case, to the point where her [recent fretting](#) over the possibility of a tainted jury pool doesn't really seem so far-fetched. The word most commonly used to describe her in the press is

“monster”—as in “Ten Monsters of 2020”, and, “Donald Trump Just Wishes This Monster Well”, and “Ghislaine Maxwell Called ‘the Real Monster’ as New Legal Hurdles Emerge”.

A new documentary, *Chasing Ghislaine* promises to take us behind the scenes of Maxwell’s “twisted and chilling partnership with Epstein”. But the public narrative has already promoted her from partner to boss. Maxwell was “worse than Epstein”, per one alleged victim. Another calls her “the power geisha orchestrating everything for Epstein’s maximum delight”. Still another told *20/20* that “Ghislaine was 100% the lady of the house at Jeffrey’s. He made that very clear. We knew who was in charge and it was Ghislaine.”

“She was vicious, she was evil and she was a woman,” Virginia Giuffre, who is expected to give evidence at Maxwell’s trial, told *CBS News* last year. “Jeffrey was a sick pedophile, but she was the mastermind.”

SUGGESTED READING

What's the point of Prince Andrew?

BY SARAH DITUM

It’s worth remembering, here, that the feminist narrative of under-appreciated heroines has a misogynist cousin. The female villain who wields power in the form of manipulation is an ancient fictional archetype; from Eve and the apple on up, it serves to tell us that it’s women’s ambition which forms the true roots of men’s evil deeds. In *Snow White*, it’s the power-hungry and jealous queen who orders a huntsman to cut out the heart of her stepdaughter. In Shakespeare, it’s Lady Macbeth who gets stuck with indelible bloodstains on her hands.

These narratives serve men. The more we dwell on the idea of a conniving female pulling the strings, the less responsibility we assign to the man pulling the trigger—or in Epstein’s case, committing the assaults. In fact, the more we hear about Ghislaine Maxwell, the less agency Epstein seems to have. He was just a big, dumb animal; she was the one bringing him fresh meat, the brains of the organisation.

Taken to its natural conclusion, this type of rhetoric leads us to a place where men can’t be held accountable for their choices at all, if there’s a woman somewhere in the vicinity who could be seen as a behind-the-scenes manipulator. It’s how we decide that Prince Harry is just a hapless lump acting at the Machiavellian whims of his wife; it’s how we turn our attention away from men who commit violence in favour of pointing fingers at the [mothers who raised them](#). At what point does giving due credit to women become just another way of excusing men?

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BY KAT ROSENFELD

Feminism requires finding this balance. If we believe that women have agency, we can't give this one a pass for her involvement with a monster; we must embrace the radical notion that Maxwell is a person as capable of evil and avarice as anyone else. But there's a fine line here between feminism and sexism —and between justice and vengeance—when we set out to condemn the nearest woman in the place of a dead, bad man.

There is an aggressive fervour surrounding Maxwell's impending trial, and a thirst to see her punished in every possible way before that it even begins. Images from pretrial hearings show her shackled, her hair lank, her face bruised. In a recent dispatch from Brooklyn's Metropolitan Detention Center, she described being kept in solitary confinement in a rat-infested cell, assaulted by guards, and given food crawling with maggots —all of which were promptly [celebrated](#) by her detractors as no less than she deserves. The fact that Maxwell's guilt hasn't yet been determined by a court of law is irrelevant to the public glee at seeing her suffer. She's too good a villain.

And unlike Epstein, she's still here.