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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

WILEY

Sexism in Business Schools: Structural Inequalities, Systemic Failures and Individual Experiences of Sexism

Unsilencing silence on business school sexism: A behind-the-scenes narration on regaining voice

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Abstract

Unsilencing sexism-related silence is not a new need, particularly in academic institutions heavily imbued with patriarchy, where sexist events are often ignored or denigrated. In this paper, we draw on a sexist cyberbullying attack unleashed against part of our academic work to extend a critique to the silence culture surrounding business school sexism. Through an embodied discussion of the various faces and phases of silence, silencing, and unsilencing that we experienced following this sexist event, we show the behind-the-scenes relational process that led us from silence to activism in regaining our voices and speaking out against academic sexism. We discuss the emancipating potential of feminist “wor(l)ds,” relationality, and communal support in unsilencing sexism-related silence and articulate possible ways of unsilencing silence at the individual, community, and institutional levels.

KEYWORDS

business school sexism, cyberbullying, silence, unsilencing, writing differently

*No one dared
Disturb the sound of silence;
'Fools', said I, 'You do not know
Silence, like a cancer, grows
Hear my words that I might teach you*

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*Take my arms that I might reach you
But my words, like silent raindrops fell
And echoed in the wells, of silence*
Simon and Garfunkel, *The Sound of Silence*, (1966)

1 | INTRODUCTION

On March 31st 2021, one of our articles published online first the previous year (Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2022) was targeted by a sexist cyberbullying attack on social media. We are two female authors, relatively young in academia, non-French, working in French private business schools, and our work has sought to develop feminist and critical research in organization studies. The attacked paper was positioned within feminist discussions on inclusion of difference and vulnerabilities in organizations, through forms of writing *differently*, making sexism a predictable (unfortunately!)—but no less violent and unacceptable—reaction (Lloro-Bidart, 2018). Our institutions have openly welcomed us and our work, such that not only have we not suffered from retaliation or pressure to change our research agenda, but have also generously been provided with the needed resources and trust to engage with our research. Yet, in the aftermath of this incident, two elements, which we had not particularly considered until then, became salient to us.

First, business schools remain highly sexist environments (Contu, 2020; Davies et al., 2020; Einarsen et al., 2021; Fotaki & Harding, 2013; Harding et al., 2013; Tao, 2018; Vaughn et al., 2020), although many of us remain unaware or blind to this fact. The country where we work, France, not only is not an exception to this (de Saint Martin, 2008; Dejourn, 2019; Duru-Bellat, 1994), but also has specificities owing to the history of the elitist *Grandes Ecoles de Commerce*; hereafter, GEC (Bourdieu, 1989; Masse, 2002; Subramanian & Suquet, 2016) that worsen its case. Having said this, this sexist attack did not occur within the French context, what sadly reflects an increase of academic sexism and cyberbullying internationally (e.g., Bosely, 2017; Hardy, 2018; Savigny, 2017). These become rapidly diffused with the instant and global reach of social media, fueled by far-right ideologies attacking different bodies and forms of knowledge seen as not abiding by normative patriarchal standards and thereby abjectified (Lloro-Bidart, 2018; Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2023). Second, we started to become aware of a whole array of complexities buried beneath the silence surrounding sexism. This awareness was enhanced by several silencing and unsilencing processes that happened within and between ourselves as targets of this cyberattack, in relation to our positionality within the various academic communities in which we are embedded (some of which provided deep relational support to empower us meaningfully in the process of regaining voice), including our academic institutions.

But should we speak about it?

And if so, how?

To whom?

Where?

When?

Silence is a multifaceted notion (Blackman & Sadler-Smith, 2009; Dyne et al., 2003) that carries a sense of mystery, elusiveness, and potentialities (Bigo, 2018). It is increasingly explored by organizational researchers as a key feature of everyday work (de Vaujany & Aroles, 2019; Fletcher & Watson, 2007), but more importantly here, in terms of its links with forms of coercive power and violence that might trigger instances of resistance and voice (Brinsfield, 2014; Brown & Coupland, 2005; Costas & Grey, 2014). Recent accounts stress that among the reasons why people might choose to remain silent around instances of organizational injustice, relate to the belief that speaking up would not make any difference in worlds where their words remain undervalued and thus unheard (Morrison & Milliken, 2003). This can be seen as an implicit form of violence and even betrayal exerted by institutional forces

to actively silence peripheral voices or simply fail to protect them (Smith & Freyd, 2014). Others stress that silencing around instances of misconduct might also reflect fear of bearing the consequences of speaking up, as in the case of whistleblowing (Kenny, 2018; Lescoat, 2021). Such consequences might relate to career progression or to being perceived as the trouble-maker for naming problems; especially sexist events (Ahmed, 2016). Such discussions have attracted increasing attention by feminist organizational scholars studying how sexism and other forms of misconduct and discrimination seek to silence women and other marginalized, intersectional minorities, such as disabled, racialized, or queer individuals in organizations (Alvinus & Holmberg, 2019; Miller, 2021; Priola et al., 2014; Vitry, 2020). Academia is unfortunately no exception (Abdellatif, 2021; Bourabain, 2021; Dorion, 2021; Einarsen et al., 2021; Gatrell, 2011; Gill, 2009; Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2023; Tao, 2018; van Amsterdam, 2020). Namely, as mentioned in the opening lines of this special issue's call for papers: "The silence surrounding sexism in academia is deafening."

By writing this, we seek to join the collective voice of the above debates to disrupt this pattern, presenting our case as just one of the many examples of discrimination targeting different others explicitly and/or implicitly, both online and offline. Feeling empowered by the communal support we received following the sexist cyberbullying attack, we thus decided to put other writing commitments on hold, to transform into words our refusal to be silenced. In writing this paper, we thus actively embrace the cause of this Special Issue, drawing on our personal experience to contribute specifically to current accounts calling for openly denouncing and speaking up against academic sexism (e.g., Bourabain, 2021; Einarsen et al., 2021; Fotaki & Harding, 2013; Lloro-Bidart, 2018; Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2023) and the silence culture around it (Abdellatif, 2021; van Amsterdam, 2020).

Here, we do so by specifically reflecting on the silencing and unsilencing processes that we went through and their relational, world making underpinnings: from being silenced by the violence of the attack to regaining our voices through communal support, acting up by writing an academic response (Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2023), and raising awareness in our institutions. In doing so, we choose to not let sexism have the last laugh, but rather be the ones to keep lighting the flame of academic activism (Contu, 2020), by engaging into a collective effort to further knowledge on how sexism permeates our professional environments.

We use a non-conventional writing style as a gateway to expose the embodied affects we experienced in this process, performing (again) through our words our inconformity with the straitjacket of masculine standards of academic writing (e.g., Boncori & Smith, 2019; Mandalaki, 2021a, 2021b, 2022; Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2022, 2023; Pérezts, *forthcoming*; Pullen, 2018; Silva, 2021). Having been attacked precisely for this reason, it seemed only logical to keep refusing to be silenced in this manner. In what follows, we specifically use *italics* to denote the reflective processes we experienced within ourselves and in dialog with each other, in so doing also broadly contributing to feminist debates stressing the emancipating potential of writing differently for fighting epistemic oppression (e.g., Dorion, 2021; Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2022; Vachhani, 2019). We know that we run the risk of being perceived, yet again, as "hysterics"; but we also know that this is the only way in which we can meaningfully destabilize the sexist culture of academia (Fotaki & Harding, 2013). In narrating our journey from silence to voice, we extend a call to the business academic communities to fight the complicit silence of our institutions, who often "see no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil," leaving different others over-exposed.

In the next section, we start by delving into how we each experienced silence both as an oppressor and an emancipator. We then dialogically traverse the relational path toward gaining back our voices thanks to the support of our academic community. In this context, we discuss the activist potentials of relational, embodied action for our writing and our broader academic and societal engagements. In the last section, we draw implications for the literature on silence by discussing the transformational potential of unsilencing sexism-related silence within the specificities of business schools' environments and by articulating ways of doing so at the individual, community, and institutional levels.

*Let's unsilence silence
...together.*

2 | SILENCING

When we were first alerted about the attack by others who flagged it, each of us was immersed in mixed feelings of doubt, rage, anger, and fear. Each of us alone, hidden in our silences and choking on them (Lorde, 2017). Like our mouths were covered with duct tape. Our wor(l)ds could not reach each other; separated by distance, by COVID, by time, by silence itself; these acted as barriers which alienated us from each other. We needed to use a language written differently to reflect this process, which we present here through the table below. The texts in *italics* present our initial parallel reflections, separated by the material boundaries of this table to denote how our bodies were separated from each other. They trace our unsettling embodied journeys through being silenced by sexist cyberbullying, before we were empowered to bring our voices together again to speak, to share, and write this account.

Emmanouela	Mar
<p><i>Thursday, 16h00. I receive a colleague's message that she was worried about me; she offers to chat. I thought of my conversation with another colleague I rarely talk with, who contacted me this morning to say that someone was ridiculing my work online. Is she also referring to the mockery? Is it so serious? Millions of thoughts cross my mind. She sends me the link (I am not even active on social media). It took me a few moments to get the spirit of the post; it was unconceivable to me how anyone would engage in such an unprofessional, trivializing, sexist attack, to say the least.</i></p>	<p><i>Something is obviously troubling me. Anyone can see it on my face, even though I cannot say anything. "What's wrong?" I just smile, I don't want to cause worry. I wouldn't even know what to say or how to name the incident yet. I'm not sure how to feel, what to think. But something is clearly wrong. My co-author has just sent me the links to several offensive posts regarding our work. I don't even know the person—or rather, troll—who launched the initial post triggering a series of incremental replies and mockeries from his "followers." But he seems to want to take a rather strong position over me. I just stand there, paralyzed, mute. For a moment, I have been silenced. Hushed, like in those nightmares, where I want to scream but no sound comes out.</i></p>
<p><i>When I realized the tone, I didn't know what/how to feel or respond; how to "defend" myself. It was one of these speechless moments, so prevalent in women's experiences; I remembered Tauchert (2002). Feelings tumbling over each other; sadness, anger, shame, pride, fear, ignorance, despair. And a knot in the stomach. Even though the attack was not naming me or my co-author specifically, it was naming and shaming our work, explicitly. I also wondered "why me/us"? Do we deserve this? No one does. And why this article, which talks about love? Who can be harmed by love? This is the feeling where you start questioning yourself, self-doubting, questioning also the space your body occupies in the academic, social and political context. But, this is the insidious labor of patriarchy: normalizing sexism to silence our bodies; I remembered Ahmed (2016). What if my colleagues think that my research is bullshit, as some of the sexist comments suggested!</i></p>	<p><i>What did this guy want from us? And why not say it to our faces?</i></p> <p><i>What is happening in social media is so perverse and goes so fast. I can't even keep up with all the shit that is being posted to judge me, to cast me out, to unwelcome me, to cut me down.</i></p> <p><i>I can't help but want to retreat to a faraway place in the deepest corners of my mind. There I am at peace. There I am. I can be. No judgments.</i></p>
<p><i>During the chat, I can see in my colleague's eyes a mix of shame and support. Is it that I don't know her well enough to decode the meanings or that there is nothing to decode, really? She feels for me but doesn't know how; I feel for her but don't know how either... we are both placed in a position we haven't chosen, by "superior," "legitimate" forces. We are women; maybe this explains it. So much labor on our shoulders. And once again, this feeling of insufficiency. I have a look at the mirror; the mirror looks back at me. I force myself to cry: to release. But, I cannot. Just empty. I hide.</i></p>	<p><i>Finally, a sound comes out. A nervous laugh. As if I cannot even believe this is actually happening; it seems so ridiculous and unprofessional. Why would anyone want to waste precious energy in ridiculing others' work? I laugh again, by myself. No one was there to witness my laugh, or partake in it. Somewhat liberating, but unsatisfactory.</i></p> <p><i>In my head resounds: "Calladita te ves mas bonita"¹. I've been told this so many times when growing up, echoing again, in my mind, as I read the long list of posts and replies, with some engaging in even deeper sexist comments, mocking and treating my work as worthless.</i></p> <p><i>As a woman, am I unspeakable?</i></p> <p><i>Am I to remain unspoken?</i></p> <p><i>Every bone in my body is fighting this.</i></p> <p><i>Yet, I cannot say anything.</i></p>

Indeed, for some time, we remained silenced; both by outer forces and by our need to make sense until we could speak again. When power comes into play, both processes of silencing and unsilencing acquire a critical dimension. Silence can then be seen, and most importantly experienced, as an unethical act affecting one's ability to speak (e.g., being sentenced to silence, or refusing to speak even under torture; Zembylas, 2005), or an emancipatory force and a condition for accessing spiritual experiences that enable reconnection with one's inner world (Butler, 2005; Karayiannis, 2021).

Or both. As in our case.

2.1 | Silence as isolation and denial of our subjectivities

We initially experienced silence as an oppressor that muted of our voices. The cyberattacks came from members of the international business academic community, but never named us personally nor addressed the critiques to us directly, as if we did not deserve to be addressed. By not naming us they showed, in our reading, an intention to erase our presence and to silence us within the academic space, while accusing us of “polluting” it. They chose to attack our work without involving us, denying us a right to even participate in this discussion and denying our subjectivities as legitimate interlocutors of an academic dialog, thus acting as self-proclaimed gate-keepers who like to “pontificate from a position of power,” as a reviewer justly put it. And they did so in the public stage of social media instead of in an academic debate, despite others' prompts.² It was a way of pre-silencing our possible responses to the attack, which placed us in a maze of shame, anger, self-doubt, and alienation among other complex affective processes.

Organizational accounts discuss various explicit and implicit ways in which minorities and bodies marked by intersectional differences become marginalized and silenced in organizations (Lescoat, 2021; Miller, 2021; Priola et al., 2014); isolated in disconnected otherness by normative discourses (Calás & Smircich, 2020). Abdellatif et al. (2021) offer an embodied alter-ethnographic account, whereby by intermingling the authors' experiences as single parents, immigrants in foreign countries, and/or members of the LGBT + community, they engage in a collective effort to unmute how their embodied subjectivities are subjected to silencing attacks and “symbolic annihilation” (Tuchman, 1979) by patriarchal norms and dominant media discourses, amid the pandemic. In a courageous unsilencing writing exercise, O'Shea (2021) draws on her experience of gender affirmation surgery to challenge transgender individuals' conditions of (in)existence under normative structures, unveiling the habitually untalked about somatic and affective aspects of this process. We have also personally faced cases of students who have undergone similar changes, but these remained invisible and unrecognized in class lists, email accounts, and other organizational procedures. These examples reveal the subtle ways in which difference and otherness become invisible and silenced in the everyday. They also stress how the nuclear family model (Pereira, 2021) and dominant power structures rooted in assumptions of hetero and cis-normativity (Vitry, 2020) render queer individuals' experiences silenced both socially and epistemically (Dorion, 2021; Rumens, 2017). Critical organizational accounts also discuss various forms of explicit and implicit marginalization that racialized minorities face at the workplace, including academia (Abdellatif, 2021; Bourabain, 2021; e.g., visible in the pay gap, see Tao, 2018), while others study experiences of workplace disability to render visible the various forms of under-representation, exclusion and marginalization that disabled and “ugly” bodies face under assumptions of the fully abled body as the socially acceptable norm (Damianidou & Georgiadou, 2021; Jammaers, 2021).

In relation to sexism, in particular, feminist thinkers (Ahmed, 2016; Lorde, 2017), including colleagues in organization studies, expose the silence cultures surrounding instances of sexism and misogyny across different organizational contexts from the public and private sectors (Ging & Siapera, 2018; Miller, 2021) to the military (Alvinius & Holmberg, 2019). They discuss affective solidarity structures, like the #metoo movement, which emerged in response to these (Vachhani & Pullen, 2019). Similarly, colleagues study various instances of sexist attacks happening in the academic workplace (Abdellatif, 2021; Bourabain, 2021; Cassidy et al., 2017; Einarsen et al., 2021; van Amsterdam, 2020), extending calls to speak up (Aumais et al., 2018; Lloro-Bidart, 2018; Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2023).

Literature illuminates how sexist cultures enhance targets' experiences of shame, making them doubt whether they hold "serious flaws" that they should hide, leading them to "see themselves as they are seen" (Bartky, 1990) and to feel shame (Angel, 2021, see also Vaughn et al., 2020). Shaming, as a mechanism of sexist oppression, intends to police the way women or other "non-conforming" individuals behave, in society and academia, rendering them unspeakable and invisible (van Amsterdam, 2020), and leading them to perceive themselves as the other's disgraced object (Mitchell, 2020). In this process, targets of sexism are objectified and abjectified as impure (Kristeva, 1989; Lloro-Bidart, 2018; Mandalaki and Pérezts, 2023), not only feeling ashamed for what has happened but also ashamed to disclose their experiences of violence and seek others' support.

(How) could we defend ourselves, if we were denied the subjectivity to do so?

In this context, we were indeed muted. Yet, this initial silence—imposed and violent—transubstantiated into something different, supported by communal relationality, showing us two of its other faces; this time productive ones.

2.2 | Silence as introspection and relationality

As we were silenced by the attack, we also actively sought silence for ourselves, experiencing silence as a sort of temporal refuge. This was an effort to make embodied sense of the event individually but also in consideration of each other, as we were not sure whether saying something would harm more than help, when the event initially occurred. Silencing, in our individual ways, provided space for us to think, reflect, feel the pain, and to let the other do the same, before we could come together to verbalize our feelings and talk about them. This functioned as a form of "sensory retreat; a movement away from other bodies and a more individualized method of emotional energy replenishment" whereby we experienced "silence as energy" (McCarthy & Glozer, 2022, p. 12). This enabled us to make sense of how we were affectively and corporeally embedded within our broader social, political, and institutional contexts. In this "silence with our self" (Karayiannis, 2021, p. 47), we paid attention to our bodies, freed them from shame, and made them visible to ourselves before being able to write them out to make them visible to others through this account.

As Butler (2005) reminds us, it is in these moments of silence and interruption, which cannot be verbalized or transcribed through language, where the inner truths of the self can find space to emerge. The philosopher Levinas (1985) also discusses some of silence's emancipatory elements viewing silence as necessary for expressing things, which cannot be articulated in clear epistemological terms. In this reading, silence enables accessing the "not yet known" and encountering the "other differently" through embodied openness founded on the recognition of otherness and multiplicity. Zembylas (2005, p. 154) uses this reading to discuss silence as a way to "embody a sensibility toward the Other," which acknowledges the subject's irreducibility. Silence, in this regard, can be seen as an ethical attitude of relating (Zembylas & Michaelides, 2004), opening access to knowing in different ways (Bigo, 2018), contrary to speech, which often fails to capture the "inexpressible and instead diminishes the meaning of an event" (Zembylas, 2005, p. 154).

In such silence, we remained for a while. With respect and consideration of the irreducible otherness of each of us that this sexist cyberbullying attack had sought to "cleanse."

It was not until a week (that felt like an eternity!) went by that we started exchanging with each other and verbalizing relationally our experience, first on the phone and then in writing. But our steps were initially hesitant. It seemed that we had almost forgotten *how* to write and surely did not know *what* to write. We are not ashamed of admitting this now that we have regained our voices. Exposing our vulnerabilities is not akin to an admission of guilt or disempowerment; it is a step toward accepting them to restore strength (Helin, 2019) and re-write them to change the script of sexism (Savigny, 2017). This process was meaningfully enhanced by the support we received from the feminist community, reminding us of how through relationality and affective solidarity (Hemmings, 2012), manifested in our broader political endeavors and our shared writings, we can join forces to resist sexist oppression (Abdellatif et al., 2021; Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2023; McCarthy & Glozer, 2022; Vachhani & Pullen, 2019) and enable new worlds.

2.3 | Silence for collective voice to make a difference

What is interesting is that while we were remaining silent navigating through isolation and inaction, a space of supportive generosity and empathy was created by others' words, which might have not emerged in the same way, had we "talked" or responded immediately. The day following the attack, it was already flagged by some members of the academic community, who either responded directly to the sexist comments, or reported it to the social media networks, and/or invited the feminist and critical academic online communities to action.

We were deeply moved by how the supportive comments "brought us back" together again by naming us, in so doing performing our togetherness in writing. Colleagues' comments such as: "dear Emmanouela and Mar, I'm horrified by these posts" asserted our existence and validated that we have a voice with each iteration of our names. Colleagues also respected our need for silence and, even unknowingly, made some space for us to start healing, while not letting the issue go unnoticed in the meantime. In so doing, they manifested a feminist affective solidarity (Hemmings, 2012; Vachhani & Pullen, 2019), which is necessary for standing up against patriarchal structures of sexism in academia (Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2023; Lloro-Bidart, 2018).

Our silence of the previous days and the swiftness of the feminist community's supportive reaction made us realize the importance of our collective voices. Silence is thus not only the absence of sound or noise. It also has a positive meaning and is often necessary for voice to make a difference; like in musical theory, whereby a melody is defined as a rhythmic combination of notes and silences or "rests" (Lissa, 1964). Like such a rhythmic combination, our parallel reflections shifted from separate parallel accounts (materialized in the table above) into an autoethnographic dialogue, presented below in *italics*, whereby words brought us together again. Our sounds conflated and extended each other echoing the chorus of the immense number of messages of support we both received. Such collective strength gave us back our voices and made them louder (Painter-Morland, 2011) to join a broader social and political effort that goes beyond our personal experience. We now speak together and dialogically, in a language written *differently* (e.g., Beavan et al., 2021; Einola et al., 2020; Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2022; Pullen, 2018), empowered by our community, whose support is reflected in our writing as well as by related debates to which we seek to contribute (Bourabain, 2021; Fotaki & Harding, 2013; van Amsterdam, 2020), to call for unsilencing sexism-related silence in the academy (Aumais et al., 2018; Savigny, 2017).

Lorde (2017) reminds us that we need to verbalize our silence into our different languages and these into energy for action, if we are to meaningfully counter social and epistemic sexism. It is a question of not letting the state-of-the-world remain as it is, but to speak a different one into existence. In the next section, we narrate this dialogical unsilencing process, and discuss its relational underpinnings; not only between the two of us, as targets of this attack and authors of this piece, but also within the broader feminist community whose support made us feel cared for. In so doing, we stress the emancipating potential of relationality and collective action in grounding activist writing within our broader activist endeavors for mobilizing change. As discussed next, these extend beyond words.

3 | UNSILENCING

Staying silent is like betraying yourself (...) you are never really a whole person if you remain silent, because there's always that one little piece inside you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder and hotter and hotter, and if you don't speak it out one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth from inside. (Lorde, 2017, p. 3).



FIGURE 1 During a protest in Santiago de Chile, November 22, 2018 (E. Félix) Published in the newspaper El País (https://elpais.com/elpais/2018/11/22/album/1542891360_210540.html?id_externo_rsoc=TW_CC#foto_gal_5, accessed April 20, 2021).

I remember the feminist protesters who parade the streets with a red hand painted over their mouths, instead of lipstick, to protest against how women become silenced in countries where femicide and gender violence go unpunished (FIGURE 1). It seems like a tragic echo of the red handprints and hand stencils of our ancestors, painted (in their majority, it seems by women, Snow, 2013) on cave walls. But it is also a sign of empowerment; of reconquering silence.

Since we are girls, we are expected to be beautiful, not smart; we exist to please others, not to stand up for our ideas. And, when we say something that disturbs, we are either muted or ignored. How naïve I was, thinking that, at least in academia, we could find a place to embrace some plurality of knowledge. Now the bullets are literally marked on m-y-our naked skin.

I remember all the work and the deep satisfaction when our piece was finally published, after a particularly exciting but also exhausting revision process. The reviewers had been so supportive! It was the first time that in an academic paper, I had felt that it was really 'me' talking; that my words were actually mine, and not what (even well-intentioned) editors and reviewers wanted me to say. This must be defended.

For once, it felt as if our bodies and our words were not just 'blind', eyeless, earless, or masked. They were allowed to speak, be heard, and responded to. What is happening here is not just a personal issue. I do not think these people even know us. They also attacked other related pieces in the same and other journals. It is about 'what' we do and 'how' we do it. It is an attack against the whole community of feminist and critical scholars that destabilize established norms to enable the change that we want to see in the academy. Maybe it is easier to attack difference than enduring the labor of trying to understand it or conversing with it.

Some have a real problem with anything non-measurable, critical, or 'leaky'. Finding words like 'feminism' and 'autoethnography' immediately seems to trigger visceral reactions of incomprehension, leading some to unleash their attacks. For these, among the available methodologies, qual will always be worse than quant, and among the qual, the worst you can do is autoethnography.

And this is often so 'politically correctly' phrased, as if sexism never happened, such that we are seen as perverse to protest against what 'never happened'. There are people really committed to not acknowledging such c/overt violence thus further entrenching them deep down institutional 'throats'. And to do so, they keep their faces (and statements) masked addressing "masked critics" and thus immune to be easily perceived as sexist language. Such a strange pattern that sexism manifests; rendering visible what it wishes could become invisible. But maybe, it is only through distant vision, as we learn in normative science, that sexism operates deactivating the other senses, muting all the sensuous experiences of the body and its affects; too afraid to surrender to these mesmerizing powers. Isn't this how patriarchy works? The words of Ahmed and Lorde cannot escape my mind.

Everything in those sexist comments points to a 'science' which is completely numbed to be 'rigorous'. We are told to hush our bodies, and keep them only as a source of lust and o/a-bjection outside of science. But I am so sick of being gazed upon and judged, instead of being listened to. Why is it that both senses seem incompatible when it comes to women? In a similar but reverse way to the Guerrilla Girls in 1985 (see FIGURE 2), I wonder why do women have to be disembodied, not so much to enter but to succeed in Academia³?

Such forms of social and epistemic violence make it so complex to speak up, filling us with fear. But whenever I hesitate out of fear, I remember a good friend's words: "When you don't know where to go, go to your fears". I do not see another way to go. I am convinced we need to be coming up against these sexist (cyber) walls raised to block our bodies (Ahmed, 2016).



FIGURE 2 Guerrilla Girls, 1989: «the poster that changed it all»: Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into the Met. Museum?, retrieved from <https://www.guerrillagirls.com/projects>.

I realize I have written 'I cannot' seven times already in my column in the table above with an additional five verbs conjugated in the negative form. It is clear that I felt disempowered; the negative was all over me. But I remind myself that it is also from the negative that strength often emerges, that the senses can scream their way back; that numbness can be fought (Pérezts, 2022).

When we break the silence, we break rules and unite. I believe it is political to stop and listen to the sound of silence. Moreover, it is necessary to assume silence as an ongoing verb, triggered by systematic performances, in movements on stage by those who silence us (...) to emphasize that our voices have been circulating for generations (...), we have always spoken, the hegemonic power relations insist on stifling contrary discourse by burying it. (Silva, 2021, p. 5).

I read these words and I know I am not alone. I see women's parades on the streets and I know I am not alone. You are not alone. We are together and empowered within our community. So many others have felt this before, for so many different reasons in so many different places under oppressive patriarchal systems that disqualify intersectional bodies. Luckily, they spoke up! Yes, it is political to break our silence. As academics, we can also use our writing to do so. But to do so creatively, I agree with Silva: we first need to listen to its sounds, to look at its different faces; to understand what it says, how it gazes at us; to try to de-code its meanings, which we usually cover with artificial adornments, buzz, and noise.

But, can my silence turn productive? I wonder. Our silence can be that of connecting (e.g., in dancing). It can be respectful, reflexive, meditative, and poetic. It can unleash other forms of bodily expressions, of eye contact. The way to break it is not by engaging in a sterile succession of counter-Tweets that will not even be heard. But just "keep writing" as most of the supportive comments suggested, and acting accordingly in the everyday, with the help and inspiration of others who have walked this path before and who carry us through the storm.

In silence, words flow out of my fingers to speak of what I dare not to open my mouth to utter. I need silence to reunite with my senses, to bring back my body in one piece after it has been scattered around by expressions of normalized violence that go unnoticed. I need silence to listen to my inner voices and to those of the others that I read.

In this silence we are in good company; we reconnect; we relate. And then, we write to give voice to the darkest and the deepest of our souls (Cixous, 1993) that remain covered with masks. This silence is fecund; it is brightness in the dark; it is light and heavy; it is a relational experience to be lived not a theory to be defined. This silence enables us to unsilence collectively. And this unsilencing screams, refusing to be abjectified as dirty or impure (Kristeva, 1989); as 'dangerous identity politics' contaminating the normative masculine order of the academic world (Lloro-Bidart, 2018; Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2023). We hope this will find echoes elsewhere.

The above dialogical reflections, shared in writing after the attack, made us realize that unsilencing is a relational process, which requires mutual exchanges of support within a community. These enabled us to make collective sense

of both the oppressive and emancipating faces of the silence we experienced as targets of this attack. Presenting our journey toward unsilencing dialogically (as materialized above in *italics*), like two dance partners in a relational process of co-subjective development (Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2022) is once again a political statement. This denotes that it is not just about *what* we say but also about *how* we say it (Mandalaki, 2021a, 2021b). Unsilencing around issues of sexism in academia, we suggest, requires a different language to be portrayed: a relational language written *differently*. It is not just about a theory to be developed, but about a collective process to be endeavored and experienced in the way we relate to each other, in life and in words.

Theory is important. But as Prichard and Benschop (2018, p. 98) remind us: "it is a long way to a better world through theory alone." Unsilencing around academic sexism is not just about making a claim to contribute to related abstract theorizing around the different faces and phases of silence. It is crucially about paving the way to a better world, where we will be able to reclaim our activism in our writing (Savigny, 2017) and, through this, our ability to speak of and from our different positionalities in the knowledge we create (Beavan et al., 2021; Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2023). It is an understanding of silence in both its destructive and constructive aspects, making it actively sought as a potentiating, emancipatory, and generative space but also acknowledging its demeaning, belittling, and devastating aspects when it is imposed (Ahonen et al., 2020). It is a recognition that silence can be chaotic, talkative, and even loud, enabling us to draw strength to do things differently (Silva, 2021).

Through such relational, activist, and dialogical processes of writing, amid our complex journeys of silencing and unsilencing, we suggest, that we can convert the shaming that sexism subjects us to into an empowering and emancipating force for change. In this embodied journey of relating, sharing, feeling, reflecting, and co-writing, for/with/through one another and the feminist community that supported us, we have thus used these words as our tools (Ahmed, 2016) to make sense of the depths of sexism-related silence in its different dimensions.

We would like to clarify that even though we support academic writing as an activist practice in its own right (e.g., Abdellatif et al., 2021; Beavan et al., 2021; Contu, 2020; Pérezts, *forthcoming*; Vachhani, 2019), we do not here present writing as the only form of academic activism that can be mobilized to combat sexism and/or other forms of oppression. As academics seeking intellectual stimulation, it is the first direction we probably turn to. But we recognize, that it is far from being the only one.

Even prior to this sexist attack, we were alert to what was happening in our institutions and communities in relation to sexism. To the best of our abilities, we actively participate in feminist communities created to denounce sexism and other forms of violence. For instance, we took part in flagging online similar attacks on other colleagues' papers, a few months later. We also responded favorably to several invitations to share our experience in relation to this attack, in international academic settings (conferences, PhD workshops, podcasts, or seminars), aware that contributing to raising awareness by speaking (about) these issues is also a double-edged sword for those engaging in unsilencing. Further, as other colleagues, we also maintain active reviewer and editorial roles on such topics in different academic outlets. Within our institutions, our approach has been longstanding by pursuing research agendas, organizing seminars, and academic debates invested in combatting various forms of discrimination and oppression, including sexism. More specifically, we both managed to schedule time within the following term's faculty meetings in our respective institutions to talk about the issue and discuss ways forward. The number of colleagues (professors but also administrative staff and PhD students, some of whom we had never particularly worked with, including numerous male colleagues) that have since then contacted us to share "me too" stories is baffling. This reveals the culture of sexism-related silence that needs to be broken and the need to pursue activist agendas beyond writing in order to so.

In addition to such activities, our activism crucially manifests in our daily ways of behaving, being, and relating with our colleagues and students in the corridors and in the classroom, whereby we try to raise the difficult questions and discussions that challenge normative practices. In so doing, we hope to generate some space for marginalized others to speak up and reclaim their embodied differences as sites of knowledge.

We next draw implications for unsilencing sexist events at the individual, community, and institutional levels through specific reference to the French GEC.

4 | IMPLICATIONS OF UN/SILENCING PROCESSES AROUND BUSINESS SCHOOL SEXISM

In the above sections, we have discussed some of the different faces and phases of silence, silencing, and unsilencing by reflecting on our individual and collective journeys through sexism. In our narrative, silence appears as both a regenerative, ethical space that provides access to sense-making possibilities of epistemological interest (Zembylas & Michaelides, 2004) but also as a violent force intended to diminish others' voices (Zembylas, 2005). How silence is experienced depends on whether it is actively sought by the self as a space where force can be restored (Butler, 2005; Karayiannis, 2021) or imposed by hierarchical oppressive powers, like those perpetuating sexism in the academy (Ahonen et al., 2020). This reflexive effort on our part, allowed us to turn our attention toward ourselves to understand how we might also participate in silencing the sexist cultures that affect us (in)directly and what we can try to do to creatively overturn this pattern in our academic communities and institutions.

As mentioned above, we are both employed in private business schools, GEC; an elite ecosystem (Dejours, 2019) within French higher education (Harker et al., 2016) with a privileged reputation (Bourdieu, 1989). According to Monique de Saint Martin (2008), and Bourdieu and Saint Martin (1987), the gendered segregation within the GEC was the “elephant in the room,” in the late 1960's. Sex was so discriminatory at the time⁴ that it was excluded, as a variable, until much later in sociological studies of the French educational system (cf. Duru-Bellat, 1994). Retrospectively, de Saint Martin wonders: “could we nevertheless have afforded to neglect [gender]? (...) We undoubtedly should have interrogated the deeper meaning of the fact that the selection, production and reproduction of the educational elite was almost exclusively masculine” (Saint Martin, 2008, pp. 96–97, our translation).

Today, the androcentrism of the GEC, and probably of most business schools internationally (Hardy, 2018), remains visible not so much in student demographics (around 50% is feminine), but in the (masculine and heteronormative) “culture of excellence” that persists therein. For the students, partying, socialization, hazing, and “integration” mechanisms (Masse, 2002; Subramanian & Suquet, 2016) have a pronounced sexual and sexist character to which business schools usually turn a blind eye or minimize (Dejours, 2019), thereby perpetuating it. In fact, fighting sexism within the GEC is a rather recent endeavor. It only started around 2015–2020 (Mielly & Joannides de Lautour, 2020) with, for example, the creation in 2017 of a feminist, anti-sexist collective and of a speak-up platform in 2020, in Mar Pérezts' business school, as well as a *HeforShe* antenna and more recently a *Wellness Centre* dedicated to addressing issues of well-being and harassment, in Emmanouela Mandalaki's.

Given that addressing such issues institutionally generally still remains in the background, our reaction following this attack was initially a cautious one within our institutions. We were somehow unsure as to whether there could be backlash, if and how to ask for support (several colleagues knew about this event, yet it was not flagged at the institutional level). This made the incident remain in the ambiguous realm of what is un/known in the hallways but not openly discussed for some time. It's telling how even in institutions that actively support our work, we might often not voice such important matters immediately. In our case, after our academic response appeared in print (Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2023), we felt more empowered to do so. Mar decided to alert the dean and make a formal deposition to the “speak-up” platform of the school (despite open to all, this platform is mainly targeted at students, so she did not initially think of using it for her case, as a faculty member). Following this, numerous meetings took place with various parties at varying levels of hierarchy, seeking to understand how this event went unnoticed and unflagged. Emmanouela discussed the issue openly with her colleagues in a department meeting and was touched by the support she received and the collective recognition of the need to speak up about such issues in order to address them at an institutional level. Although no concrete measures are yet visible since all this is recent history, the support we have received is reassuring. Disclosing our experience has brought the need to tackle sexist events significantly on the agenda (also for faculty and staff beyond students), hopefully fueling a broader understanding of the phenomenon and its institutional implications.

It is worth mentioning that student associations promoting LGBT + rights predate those fighting sexism by over a decade, what might reveal how such matters have long been off the business school agenda, both in France and

elsewhere (Mielly & Joannides de Lautour, 2020). These issues are instead increasingly talked about in local media, which “today show the vastness of a phenomenon unknown to the general public but perfectly interiorized by those who attend these establishments” (Mielly & Joannides de Lautour, 2020, p. 5). In 2020, a collective of GEC alumni published in a major leftist French newspaper, *Libération*, a letter speaking up against the sexism, racism, and homophobia they endured as students (Un collectif, 2020), asking GECs to act against this perceived institutional betrayal and violation of trust. While important, such steps usually seek to address instances of sexism targeting students, often remaining unaware, ignoring, or minimizing how sexism can also affect faculty members and their research (Cassidy et al., 2017). Legal research has shown how it is not the law but the prevailing culture that shapes the norms against which instances of sexism are evaluated or dismissed (Weiner et al., 2010). But if the culture of academic sexism is to be effectively fought, we cannot afford to neglect the dynamics occurring among faculty members, both online and offline, as part of the institutional dimension of the problem (Smith & Freyd, 2014).

Since speaking up around faculty-directed sexism is far from being a generally institutionalized or even encouraged practice in the academy, targets of such sexist behavior often remain silent fearing the consequences of unsilencing. Despite any practical consequences in relation to career progression (Ahmed, 2016; Lescoat, 2021), unsilencing is also often inhibited by how sexism destabilizes self-perceptions and one's relation to their context, through processes of shaming and fear (Angel, 2021), as discussed above. What might further discourage targets to speak up, is that such public disclosures are often perceived as narcissist, or outwearing as “just another account” of self-pity. As Love (2001) proposes, this might stem from the fact that as witnesses or readers of experiences of sexist violence, we encounter ourselves in others' testimonies of shame. This makes us feel ashamed not only for the victims but also for ourselves, and thus uncomfortable, as we like to think of ourselves as “post-wounded.”

Acknowledging such patterns, in ourselves and others, that might block us from opening our ears to listen to others' pain, exchange support, and relationally act against silencing it, we suggest, is important. For, although we cannot change the very events that silence us, we join Osborne-Crowley (2019, p. 137) in arguing that what we “can change is the size of silence. The weight of it. The way it pulls us under” by speaking out and embracing others' testimonies of violence. It is our responsibility to speak up (against/about) sexism in our professional environments, and to join the collective responses that denounce it, to disrupt sexism's “belief in the inherent superiority of one sex over the other and thereby the right to dominance” (Lorde, 2017, p. 96). Regardless of how uncomfortable this can be for the writer, the reader or the by-stander witnessing such pain, including our academic institutions, we are convinced that to combat sexism, we should join forces to resist the silence it imposes on us. Indeed, Mar's voice was trembling when addressing the faculty in the amphitheater and on zoom but the urge to unsilence was inescapable. Despite knowing some colleagues would remain dismissive and oblivious to the issue, she has since then constituted a taskforce of volunteers seeking to advance ways to deal with these matters internally with support from the Dean. She felt deeply empowered and supported when colleagues walked up to her following what was far from being the most confident and eloquent speech in her career and said:

I've never felt more proud to belong to this school, thank you.

Too often, sexism is considered an individual issue, while neglecting systemic considerations. Yet, it is mainly institutions that by their action or inaction can worsen the impact of sexism (by limiting themselves to reacting ex-post (if at all) instead of preventing) or instead “become sources of justice, support and healing” (Smith & Freyd, 2014, p. 576). Fighting sexism requires courage, but also creativity in the *doing together*, since the master's tools cannot be used to dismantle the master's house (Lorde, 2017). We need to find our own tools, in our different levels. As writers of organizations, we can use our words in our embodied accounts, as primary tools (Ahmed, 2016) to develop our own different voices that leak, that breathe, that fear, and dare to expose it (e.g., Pullen, 2018; Silva, 2021; van Amsterdam, 2020)—even if this is exactly what patriarchy attacks. This is why we chose, in this text, to not only write (about) our personal experience of sexism but also to write about it *differently*, again; in ways that account for the spatial, embodied, and relational dynamics of our shared experience (Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2022). It is through

such an understanding of our embodied subjectivities as “work in progress,” that we become aware of what our experiences of relating, but also respecting our need to be alone for a while, make us capable of and how they enable us to develop agency to regain our collective voices (Painter-Morland, 2011). By speaking out our embodied affects and responding to each other, echoing the support of our community, we know that we have been heard. We know that we have a voice, which does not just mirror what the others want to hear—which is what patriarchy sustains as a pattern (Painter-Morland, 2011)—but rather enables multiplicity to emerge (Einola et al., 2020). In this inter-corporeal relational process of writing, speaking up, and interacting, which has been so meaningfully enhanced by the expressions of support we received and includes them, we seek to reclaim a space where our bodies can breathe again (Silva, 2021). This is a feminist writing space that challenges how patriarchal thinking underestimates different bodies' potential for knowing (Abdellatif et al., 2021). It calls for rethinking both *what* we think/write and *how* we do so, standing courageously against efforts to “write us out” (Mandalaki, 2021b; Beavan et al., 2021; Savigny, 2017).

Besides individual and communal efforts, it is also crucial, we argue, that academic leaders in top levels of decision-making put in place institutional processes intended not only to combat but also to prevent sexism from happening, as well as measures encouraging victims of sexist behavior to speak up. In our case, the support we received from colleagues and from feminist and critical scholars' collectives was crucial. Yet, in the midst of the huge wave of social and epistemic expressions of sexism, additional organized efforts are needed to fight it. We invite our academic communities, organizations, and institutions to pay attention not only to what happens within the material walls of our schools but also to the cyberwalls where academics also interact (on platforms where we are increasingly encouraged to have a digital presence, such as LinkedIn or Twitter), and where forms of sexism, trolling, and cyberbullying attacking different knowledge are increasingly taking place (Cassidy et al., 2017; Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2023). This is part of a call to reframe our ways of socializing, researching, writing, and interacting around notions of care, support, and affective solidarity for, about, and with each other, to together find meaningful ways to fight the silence culture around academic sexism (Vachhani & Pullen, 2019). This is about actively engaging in rescripting and reframing how we navigate our lives as materially and affectively engaged embodied subjects within our institutions; a collective effort to listen to others' stories and to replenish our emotional energies through (mis)alignment with their embodied experiences (McCarthy & Glozer, 2022). It is such affective, emotional attachments with others at work that fuel our ability to work with our institutions to transform our working environments for the better. In extending this call, we also broadly contribute to literature studying forms of emotional embeddedness within institutional life (Fotaki and Pullen, 2019; McCarthy & Glozer, 2022).

It is only by disrupting how sexism silences us that we can transubstantiate silence into a force enabling better academic futures and worlds. This process is grounded on mutual support, in collective, organizational, and institutional levels. In this way, we might develop “affective pathways to freedom as an important form of emancipatory politics in the context of injurious, discriminatory bodily norms” to unshame our shame through caring interactions (Pouthier & Sondak, 2019, p. 1). This is surely a long process, but when we go together, we know we can make it. And we are convinced that this is worth the struggle and the resources invested in such a collective endeavor to change our wor(l)ds.

5 | FINAL SOUNDS...

We are aware that some of what we expose here might not make sense to the reader or appear as just “another account of sexist violence.” Yet, this is, we suggest, the meaningful part of knowledge creation and writing itself; letting oneself surrender into untrodden territories (Ingold, 2015), whereby not only sameness but also and most importantly otherness can be found (Cixous, 1993). The latter is unfortunately not valued enough as a knowledge objective within masculine academic structures that repress difference into knowable sameness (Kaasila-Pakanen, 2021). No

matter how similar or different our experiences of sexism are, we suggest that we should not stop repeating them and making them public. It is through such repetition that we can reclaim the scene of feminist construction to reposition our different bodies in the spaces we inhabit (Ahmed, 2016), inviting others to be part of a broader social cause we all share against the tyrannies of silence (Lorde, 2017, p. 2). As one colleague wrote to us in support:

I am absolutely outraged by [the attack]. There is still so much of this poisonous shit around, the only way to fight it is to speak up and be proudly irreverent.

To all social and epistemic forces that silence us and to any other that refuses to unsilence academic sexism, we choose to reply poetically, echoing the words of Osborne-Crowley (2019): "to be invisible [and inaudible] is to give up the only tangible thing I have to offer: this cautionary tale.":

I write to speak.

*For when I (try to) speak,
my words are too little to reach your highness
such that I cannot make myself intelligible.*

I write to make noise.

*For when I (try to) make noise,
distorted echoes clash on the walls of your decibels
and fall down shattered.*

I write to stand.

*For when I (try to) stand,
my body is too thin, too small or fragile,
as you like to call it,
and gets lost in your shadow.*

I write to feel.

*For when I (try to) feel,
I become unrecognizable to your (de)coding.*

I write to belong.

*For when I (try to) belong,
I am always reminded of my unacceptable difference,
which makes me misfit to your norms.*

I write to relate.

*For when I (try to) relate,
I remain deeply alone;
neither solitude, nor loneliness;
'aloneness' over-exposed.*

I write to unhide.

*For when I (try to) unhide,
the veil is too tight,
suffocating me and I cannot escape.
So much trying, indeed.*

Always in parenthesis.

Going unregistered.

*I thus write to register myself
in the lines you never wanted to read.*

No matter their seemingly soundless existence,

*I warn you, they live and shout loud,
echoing words inappropriate,
which you never wanted me to expel.*

I write to leave reminiscent traces of my (in)existence.

I write to reclaim all what your speech renders of me an - other;

invisible, silenced, unheard, unnoticed, when I speak.

And, thus, I speak better in silence;

when I write.

If my words are never too loud to be heard,

my writing will always be the means

through which I will be making myself loud;

I'll use it to 'stand up on the table and shout' (Lorde, 2017, p. 11),

to dance and join the chorus of melodies that disturb

to write words that cry and laugh hysterically

where another kind of "silence 'has to be' respected" (Ahonen et al., 2020; Fotaki & Harding, 2013, p. 2)

to reclaim all what you always labeled as irreverence.

I am not going to stop speaking when I write.

For, I write to breathe (Silva, 2021).

I write to exist.

I write to relate and survive;

I write to turn my silence

into a creative energy to unsilence my body.

Unsilencing silence through this silent act of writing is political.

It has an emancipatory and relational potential.

It just takes the effort to open y-our pores to listen ...

(Paris, 17/04/2021)

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Literally: "You look prettier when you keep quiet," a common rhymed expression addressed to girls and women when they speak up in my home country, Mexico.
- 2 Other academics, while not necessarily "defending" our work, urged the attackers to engage in a proper academic debate if they disagreed with our paper, instead of resorting to gratuitous comments on social media.
- 3 According to the AACSB (2021) Business School Data Guide (p. 32), the gender ratios by full-time faculty rank are telling: while women constitute 39.2% of assistant professors, this drops to 34.4% for associate professors, and to 23.5% of full professors ranks. Recently, Davies et al. (2020) have shown that for instance only 25% of impact cases for business and management studies in the UK's REF (Research Excellence Framework) in 2014 had a woman as a lead author. Vaughn et al.'s (2020) study shows that even today there is an enduring "impostor syndrome" and related feelings of self-doubt, incompetence and lack of belonging, while Tao (2018) unsurprisingly confirms that the gender pay gap coupled with other intersectional, markers of difference is still prevalent.
- 4 Until the late 1960s, women were excluded from most GEC, and when admitted, were often physically segregated, spatially and temporally (cf. Saint Martin, 2008, p. 96).

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