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

From the cocoon to *la chape de plomb*: The birth and persistence of silence around sexism in academia

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Abstract

Drawing on narrative accounts of French business school staff and faculty about their experiences and observations of actions taken by different organizational actors in response to a trigger event, we theorize the intricate connections between organizational practices conducive to sexism and the persistence of silence around such practices. Specifically, empirical investigation demonstrates how managerial practices such as the allocation of organizational tasks and valorization of individual contributions prompt organizational members to assume a variety of stances toward gender issues. The enactment of these stances in various interactions provokes organizational counteraction in the form of sanctions, the establishment of a hermetic and formulaic communication regime, and public reinforcement of meritocratic narratives. This results in silence around organizational sexism manifesting as a collective and individual *inability* and *unwillingness* to react. This study contributes to a broader and rapidly developing literature on sexism in academic settings and the phenomenon of silencing in organizations by shedding light on the mechanisms of its persistence.

KEYWORDS
business school, France, sexism, silencing

1 | PROLOGUE

And in the naked light, I saw
Ten thousand people, maybe more
People talking without speaking
People hearing without listening
People writing songs that voices never share
And no one dared
Disturb the sound of silence
—Simon & Garfunkel, "The Sound of Silence"

It was a bright September afternoon that brought four colleagues together over lunch. The new academic year had just started, but the shared mood was a palimpsest of fatigue, puzzlement, and bewilderment. In addition to the emotional and physical strain of the pandemic year, the four colleagues had taken part in the school's strategic relaunch over the summer. Now that the grand vision of the school had finally been presented, work lunches held in remote corners of the cafeteria percolated with a sense of uneasiness and discomfort. Official announcements were often followed by secretive murmurs in corridors and at coffee tables, but this time was different. This time, the yawning gap between the rhetorical and the real felt intolerable and begged to be addressed.

"Why didn't anyone say anything?
Why did everyone clap?
Don't they see how unfair and yet predictable it is?"

Why indeed? The four colleagues looked at each other and decided to find out.

2 | INTRODUCTION

Despite the legal frameworks to prevent discrimination and promote equality in the workplace, women are still underrepresented in decision-making roles, primarily responsible for under-valued care work, paid less than men, and disproportionately subjected to violence (Acker, 1990; Castelao-Huerta, 2022; McLaughlin et al., 2017). In academia, one of the sectors directly involved in championing gender equality, the widespread gender pay gap and ostensible lack of women in leadership positions demonstrate the persistence of traditional gender politics and normative regimes (Husu & Koskinen, 2010; White & Bagilhole, 2013; see also Fotaki, 2013; Jones et al., 2019; Knights & Richards, 2003; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012). Gendered (institutional) structures enact systemic barriers to professional advancement that disproportionately disadvantage women (Bird, 2011; Van den Brink & Stobbe, 2009; Vershinina et al., 2020). Such structures are maintained because paid work in bureaucratic, market-driven organizations assumes the body and life of a man (Acker, 1990). In recent years, the marketization of academic work contexts, and particularly business schools, has led to several structural changes (Jones et al., 2019) including the commodification and transformation of the public image of higher education fostered by the growth of managerialism (Sappey, 2005), and changes in governance, structures, and processes marked by work intensification, surveillance, and control (Broadbent et al., 2013; Sang et al., 2015; Teelken & Deem, 2013).

Besides these shifts, the prevalence of sexist practices in academia and their destructive effects have also been extensively noted (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012; Husu, 2001; Mountz, 2016). Even in contexts that are considered leading in terms of gender equality (e.g., the educational sector in Finland), universities are still characterized by the everyday sexism of role divisions, symbols, and interactions. Furthermore, a recent study revealed that academic women in the UK felt unable to speak up about their experiences due to institutional structures that failed to acknowledge the harmful consequences of daily microaggressions (Savigny, 2019). Unsurprisingly, the intricacies of silence surrounding organizational sexism, make its study a complex and controversial task, further hindered by the reluctance of individuals to call out (i.e., speak and name) specific experiences or practices as sexist (Dick, 2013). Given the circumstances, it is impossible to give a comprehensive account of the continuing presence of sexism in academia without looking into *silence and silencing* as a persistent organizational reality that defines and perpetuates it.

By offering an account of silence around the problematics of sexism in a French business school, the investigation seeks to explain how silence comes into being and persists through interactions that simultaneously (re)produce certain practices conducive to sexism and hinder the possibility of confronting them collectively. It mobilizes the concept of sexism as a structural feature that entails an agentic component: "a set of attitudes that are institutionalized, a pattern that is established through use, such that it can be reproduced *almost* independently of individual's will" (Ahmed, 2015, p. 10, emphasis in original). These articulations between agency and structure are also shaped by the specificities of cultural and historical contexts from which masculinized institutions emerged and in which organizations remain embedded. Following prior work by Ahmed (2015, 2016a, 2016b) on silence/silencing, we argue that deciding not to name a practice, a behavior, or an action as sexist is the result of being silenced or voluntary retreat into inaction (Neal-Smith & Cockburn, 2009; Savigny, 2014, 2017). The article contributes to extant research effort on the phenomenon of organizational silence by investigating how silence comes into being, how it persists and consequently sustains sexist organizational practices by facilitating their reproduction.

The paper is structured in five parts: first a discussion of sexism in the contemporary business school, focusing on prior work on organizational silence around gender issues. Next, a literature overview of the discursive, social, material, as well as affective and relational dimensions of silence based on existing accounts of silencing. A contextualization of these insights follows through the introduction of our empirical setting, French *grande école*, tracing the historical role played by the *grandes écoles* in the "meritocratic legitimation of French inequality" (e.g., Zeldin, 2012, p. 192). After presenting the methodology of the study, we introduce the findings. The paper concludes with a discussion of the paper's contributions, including reflections on related debates on silencing in the context of combating sexism in organizations.

3 | THEORETICAL POSITIONING

3.1 | Sexism in academia

Gendered organization theorists, with notable contributions by Acker (1990) and Calas and Smircich (1996), have argued that gender is not an add-on but an integral part of organizational processes, structures, and beliefs "that distribute women and men into different tasks and positions" (Acker, 2006, p. 192). While a range of feminist critiques within organizational theory exists and reveals how gender shapes power, decision-making, representation, and accountability within the neo-liberal organization, these attempts to develop a more equitable perspective and experience are hindered by a theoretical approach that perceives organizations as gender-neutral, disembodied, and asexual (Cunliffe, 2022).

Experienced at both the individual and systemic levels, and normalized in various institutions, sexist attitudes, practices, and behaviors contribute to workplace inequality (Powell & Sang, 2015). Sexism, one of the core features of the gendered university, refers to "a system of oppression based on gender differences that involves cultural and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals" (Shorter-Gooden, 2004, p. 407). It is "an agile, dynamic, changing, and diverse set of malleable representations and practices of power" (Gill, 2011, p. 62)

that subordinate women, assigning value to some bodies and work over others (Mountz, 2016; Pullen, 2006; see also Vachhani & Pullen, 2019 on the "everyday sexism project").

Neal-Smith and Cockburn (2009, p. 36) explain that within organizations "sexism exposes women's differences but likewise makes no allowances for them, and, therefore, women face a double bind. Their colleagues are aware they are different but expect them nonetheless to adapt to the existing system." Similarly, for Savigny (2014), sexism has become a prominent cultural feature of ordinary organizational life: It "combines the notion that sexism is an everyday, *ordinary*, occurrence, combined with the cultural context which gives rise to it, and [with] its cumulative… effects …on women, [that] can disempower or marginalize their experiences and contributions" (Savigny, 2017, p. 648, emphasis in original). Modern sexism, therefore, is characterized by "the denial of continued discrimination, antagonism toward women's demands" (Swim et al., 1995, p. 199).

Extensive research has already been conducted on the sexist nature of negotiating workloads and the effects of intensified audit cultures (Mountz, 2016), the recurrent and intentional disregard of care work, which by remaining invisible and mute to audits and metrics, further "compound[s] the inequalities of university communities" (Maclean, 2016, p. 188). Whilst sexist attitudes, either hostile or benevolent (e.g., discriminatory attitudes in the form of caring) are grounded in traditional gender stereotypes (Hammond et al., 2016; see also Mastari et al., 2019), it seems very difficult for individuals to voice their concerns about them. The isolation that women experience also becomes self-fulfilling, as they refrain from speaking up for fear of repercussions; this fear marginalizes and secludes them physically and emotionally from the very academic communities with which they must engage. Supported by the language of empowerment and choice (McRobbie, 2009), or the strategic mobilization of the language of feminist success (Ahmed, 2015), it may seem like critiquing sexism is no longer necessary. This dominant post-feminist discourse renders sexism increasingly difficult to name or speak about; instead, silence is often the implied or anticipated course of action.

3.2 | Silence and silencing in organizations

There is a burgeoning literature on organizational silence and silencing, focusing on unequal relations between managers and employees resulting in employees' voices being silenced (Allard-Poesi & Hollet-Haudebert, 2017; Barratt, 2008; Prouska & Psychogios, 2018). Some authors point to employees being afraid of speaking up because of organizational culture (Pinder & Harlos, 2001) and to silence as an example of managerial reluctance to convey or hear bad news (Cueller, et al., 2006). Early studies on organizations see the emergence of silence as the result of existing social pressure to conform (Janis, 1972) and what is considered an ineffective use of voice (Brinsfield, 2013), causing withdrawal, absence, and resistance behaviors among individuals. Previous work on silence in organizations has explored manifestations of organizational silence as the opposite of voice and stated that it results from impeding free contributions to organizational discourse (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Brinsfield et al., 2009; Piderit & Ashford, 2003). For example, Bowen and Blackmon (2003) employed the term "spiral of silence" developed by Noelle-Neumann (1977) in the context of public opinion research to discuss invisible differences (sexual orientation) and how they might affect organizational silence and voice. The spiral of silence describes the degree to which employees are willing to publicly express their opinions and how this is affected by the organizational climate of opinion (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003, p. 1397). Along the same lines, Morrison & Milliken (2000, p. 714) referred to a "climate of silence" to describe the belief that speaking up in a specific context will be unproductive and dangerous for those who decide to do so. Exploring the negative impact of systemic silence, particularly in relation to pluralism and change, they point to the contextual variables that create conditions conducive to silencing—the shared, collective perception that speaking up is unwise. Furthermore, literature presents disparate and gender-blind attempts to position silence as a process of quiet loyalty (Hirschman, 1970), cooperative silence (Wang et al., 2012), defensive silence (Dyne et al., 2003), diffident, disengaged, and deviant silence (Brinsfield, 2013), all in all resulting in tolerant and sacrificial individual behavior toward organizational outcomes.

Seen as a symptom of oppression (Calas & Smircich, 1996), silence can also be conceptualized as a taboo (Zerubavel, 2006), with individual struggles remaining unnoticed, purposefully, or not. In a recent study, Dupret (2019) argues that if understood as a meaningful and intentional act on the part of the organization or individual, silence and silencing within organizational settings impacts the creation of new realities and work practices with a direct effect on the constitution of power relations, conversations, and articulations of decision-making. These studies place an emphasis on silence being necessarily almost entirely negative, unproductive, or passive (Glenn, 2002). Indeed, individuals may choose to remain silent out of an instinct for self-preservation. At the same time, however, instances of self-silencing, recognizing a certain dynamic as sexist but without naming it due to contextual factors (Swim et al., 2010), requires an (un)conscious form of self-censorship that is structurally enabled by the (academic) regulation of resources or forms of expression (Bourdieu, 1991; Perger, 2016). As a result, "when you do speak out, you are seen as a problem, as if the problem is only there because you speak about it. It is as if the problem would go away if you stopped talking about it […]; how exposing a problem becomes posing a problem" (Ahmed, 2016c, p. n.p). Moreover, it is necessary to consider "the unequal distribution of supportive resources and systems with whose help the subject's exposure to social injuries may be made less unbearable and more survivable" (Ahmed, 2016c, p. 1398): "when researching the 'when not' of naming sexism, the formalized asymmetrical power relations are perceived as the most important factor of inhibition that manifests in self-silencing." Ahmed's work (2014) and consecutive investigation account for these formalized, structural dynamics that establish and maintain organizational sexism and offer a narrative that highlights the urgency and need for individuals to break the silence. In addition to apprehending silence as (often) a practice of voluntary passivity, our study explains how and from where silence is born and how it becomes persistent.

4 | THE CONTEXT

4.1 | The origins and some particularities of French business schools

This study is born out of the specific context of a French business school. It is therefore advisable to revisit the origins and some of the specific features of these organizations to shed light on their history of sexism and silencing.

Top-tier business schools in France are *grandes écoles*, a type of higher education institution that emerged as a direct result of the French Revolution. Once the revolutionaries ousted the monarchy, they took several measures to modernize the French state and society at large. Their historical *Convention Nationale* of 1794 established the first *grandes écoles*, a key feature of the so-called *méritocratie républicaine* [republican meritocracy] project, which would eventually become essential to building contemporary France. Central in their design was an education system employing different instances of examination to select the best students to join *grandes écoles* and to become leaders of the industry, commerce, and public administration (Goblot, 1925; Lazuech, 1999; Locke, 1989). Hence, instead of eliminating inequality, the post-monarchic regime legitimated a structural divide among classes (Azevedo, 2020, p. 391). Unsurprisingly, there is ample criticism of how the *grandes écoles* played into this "meritocratic legitimation of French inequality" (Altman & Bournois, 2004; Lazuech, 1999; Rosanvallon, 2011; Zeldin, 2012, p. 192).

The *grandes écoles*, with their prestigious admission exams requiring a couple of years of study in post-secondary *classes préparatoires*, became elite institutions, not to be confused with French public universities catering to the masses (Altman & Bournois, 2004; Locke, 1989). Their superior status has been reinforced by the late-twentieth-century economic doctrine of *dirigisme*, defined by state intervention in productive systems (Clift, 2004; Kuisel, 1984; Prasad, 2005) and reflecting an even older French ideological inclination toward centrally planned solutions based on the coordinated actions of government and business (*e.g.*, the *Colbertism* tradition established by Jean-Baptiste Colbert between 1661 and 1683, under the ruling of Louis XIV).

As a mark of French exceptionalism (Lazuech, 1999), the logic underlying the *grandes écoles* is not one of liberal capitalism but one of association between government and industry aiming at orchestrating the actions of the

leaders of public administration, private management, and large-scale technological projects. Typically controlled by a local *CCI* (*Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie*), the *écoles de commence* were content to compete against each other to educate students who would come to be top managers at the companies composing the very *CCIs* that controlled their schools. Yet, some specific isomorphic pressures such as the universalization of the MBA diploma (Mazza et al., 2005), the influence of international rankings (Wedlin, 2007), and the Bologna Process of ensuring comparability of European higher-education qualifications (Tauch, 2004), gradually began to make the French *écoles de commence* less French. To better comply with accreditation bodies and international ranking criteria, French business schools began to hire international, research-oriented faculty, who could also teach courses that were by then delivered in English. When the *CCIs* began to reduce their financial support, the *écoles de commence* sought additional income by attracting international students who paid higher tuition fees than their domestic counterparts. Many of the French *écoles de commence* even rebranded themselves by adding "Business School" to their names. Their entrance into the international business education arena made a visible positioning on gender issues more urgent.

5 | METHODOLOGY

The focus on silence concerning organizational sexism—a sensitive theoretical domain—requires recognizing the gendered nature of the research and the researcher (Pullen, 2006). Following Golombisky (2006), who argued that as scholars of gender, we are responsible for managing gender performances during the data collection and data analysis stages of the investigation whilst simultaneously recognizing our positionality and privilege (Anthias, 1998). Accordingly, the cohort of participants was diverse and included individuals with decision-making power as well as those in supporting roles as part of the professional services offered by a French Business School. As authors, we also engaged in this research as active participants who experienced the phenomenon under investigation and acted as interviewees in this research project. Interpretation of the data takes into account our own embeddedness in the French business school context through the lens of our positionality as academic members of the institution, some with specific managerial responsibilities. The analysis rests on an understanding of the subject as an agent continuously reflecting and acting upon the social world while also being simultaneously a part of it (Zanoni et al., 2017). In leveraging first-person accounts and merging these with our own, we are working with the assumption that individuals utilize their own discursive practices to choose, omit, or combine available discourses and narratives to construct meanings of themselves, their actions, and their endeavors (Kornberger & Brown, 2007; Stanko et al., 2022; Zanoni et al., 2017). Examining multifaceted individual experiences can help unearth the political as well as theoretical within the personal (Karaian & Mitchell, 2009; Siplon, 2014).

5.1 | Data collection

Primary data were collected through semi-structured narrative interviews with 27 participants—individuals who worked for the French Business School in a variety of roles as academic and non-academic staff. Some participants were selected based on their engagement in the trigger event (i.e., the announcement of the operationalization of the school's collective plan and appointment of new leaders in the organization, as well as the demotion of certain individuals from their previous leadership positions). Other participants were known for their activist positions in the past, and their long-term involvement with the school union. Participants ranged from Assistant to Full Professor across pedagogy- and research-focused contracts, individuals with authority and responsibility, as well as longstanding and recently joined members of staff and members of professional support services with varying lengths of service in the organization. Data collection was carried out from November 2020 until April 2021, resulting in 27 reflective accounts and 627 pages of transcripts. While mostly of unstructured nature, the reflections were guided by the critical incident that triggered this research. Due to the sensitive nature of the conversations with the participants,

TABLE 1 Data materials.

Source	Type of data	Use in the analysis
In-depth interviews from September 2020 to July 2021	27 interviews with faculty members and staff (19 women and 8 men) The interviews took place in person or through MS-Teams Duration from 45 to 120 min; 627 pages of text in total	Capture employee perceptions of the institution concerning the trigger event Examine the reaction of employees to the trigger event Gather the reactions from employees and situate them in relation to their position and history in the institution
Secondary data from May 2020 to February 2022	SD1- public school communication (press and social media)	Corroborate the perceptions and emergence of themes
Participant observation from May 2020 to February 2022	Fieldnotes	Capture closely the exchanges between colleagues and how the processes evolved since the trigger event Identify sexism and the mechanisms of silence emergence in the interactions Gather how the processes and exchanges evolved

their input has been anonymized and their names replaced with the French names for flowers. The aim was not to construct an objective assessment of sexism problematics in each context; it was to capture subjective perceptions of the gender issues and the reactions of silence that we had witnessed and were puzzled by during the trigger event.

To corroborate the insights, we also draw from the set of archival data, identifying events and decisions made within the organization to help contextualize certain organizational responses and individual reactions to them. Specifically, the data included public communication on the school's website, in the press and on social media from the period between May 2020 and February 2022 (see Table 1 for a summary of the data sources).

5.2 | Data analysis

The data analysis involved a process guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) stages of thematic analysis. Qualitative analysis software (Dedoose) facilitated the coding of the data and modeling of concepts and constituting constructs. All the authors were involved in collecting the data, translating it from French into English, and coding it. To avoid uncritically accepting the translation of French transcripts into English, we re-read and ensured that the translation did not lose the nuances in culture and language, so that the essence of what was narrated by interviewees remained an integral part of the arguments. Data analysis occurred individually at first, reading the transcripts several times to understand the positionality and individual experiences of each participant. We then developed a set of core themes to facilitate the subsequent coding process, after input from other co-authors. The posed questions were simple: why, how, and who made specific decisions related to the critical incident that triggered our study? What was the institution signaling to the employees? What was visible and possibly invisible in terms of processes and actions reflected upon by participants, and how did they feel and express themselves? All these questions supported the iterative process of developing key themes in our data. To leverage the next level of data analysis, we extract quotes that illustrate the first-order codes, accounting for issues of confidentiality and preserving the respondents' anonymity. Following the coding process, we interpreted first-order themes in line with the core theoretical ideas that emerged from the data. The theoretical contributions to be presented in the discussion section emerged at the next stage of our analysis.

Combining narrative accounts of business school workers about their experiences in the organization and observations of actions taken by the different organizational actors in response to the trigger event described in the prologue, the findings ultimately show how individual—and organization-level interactions led to the birth and persistence of silence around organizational practices perceived as sexist.

5.3 | Reflexivity

For researchers, reflexivity means taking on the final role of a critic to scrutinize one's own interpretative predispositions (Golombisky, 2006) and being conscious of where we place ourselves in the research process (Steier, 1991). We remained conscious of the intersection of power with academic knowledge, adopting reflexive strategies that made us think critically about our privileged position in the knowledge production process (see the work of Rose, 1997 on feminist research and reflexivity; also, Berger, 2015; Maxey, 1999). Throughout the research process we acknowledged that the "insider and/or outsider" positionalities of the researcher and the researched affect the knowledge co-produced between them (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015, p. 91). Being an insider may blur boundaries, where the researcher might project their own values, beliefs, and perceptions (Berger, 2015, p. 224). Having said that, insider and/or outsider positioning is complex and the boundaries between the positions are not so clear: One's positionality changes according to race, class, gender, or culture (Merriam et al., 2001, p. 405).

Furthermore, working as a research team demands making a collective sense of individually traumatic and sensitive experiences, thus dealing with the inevitable risks of its banalization or dramatization. That is a daunting methodological task. In the case of this study, being able to perform such a task required ensuring that we engage in transparent and honest exchanges without fearing to appear angry, vulnerable, and emotionally unraveled by what we were witnessing. It also called for the willingness to share one's individual biases on the subject and accept the repercussions one may face writing about it.

At the initial stage of the study, the team of authors was bigger, but as the study progressed and reached the data collection stage, two individuals left the project. Those who remained shared their determination to continue but were pulled back by the diversity of their genders, political views, and personal experiences. This became evident during the first collective reading into the data which revealed how easily one could fall into a habit of labeling (or not labeling) something as sexist at the expense of asking more ambitious and painful questions of how differential treatment of individuals based on their sex comes into being and remains unchallenged. Being able to ponder such questions meant thinking about our own compromises and survival tactics within the academic system. Reflecting on our predicament as *career building academics with regular inner conflicts* helped us move away from the itching desire to pass a judgment or a verdict on what our respondents were saying and focus on understanding how individual stances are intertwined with social expectations, professional aspirations, and organizational facticity.

6 | FINDINGS

The investigation's findings consist of two parts. In the first part, they make clear how gender issues manifested themselves to workers in two sets of questionable practices—*distribution of tasks* and *organization's valorization of individual contributions*. In the second part, they demonstrate how management and workers interactively contributed to silencing concerns around these practices by setting in motion a dynamic of *cocoon weaving*. To conclude, they expose the role of worker-management interactions in fostering the persistence of organizational silence as a dual predicament of workers' inability and unwillingness to react.

6.1 | Uncovering practices conducive to sexism

The data show that gender issues in the business school setting became ostensible and triggered workers' emotional responses in the case of two management practices: distribution of organizational tasks and valorization of individual

contributions to the school's development. These practices were perceived as two distinct manifestations of organizational sexism. On the one hand, practices related to the valorization of individual contributions to organizational ends designed to display a well-functioning gender-neutral meritocratic system were seen as being at odds with the actual acknowledgment of one's merit and effort in the organization where gender appeared to be a key differentiator. On the other hand, the workers perceived that they were expected to adhere to an established system of distribution of organizational tasks that reinforced patterns of productive and reproductive labor division.

6.2 | Distribution of organizational tasks

Interviewees considered the distribution of organizational tasks as one of the key practices conducive to sexism. Evidence on the construction of tasks as more or less esteemed showed a clear demarcation, where more esteemed monitoring tasks were seen as being assigned to male workers while less esteemed coordinating and maintenance tasks were routinely offered to female workers, showcasing that executive power does not stick to women's bodies. The resulting configuration was that men were perceived as being more likely to occupy supervisory or expert positions with generous remuneration, whereas women tended to be assigned more operational functions that granted no extra recognition. For example, one respondent presented the situation as a self-selection issue that became normalized in the organizational culture:

> Guys don't want to be program managers. They don't want to manage programs because they can see that you work a lot, but you get very little recognition. There is a perception that these positions are the least prestigious. The ones who are the little hands, who have their hands in the dirt and who give it all, are the women [...], they do it over and over again.
>
> (Azalée, f)

The data also revealed an organizational disposition through which male colleagues, notably those belonging to certain inner circles, were allowed to take on more valuable and prestigious responsibilities. The task allocation became especially visible during the trigger event, which revealed a striking contrast between frontstage and backstage performances for workers who were asked or chose to take part in it. All the backstage (invisible) work that included data collection, brainstorming, and generation of insights was predominantly assigned to female workers who were then asked to present the results of their labor to a committee entirely composed of male colleagues magnanimously passing their judgment and assessing "the quality" of ideas. The total lack of diversity on the committee and its cozy composition of all male collaborators did not remain unnoticed. However, reactions varied depending on the gender of the respondent. Some male participants saw such an arrangement as a timesaving attempt to utilize internal "talent" for the task of supervision and were not particularly bothered by the fact that this talent was recognized exclusively in male workers:

> They invited me because there is a form of proximity. [...] A call for internal and even external recruitment would require a six-month schedule. Did the school have six months to wait before appointing someone?
>
> (Tournesol, m)

Contrastingly, female participants regarded this episode as an indication of the established way of maintaining consensus and communicational comfort over important decisions that could be disrupted by gender diversity in executive power:

> He [a member of the Executive Committee] wants to feel close to the other members [of the Executive Committee]. So, he doesn't want us to elect someone he will find difficult to work with. […] They are not at all aware of the question of women in the workplace, in fact. We've had this conversation each time there was an executive management position open, […] each time we asked "are there any female candidates? Did you consider calling them in for an interview?"
>
> (Azalée, f)

Finally, the distribution of tasks practiced by the school incorporated and normalized the expectation that female workers were more likely to refuse to take on tasks that required argumentative or combative skills. As a result, their perceived docility and placidity served as an excuse to overlook female candidates for positions that were associated with tasks related to the strategic development of the organization. Few participants commented on the problem of these perceptions being internalized by some female employees thus leaving the practice unchallenged:

> But [women] have something else that is also a burden or is a sort of guilt of inadequacy. […] That pushes them not to negotiate, not to ask for more, not to value themselves in the same way.
>
> (Renoncule, f)

Sharing their perceptions of the trigger event that was meant to symbolize a new era in the school's management transition, some participants directly called out the practice as perpetuating sexist rather than meritocratic culture in the eyes of internal and external stakeholders:

> For me, first, the school doesn't try to have a balance. We dismiss women who are extremely qualified. So, there were at least […] a few ones at the school who could have taken those positions and had even better credentials.
>
> (Violette, f)

> It was already during the confinement that I was talking with some of my friends [from another institution], and I was saying this was problematic because the Executive Committee was calling people in from the old male guard. That's something that sends the message that we are who we are, and we want to stay that way. It shows that we are not open and that people who join the school are going to stay on the sidelines because the old male guard is the only one worthy of trust.
>
> (Acore, f)

In sum, the distribution of tasks was perceived by our female and some male interviewees as a practice conducive to sexism because they saw it as facilitating the establishment of a regime that enhanced the chances of one gender group to ascend in the ranks of the organization. From participants' testimonials, it was clear that the distribution of tasks as practiced in a business school setting sustained a discriminatory assessment of workers' competences thereby reproducing structural and cognitive barriers for female workers and hindering their chances of taking on responsibilities beyond organizationally designated areas of appropriateness.

6.3 | Valorization of individual contributions

Furthermore, interviewees revealed their sensitivity to another organizational practice perceived as evidence of organizational sexism: the valorization of individual contributions. They observed that the management of the school tended to render female workers' efforts invisible by taking them for granted or devaluing them through a teamwork narrative. At the same time, male contributions were often presented as uniquely useful for the organization and

hence worthy of reward and salient recognition. The discriminatory valorization of contributions became apparent and culminated in the reflections of some interviewees on how individual efforts were recognized and rewarded in the context of the business school expanding its operations:

> I see men taking these positions [...] of course, they work a lot [...] but, somehow, they manage to have someone behind, typically a woman, doing all the dirty and supporting work, but men keep the title for themselves.
>
> (Lys, f)

Furthermore, some of our participants pointed to the reinforcement of a performance-driven culture that left little space for considering any type of effort that did not comply with specific metrics:

> I tend to think that as the management is facing external demands related to audits and rankings, they tend to let the processes take over, where higher starred journals take control over the human being. But how is this achieved and who gets disadvantaged in this process? People on the margins, who tend to be women.
>
> (Campanule, f)

The testimonies of some participants revealed the ongoing inculcation of a work culture that expected heroic interventions to be performed in the name of organizational advancement. One of the male workers, selected to take a relevant part in the trigger event and who a few months later received a considerable promotion, recalled his exchange with another male colleague highlighting a kind of fraternity ethos of disinterested devotion to the school service and drive for excellence as the underlying motives of their participation.

> I will always remember an exchange I had with X. I said to him: "But what are your ambitions? Why are you doing it? Do you want to become assistant director, do you want to become a dean?" He responded that he was doing it (and that is what brought us together) because he felt that the school had a certain amount of pathology or silo areas and that was the way of us saying: "We can't criticize if we don't do anything about it."
>
> (Tournesol, m)

The gathered testimonies also showed that whilst contributions made in the name of organizational expansion and research productivity received personal recognition, individual efforts constitutive of reproductive labor were often de-personified and recast as "teamwork," allowing contributions of administrative and pedagogical nature to remain unnoticed and unacknowledged.

> [Women] they don't count their hours, because [...] I had spoken with a former school colleague who left three, or four years ago. He had been Head of Department, and he said to me: "Today, given what the position is like, I am not interested." You see, less professionally appealing positions get occupied by women. The guys let go of the positions that require too much work compared to little recognition they bring.
>
> (Azalée, f)

The shared testimonies allowed us to observe that gendered valorization of individual contributions was particularly visible during periods of restructuring or an abrupt crisis when an organization reached out to its members for extra support and engagement and appealed to their sense of solidarity. While reproductive labor in such conditions (e.g., pedagogical assistance, administrative support, etc.) was rendered crucial for sustaining the operational integrity

of an organization, the recognition of these efforts routinely carried out by female workers bore the air of being taken for granted and remained generic, that is, void of individual praise specific to distinct accomplishment. Referring to the trigger event where the women's participation was diminished, Lys (f) was visibly bothered by this continuous disregard of female talent and contributions:

> It's not that women don't work, because there are a lot of them, those who work. That's not the point. The point is that no one cares that we are participating, that we are there working and giving ideas.

6.4 | Interactions giving rise to silence around practices conducive to sexism

This section illustrates how individual stances toward problematic practices, identified in the previous section, inform interactions within the organizational environment, resulting in unwillingness or inability to vocalize any possible concerns. The metaphor of "cocooning" captures the mechanics of the process more vividly: It symbolizes a gradual retreat into passivity driven by manifold interactions between workers and their organization. The investigation identified that the interactions between individual stances on sexist practices and organizational reactions to their enactments took on either an agonistic or uncontentious nature. In agonistic interactions, some workers maintained a critical stance and attempted to challenge organizational policies by publicly voicing their discontent. In uncontentious interactions, workers either adopted a supportive stance by aligning their responses with management expectations or espoused a neutral stance by hiding any sign of public disapproval. This interplay set in motion a process of cocooning which represented both seclusion and inaction.

6.5 | Critical stances and agonistic interactions

The participants' narrative descriptions of events revealed various oppositional stances toward the organization's position on gender fueled by idealistic aspirations and political activism. Some oppositional stances identified in the narratives showed an explicit political position in relation to what participants perceived as sexist practices. These oppositional stances also contained an insistence on benchmarking the organization's progress on gender equality vis-à-vis other institutions. The overarching motivation expressed by participants assuming this stance was an aspiration to foster a fairer and more humanistic organizational culture through the reformation of the existing system of performance metrics and work recognition, as depicted in the testimony of Rose (f):

> There are former and current students at the school talking about how huge the difference is between the walk and the talk […] and this is very unfortunate. I see it as organisational immaturity: not being able to deal with its own deficiencies […] The transparency here is an artificial type of transparency. You ask a direct question, but what you get back are metrics of our excellence on all fronts…but these metrics are not what we experience, feel, and see in reality.

Orpin (m) echoed this perception by posing and answering a critical question related to the management of the organization:

> I ask myself the question: "how can this change happen?" …So, there is this board of directors, and they could say: "We stop now, we are not going to exclude women, and we will prioritise equality and justice in our decisions." That's it. It's not very complicated. It is a matter of will, that's all.

Several workers with oppositional stances foregrounded the fact that any attempt to initiate a dialog around issues of gender was met with a pre-emptive annihilation of the possibility for further exchange. The reaction

happened through the establishment of a hermetic regime of communication, which rendered impossible any action of vocal opposition as the discursive and deliberative spaces where this could happen were eliminated or replaced with the symbolic ritual of democratic consultation. For example, one participant remarked that despite declarative democratization of the workplace, decision-making at school remained top-down and dialogical interactions were dismissed when pertaining to difficult topics.

> Some years ago, a questionnaire was made to disclose what the faculty wanted. In my opinion, the gap [between what the faculty wants and what is done] is huge. The results were presented to everyone. The [top manager] saw them but ignored them completely. He said: "co-creation does not mean co-decision."
>
> (Begonia, m)

Several participants discussed the apolitical nature of deliberations propelled by management where the elegant crafting of an argument was more important than considerations of fairness and sensitivity to ethical issues. Thus, the ability to bring attention to a specific concern relying exclusively on rhetorical deftness was cherished more than the readiness for political engagement. One of the managers explained this approach to communication in the following way:

> The ability to influence processes in the organisation can be done through the art of persuasion [...] by building an argument convincing enough for management and then the management can decide.
>
> (Chrysanthème, m)

The interaction between critically oriented organizational members and management followed an agonistic path because such exchange often took place under conditions that combined hermetic communication regime and a perceived threat of sanctions, as revealed in this testimony:

> The problem with this administration is that they perceive any criticism as a direct confrontation. Emotionally, there is no reaction other than an angry face, even when they try to avoid any confrontation but respond back in the way that instils fear.
>
> (Rose, f)

Several examples in our data pointed to the excessive emotionality in management reaction to strongly critical opinions or unusual situations.

Finally, these experiences derived from agonistic interactions between critically disposed organizational members and management activated a voluntary retreat into passivity. Some participants confessed that they were growing reluctant to publicly raise topics that could be perceived as controversial or irrelevant. Referring to one episode, Primevère (f) summarized this self-inflicted unwillingness to react to certain topics being treated as "organisational taboos." In a similar vein, Digitale (f), explained how tabooing was used as a self-applied constraint in interactions with management:

> I wanted to tell him that it was a bad decision [...], but I didn't. I became my own censor, I moved more to the position of employee, when asked to do something, I do it within my perimeter. [...] they don't take criticism well; they take it as a personal attack.

6.6 | Neutral or supportive stances and uncontentious interactions

Neutral and supportive stances involved accepting organizational metrics of merit, adjusting personal goals to fit with organizational expectations, and promoting uncontentious interactions with the organization on the topic

of questionable practices. However, there were some differences in how participants chose to formulate their standing.

The attitude expressed by participants assuming a neutral stance was one of compliance and submission; individuals always act under organizational constraints and, therefore, flexibility and adaptability were seen as desirable traits to avoid conflict even in cases of disagreement. For example, Renoncule (f), albeit visibly upset by the unfairness of organizational valorization of individual contributions, defended her uncontentious interaction with the school administration and insisted on the importance of self-adjustment to power structures:

> We need to follow the rules, of course, but I saw some men but also few women… promoted to full professors without an HDR,[1] without years of teaching. But, well, that's life, I follow the rules.

Other participants, like Azalée (f), when considering the underrepresentation of women in top management positions, exempted the school from blame, reasoning it was caused by the failure of female workers to apply for and assume such functions:

> If there are no women as academic directors, it means no women put themselves forward for this position. Same with the steering committee, if women do not put themselves forward, they cannot get elected. They are self-censoring. They don't come because they do not want to do this job.

Sexism was deemed a non-issue by arguing that different pay levels and hierarchical positions were due to factors other than gender. Tournesol (m) agreed that "unfortunately, there are perhaps more women in the lower salary-scale jobs" but insisted that was due to female workers' reluctance to volunteer or compete for better-paid positions. Other male participants justified the lack of female colleagues in the higher echelons of the organization by arguing that management had "bad" experiences with women given executive responsibilities in the past:

> The women who were demoted were not good at their functions. They were oppressive and used resources from the organisation to create feuds inside the school. And they hurt many people, including members of their own groups. They were bad for the school, and they happened to be women.
>
> (Begonia, m)

Male participants with a neutral stance did not see the point in confronting the organization on allegedly sexist practices because they did not recognize the existing arrangements as problematic. Moreover, the use of a jocose, sometimes derogatory tone implicitly reinforced the notion that gender issues were nonchalant:

> The reality is that I can't change my sex, and I don't plan to! [Laughing]. I say this with humour, cynicism even. I see myself neither in the position of the oppressor nor of the victim. For me, if there is work, I should do. I go and I do it. Why should I ask myself the question of gender?
>
> (Tournesol, m)

In contrast to neutrally oriented colleagues, the participants with a supportive stance were more willing to make politically resonant statements and reproduce the official rhetoric on gender in business school management and education. The attitude expressed in this stance was one of endorsement for the organization's policies on women's support and a belief that the institution was a step ahead of others in this regard.

> The classic [of] when you go on maternity leave, it will have a knock-off effect on your career, it just happens everywhere. That is not something we dealt with or managed very efficiently in business schools, not any different from other places. [...] I know a lot of women who would go through pregnancy, but they will still be required to produce scientific work, to publish papers and have publications at the same time. I think that at [current institution] we have a little bit better policy for that.
>
> (Bouton d'or, m)

6.7 | Persistence of silence

Interrogations of workers' stances and their interactions with business school management around questionable practices of task distribution and valorization of individual contributions uncovered the entangled relationship between the production and persistence of organizational silence around uncomfortable questions of gender and power. Silence around gender issues started growing persistent once individuals developed a default reaction of retreating into passivity in response to any gender issue concern. The findings showed that this process was accompanied by two complementary predicaments: the inability of workers to react and their unwillingness to do so. On the one hand, the inability to react against practices perceived as sexist stemmed from agonistic interactions that generated restrictions and constraints in formal communication milieus (i.e., a hermetic communication regime). On the other hand, the unwillingness to react resulted from the fear of sanctions or an uncontentious and non-reflexive assessment of the organization's actions and practices in relation to gender issues. Combined, the inability and unwillingness to react culminated in magnitude when organizational members distanced themselves from these issues by retreating into a cocoon of detachment, thereby making silence ever present and immune to the passage of time. The testimonial of Bouton d'Or (m) articulated this willful withdrawal in a passive and almost self-deprecating tone:

> It's very uncomfortable to judge your own institution. [...] It's very subjective, I don't know how to say it. [...] If you want to talk about how I feel [about gender inequality], then that would become subjective. It's a very hard answer to be very honest.

The perpetuation of silence, that is, its growth in scale, reflected how a history of previous (often traumatic) experiences of agonistic interactions with the organization have led to atomization and self-cocooning as a preferred strategy of risk aversion for individual workers:

> In the past, when I tried to object, I have not necessarily been able to gather people around me or around my ideas. [...] Today, I am no longer so frustrated when I say to myself: "Oh dear, I couldn't express myself," because I know that even if I were to express myself, there would be no support from others anyway.
>
> (Campanule, f)

Hitting a dead-end in the initial political battles against organizational flaws, some employees started perceiving the lack of will to address sexist practices as endemic to the entire business school industry and thus insurmountable through individual resistance. This perception served as a justification for silence.

> I think that the problem is not at all specific to our school. My moral standards are extremely high, but I cannot voice my concerns in a meeting because it would be seen as confrontational and upset a good part of our colleagues. So, I keep quiet.
>
> (Campanule, f).

At the collective level, this perception of insurmountable organizational conditions translated into a crisis of solidarity even in situations that called for the support of fellow colleagues:

> I thought [female colleague professor] was brave for saying it outright, but when [nominated male director] gave that answer, which was absolutely insulting and showed complete ignorance of the issue, no one said anything, people were scared or there was nothing to say.
>
> (Digitale, f)

In some sense, cocooning or retreating into passivity could be seen as a form of estrangement from the organization by an individual. At its most extreme case, it risked becoming reciprocal by detaching the individual from the organization and the organization from the individual further metamorphosing into the impenetrable silence of *la chape de plomb* (in French: literally, a lead cloak; figuratively, a crushing pressure) as poignantly expressed by Gardenia (f):

> I think there is a fear. Yes, because you expose yourself, you can be turned down, so it's not pleasant. When you see how [member of Direction Committee] talks to people, you think: "I don't want him to talk to me like that in front of everyone." And yes, I think that there is a little bit of a *chape de plomb* there.

7 | DISCUSSION

Chaque parole a des retentissements. Chaque silence aussi.
[Every word has repercussions. So does every silence.]
—Jean Paul Sartre Les Temps Modernes (1945)

This study contributes primarily to two streams of literature: investigations of academic sexism and studies on silence and silencing in organizations. In this section, its findings serve to enhance the existing streams of literature, offering a vivid metaphorical representation of silence around sexism that explains the mechanics of its emergence and persistence. Questioning workers' stances and their interactions with business school management uncovered the entangled relationship between the production and perpetuation of sexism through silence that surrounds the organizational *état d'affaires*. The findings showed how individual stances toward problematic practices of distribution of organizational tasks and valorization of individual contributions served to inform interactions within the organizational environment resulting in unwillingness or inability to vocalize any possible concerns.

Consequently, the findings indicate that silence around organizational sexism takes a form of a forced or deliberate retreat into passivity born out of the interplay between individual- and organization-level reactions to the reality of gender power structures. Specifically, we argue that managerial practices and interactional dynamics around gender equally contribute to making silence about sexism part of organizational culture. These silenced practices are conflated within an organizational ideology that manifests itself as a self-proclaimed meritocracy oblivious to the defining role of gender in formulating perceptions of worthiness and assessing the quality of performance of individual workers.

7.1 | Disclosing the dynamics that establish and maintain organizational sexism

Pertaining to organizational sexism, this study discloses specific instances of how one can make sense of how sexism is operationalized within business schools. It offers empirical support to the argument that misogyny is internalized and silenced through women's isolation (Savigny, 2019). It brings novel elements to this area of investigation by

demonstrating how organizational practices such as the allocation of tasks and valorization of individual contributions encapsulate and ossify the structural disadvantage that permeates the academic milieu.

Moreover, taking a closer look at the practices of task allocation and valorization of workers' efforts enables us to posit sexism not only as a reproduction of stereotypes in an organization's decision-making (Hammond et al., 2016; see also Mastari et al., 2019) but also as a strategic manipulation that appropriates gender stereotypes and makes use of this appropriation to demonstrate the absence of sexism.

The elaborated theorization of the perpetuation of academic sexism through persistent silencing thus concurs with recent work on business schools as a "heteronomic organization of excellence" (Wieners & Weber, 2020) facing the need to strategically navigate socio-political legitimacy and pressures for competitive enhancement. These strategies can comprise changes in governance, structures, and processes marked by work intensification, surveillance, and control (Broadbent et al., 2013; Sang et al., 2015; Teelken & Deem, 2013). For business school professionals, becoming the "ideal academic" entails a commitment toward the masculinization of *achieving targets*, constantly dealing with terror, and prioritizing work to conform to an uninterrupted career path in the "performative university" (Jones et al., 2019; Zawadzki & Jensen, 2020). These behaviors explain why the stances about sexism voiced by the participants of this study often leaned toward being neutral and accommodating.

The dynamic that establishes and maintains practices conducive to sexism is therefore simple in its workings. First, the organization is involved in the creation and popularization of a certain image of the ideal worker. Second, the organization employs the logic of dividing tasks into productive and reproductive labor and distributes them along gender lines, with gender being used as a signal of capability and measure of proximity to the ideal worker. Third, a system of reward and recognition is established to glorify contributions related to productive labor while taking for granted and generalizing efforts related to reproductive labor. Finally, the maintenance of a hermetic regime of communication reiterates the messages of meritocratic fairness and thus reinforces the culture of individualized productivity worship.

7.2 | Understanding the birth and persistence of silence

The present study shows that *silence* is a crucial feature of the mechanisms that allow sexism to exist and endure in academia. The second set of its contributions pertains to a better understanding of how silence emerges and persists. We posit that our theorization of silence as a dual predicament of unwillingness and inability to react constitutes a valuable addition to the literature on silencing in organizations because it provides a more fine-grained perspective on both agentic and structural features of silencing that exterminate the conditions for cohesive collective action.

This investigation enriches a nascent literature that already comprises some accounts of technologies of silence employed in the context of business schools. Extant examples include the establishment of procedures that silence complaints about abusive labor practices and inappropriate workplace behavior because filing a complaint comes with a risk of being labeled as fragile and, therefore, unfit for promotion (Ahmed, 2015). Anteby's (2013) ethnographic study of the Harvard Business School tenure system provides another example of silencing that consists in imposing "the burden of representation" on the academic staff and, therefore, operates as a corrective mechanism for behaviors that could potentially deviate from certain institutionalized canons of acceptable individuation. The study's findings bring to the forefront the aspects of silencing enacted through individual stances toward gender issues in a business school. We show how a hermetic communication regime may fracture and manipulate interpretations around managerial arrangements of tasks and expectations and lead to the internalization, normalization, and subsequent reproduction of gender-divisive patterns.

As the business school is being infiltrated by neoliberal post-feminist discourses on a global scale, it uses the language of empowerment and choice (McRobbie, 2009), or what Ahmed (2015) calls the strategic mobilization of the language of feminist success. The post-feminist narrative in business schools attempts to make the organizational members, particularly female faculty, apolitical by feeding them the image of socio-economically and

sexually empowered professionals. The present findings illustrate how a variety of stances assumed by organizational members produce a myriad of alternative representations of the gender issue, which eventually eliminates the possibility of developing a shared interpretation that could mobilize collective political action. As a result, criticizing sexism becomes unnecessary, with the issue being easily dismissed as "passé, as old-fashioned, dated" (Ahmed, 2015, p. 2). The very same practices that produce sexism also make it increasingly difficult to confront it. The experience of sexism may act as a trigger for activating a political orientation toward the issue. Nevertheless, turning an individual awakening into a quest for organizational change remains an unsurmountable challenge for those who seek to break through the wall of silence with their eyes wide open but their hands tied up.

The study thus resonates with the recent work on organizational silencing (Vu & Fan, 2022) that points to the activeness, intentionality, and instability of silence. It concurs with the argument laid out by Dyne et al. (2003) that the intentional withholding of work-related ideas, opinions, and information implies that silence involves choosing what not to reveal and which topics to avoid. Consequently, it demonstrates that this choice is driven by individual-level or group-level characteristics (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003), as well as organization-level characteristics such as unsupportive cultures and spiraling of dominant organizational norms. Embedded in power relations, silence, in these organizational contexts, denotes the fear of being marginalized and punished (e.g., Brown & Coupland, 2005; Milliken et al., 2003), disengagement from workplace injustice and discrimination, or the strategic avoidance of risks to reputation (e.g., Fernando & Prasad, 2019).

7.3 | From the cocoon to *la chape de plomb*

Walls of silence are woven as cocoons that not only protect but also isolate. A quote in which a participant mentioned a *wall of silence* inspired a little epiphany, and we came to realize that such a wall is not just in front or behind a person. Instead, it surrounds that person as a (non-)chamber of voices within which only compliance with organizational order is accepted. As resistance attempts are pushed down and reprimanded, individuals remain silent also for fear of possible repercussions.

The metaphor is both telling and appropriate since the culture and format of organizational interactions—that is, the cocoons warping each individual—block all attempts to challenge the established order. Moreover, even if someone may occasionally pierce the surrounding cocoon by screaming and shouting about certain injustices, the others do not hear it, or pretend not to hear it. The organization can proceed to fix the holes and, by labeling the person's response as an example of inappropriate behavior, it essentially amplifies the message of wrongdoing. Under the effect of public sanctioning, the person who once shouted may eventually prefer to spin additional layers inside the cocoon. This buffer merely reinforces the isolation creating the impenetrable *chape de plomb* inside which one cannot be heard anymore and one cannot hear the organization either. Just like cocoons, walls of silence are built and strengthened. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

Silence in organizations hinders collective reaction against regimes that marginalize other voices within work settings. And, yet, it is crucial to make hegemonic practices visible to enact change (Burke & Shear, 2014). It is with this conviction that this work can align with that of feminist scholars who raise the urgency and need for individuals to break the silence, despite understanding that organizations remain repressive to those challenging the gender regimes (Ahmed, 2021; Cole & Hassel, 2017; DeVault, 1999).

8 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

Silences are defined relationally and can only be understood in the local practices within which they emerge and evolve. As these practices differ from one situation to another, no single reality of silence exists; instead, silences are continuously performed, creating new realities situated in the everyday socio-materiality of organizational life:

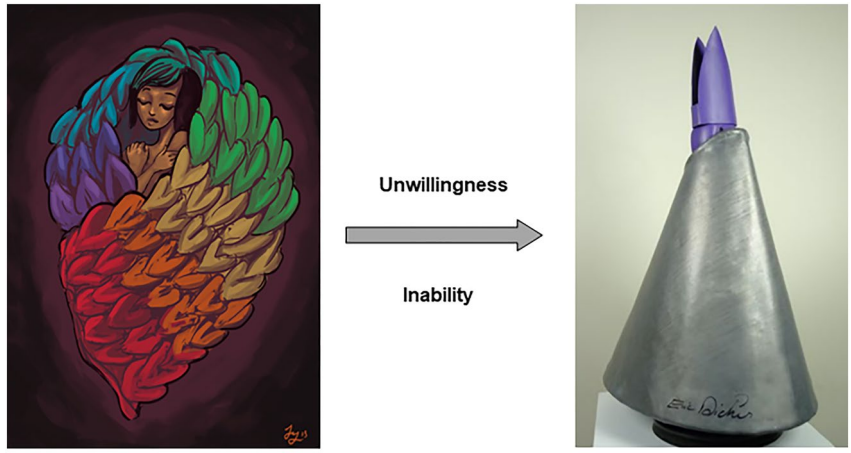

Image sources: Jem Yoshioka (jemshed.com/2013/11/78/) and Erik Dickes (dickes.lu/fr/110/La-chape-de-plomb.html)

FIGURE 1 Illustrating persistence of organizational silence.

"The claim here is that the definition of silence in organizations cannot be reduced to a single phenomenon separated from other organizational practices" (Dupret, 2019, p. 685). Indeed, the particularities of the French business school often made aspects of the mechanisms that produce sexism and silence more salient. The French historical discourse of meritocracy, which continues to serve as a justification for the structural divide among social classes (Azevedo, 2020), is key to explaining the elite positioning of French business schools *vis-à-vis* French public universities (Altman & Bournois, 2004; Locke, 1989). Unsurprisingly, French business schools are therefore prone to cultivating silence about inequality (including gender inequality) because their very existence is justified by and contributes to the perpetuation of inequality. The leadership culture promoted by the *grandes écoles* has been ostensibly masculine in its focus on power concentration, Cartesian rationality, individual responsibility, virility, and conspicuous intellectualism. Moreover, the French historical ideological inclination toward centralized power (e.g., Clift, 2004; Prasad, 2005) reinforces regimes of hermetic communication and top-down decision-making, which play an integral part in generating sexist cultures and persisting silence.

The mechanisms that produce sexism and silence also likely exist in business schools in other geographic areas. As argued before, despite its unique historical origins, the French *grandes écoles* have experienced increasing isomorphic pressure related to the universalization of diplomas, the influence of international rankings, and the Bologna Process (Mazza et al., 2005; Tauch, 2004; Wedlin, 2007). These shifts, combined with the need to find new sources of funding, have pushed them to comply with the international business education system. The similarity between French business schools and their counterparts abroad is reinforced by the growing presence of non-French faculty and students, by the strengthening of exchange and collaboration and by benchmarking with institutions located notably in the US and UK. Therefore, the specific context of this investigation may have made some unique aspects of the studied phenomena more salient, but the mechanisms revealed in this study most likely do exist—at least in a similar form—in business schools beyond France.

9 | EPILOGUE

September was long over. Another 8 months had passed, and now they were five. The finding-out journey was long and laborious. They followed an arduous path full of dead ends and doubts. They entered spaces populated by harsh

emotions and painful revelations. But the generous testimonials of trusting others helped break the spell, and they also had their moments of joy and mutual support, punctuated by bursts of laughter. They were exhausted yet gratified having named the unutterable.

"Fools", said I, "You do not know
Silence like a cancer grows
Hear my words that I might teach you
Take my arms that I might reach you."
But my words, like silent raindrops, fell
And echoed in the wells of silence
—Simon & Garfunkel, "The Sound of Silence"

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest to be reported.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTE

[1] The *Habilitation à diriger des recherches* (HDR) is the highest national diploma of Higher Education in France. It is required for supervising PhD students and applying for positions of Full Professor, Research or Academic Director (Légifrance, 2020).

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