

Silencing Dissent

Feminist Student Representation and Institutional Resistance in University Governance

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This essay explores a narrative interview with Camille (fictitious name), a student activist who was involved in the micropolitics of her university. The interview focused on her experience of the adoption of a new internal policy addressing sexual violence, an institutional process in which she participated as a student union representative. I conducted my fieldwork in Quebec, Canada, where efforts by feminist activists exposed the problem of sexual violence on university campuses (Ricci 2017). Thanks to this campaign, Quebec introduced a law requiring all universities to adopt policies against sexual violence (Ricci/Bergeron 2019).

My research investigates how feminist activists experience and navigate the gaps, tensions, and contradictions surrounding the institutionalization of their struggle. Among the various interviews I conducted, I found Camille's story particularly interesting. Alongside her institutional commitment as a student representative on the university board of directors, she was deeply involved in feminist grassroots activism. She was therefore adept at leveraging her network to overcome the obstacles she encountered within the university's institutional bodies. At the same time, her account of her dealings with university authorities is full of tension and conflict, which made her feel unwelcome and excluded. As a result, Camilla lost confidence in the possibility of establishing a *modus operandi* with the board of directors to tackle sexism and gender-based violence within her university.

Camille's experience is an example of how feminist attempts to open a dialogue on sexual violence may encounter various forms of institutional resistance, even when universities have committed to addressing the issue. While her narrative cannot be taken as representative of the experiences of all student and feminist activists fighting against sexual violence, it provides a valuable case study through which the institutional dynamics of resistance become visible. In Camille's case, I identify three distinct dynamics of institutional resistance: *institutional humiliation*, whereby Camille witnessed her colleague and fellow student representative being subjected to sexualized remarks by a member of the board of directors in a position of au-

thority; *institutional harassment*, which refers to the persistent hostility and stigmatization experienced by Camille during the board meetings; and *institutional avoidance*, which arose when Camille was prevented from discussing the sexually abusive behavior of a professor. These institutional dynamics of resistance, I argue, work together to de-legitimize the perspectives of feminist student activists, thus preserving the longstanding silence around sexual violence on campus. The struggles of feminist activists like Camille therefore provide valuable insight into how entrenched power relations within academic governance perpetuate gender inequality, and they also point to possible pathways for breaking that institutional silence.

1. Institutional Resistance

The theoretical premise of my research is that sexism and gender bias in organizations are often subtle, unacknowledged, and unintentional. As such, they are “rarely recognized or condemned” (Martin 2006: 255). Feminist scholarship—especially when it advocates for women’s entry into traditionally masculine domains—frequently encounters strong resistance (Connell 2006). Additionally, this resistance intensifies when feminist initiatives confront gender biases embedded in an organization’s norms, beliefs, attitudes, and routines (Benschop/Verloo 2006). Such resistance can manifest in various ways, such as seeking to avoid participation in gender-change initiatives, challenging the authority of women managers, and denying that gender issues exist in organizations—for instance by instrumentalizing the paucity of empirical research on inequalities, where the absence of data is mobilized to contest the legitimacy or urgency of gender-related reforms (Benschop/Verloo 2006: 286). Therefore, as Bleijenbergh (2018) argues, since resistance to gender equality policies seems to be the dialectical counterpart of the transformation generated by women’s entry into universities, understanding its dynamics is essential for achieving further progress toward gender equality.

Bleijenbergh’s own participatory action research on gender equality in Dutch universities illustrates the dynamics of resistance to feminist scholarship (Bleijenbergh 2018). Her studies revealed persistent inequalities, such as the lack of institutional support for employees with care-related responsibilities, the exclusion of women from tenure-track positions, and the low proportion of female full professors. When she presented her results to the universities, they triggered multiple forms of resistance: Some institutional authorities responded with anger, while certain colleagues reacted with patronizing dismissiveness. Bleijenbergh attributes this resistance to the fact that her research challenged the institutional reputation of the universities involved. In this sense, angry reactions were a defense mechanism to protect the university’s identity and public image. Nonetheless, Bleijenbergh seems hopeful about the possibility of achieving social change. In her own experience,

rience, direct engagement with stakeholders eventually shifted their stance; for instance, they began to “pay symbolic attention to gender equality policies at public events” and even “became active defenders of gender equality policies” (Bleijenbergh 2018: 136f).

Bleijenbergh's work offers an important contribution to understanding the varied forms resistance to introducing gender equality policies can take, from overt opposition to passive-aggressive behavior and subtle undermining, and how feminists can overcome these challenges. However, her analysis overlooks the possibility that symbolic gestures toward gender equality may themselves constitute a form of resistance. For instance, superficial adherence to gender equality can be exploited to protect the institutional reputation of organizations and silence ongoing feminist struggles. In fact, other feminist institutional scholars (Acker 1990; Mackay et al. 2010) have identified formal and informal institutional mechanisms of organizational control through which feminist struggles are contained, despite the formal recognition of equality.

Ahmed's investigation of diversity politics in universities looks more closely at the dynamics of resistance to equality and inclusion (Ahmed 2012). In her analysis, resistance to social change and transformation is an institutional process. Consequently, it is deeply embedded in an organization's norms, beliefs, attitudes, and routines and thus tends to evade collective perception. In other words, according to Ahmed's analysis, racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of inequality are “institutional” when they are normalized and taken for granted. Her work demonstrates that not only are diversity policies insufficient to generate institutional transformation, they can also operate as institutional mechanisms to control dissent. Indeed, they may contribute to institutional resistance by reinforcing the common-sense notion that inequalities are irrelevant in the university context, thereby silencing protests. Consequently, Ahmed cautions against mere symbolic commitments to equality and diversity, which can mask ongoing inequalities and enable institutions to perpetuate the very issues they claim to address.

To investigate institutional resistance, Ahmed suggests examining the experiences of individuals attempting to generate institutional transformation. She argues that these attempts make them aware of “the invisible brick wall [...] which keeps its place even when an official commitment to diversity has been given” (Ahmed 2012: 174). In her case, the invisible brick wall metaphor refers to institutional racism, yet it can also be applied to institutional sexism, given that historically, universities are places of white male power (Purkiss 1994; Harding 2004; Puwar 2004). The experiences of students and university staff in trying to institutionalize gender and diversity policies can provide valuable insights into how institutional resistance to social change operates in university settings. Specifically, these experiences demonstrate how institutional resistance manifests within the

university governance and decision-making process, reproducing the marginalization of feminist perspectives and political demands.

2. Student Activism Against Sexual Violence in Universities

Following Ahmed's suggestion of looking at the experiences of actors who are trying to generate institutional transformation, in this contribution I look at the experience of Camille, a student activist who participated in the feminist struggles addressing sexual violence at her university. As in many other universities in Quebec, the student body at Camille's university played an active role in denouncing sexual violence, as well as advocating for the revision of existing policies. To protect Camille's anonymity and avoid "naming and shaming" a specific institution (Phipps 2020), I will not disclose the name of her university.

I will now provide information concerning the institutional context in which she studied. Camille's university is a public institution. In recent years, students and faculty members publicly raised awareness about sexism and sexual assault, bringing the matter to the attention of the university authorities and the media. Feminist collectives organized protests addressing sexual violence perpetrated by members of staff, generating a media scandal that exacerbated the conflict with the university authorities. According to my interviews with other activists from the same university, student unions began at that time to advocate for an extensive revision of the internal policies and procedures on sexual violence. My respondents also stressed that initially, the institutional authorities were reluctant to acknowledge the existence of a widespread problem of sexual violence at the university.

In 2016, Quebec saw a wave of protests against sexual violence at universities. That year, a student perpetrated a series of sexual assaults in the student dorms at Laval University (Quebec City) (*Agressions à l'Université Laval* 2016). When the incident became public, feminist groups and organizations held demonstrations in several cities across the province, demanding the government implement legislation on gender-based violence (Perron 2016). The same year, a team of researchers published a province-wide survey (Bergeron et al. 2016), revealing that "one third of respondents (students and employees from six universities, all genders combined) reported having experienced at least one form of sexual violence since arriving at university, committed by someone affiliated with the same university" (Ricci/Bergeron 2019: 1290). The study further fueled the public debate (ibid.), and in 2017, the Quebec government unanimously approved the introduction of Bill 151, *An Act to prevent and fight sexual violence in higher education institutions* (Quebec National Assembly 2017). The bill, adopted into law as Act P-22.1, requires universities to adopt policies to combat sexual violence, a code of conduct on student-professor intimate and sexual relationships, and awareness programs for all members of the academic community.

According to my respondents, feminist activists at Camille's university welcomed the bill with relief: After a years-long struggle with the university administration, the new legislation forced the latter to acknowledge the problem of sexual violence. At the same time, the activists were aware of the risk that universities would exclude student representatives from the process of institutionalization. While they acknowledged that the bill represented a significant social transformation in officially recognizing the systemic nature of sexual violence in higher education, many of my respondents stressed that it would be naive to believe that this legislative change would automatically solve the issue, for which significant collective effort from universities is required. The interview with Camille, who advocated for the inclusion of student perspectives in policymaking, provides an opportunity to explore the obstacles that student activists may face when participating in the complex process of institutionalizing feminist struggles in higher education institutions.

3. Institutional Humiliation

I conducted an interview with Camille in 2021. From the interview, it emerged that, at the time, she was deeply involved in the micropolitics of her university, where she participated in the activities of feminist collectives and student unions. Additionally, she was a "student administrator"; that is—she explained—a student representative who has a seat on the university's board of directors, which is responsible for the university's governance and strategic direction. Camille mentioned that with the process of neoliberalization, the university was becoming increasingly concerned with financial matters, and the interests of the student body were often overlooked. She believed that a student presence at board meetings could be useful to remind the institutional authorities of the educational mission of the university. For Camille, the adoption of the new policy against sexual violence represented an opportunity for political debate.

Act P-22.1 requires universities to establish standing committees made up of students, staff, and administrators. The standing committees are responsible for writing, revising, and implementing the policies (Quebec National Assembly 2017). Camille explained to me that the policy must nonetheless be approved by the board of directors. As members of the board, Camille and another student administrator participated in the meetings where the new university policy against sexual violence was finalized. Camille described them as difficult, with a hostile environment where the political demands of the student administrators were not welcomed. For instance, Camille recalled an incident between a professor and the other student administrator, another woman. In this episode, the board was discussing the notion of "intimacy," with respect to the regulation of intimate and sexual relations between

students and academic staff. According to Camille, the student representative, who also happened to have legal training, tried to intervene in the discussion, asking for clarifications:

There was a question, it was about intimacy, and my colleague is a lawyer, and she said, “no, but intimacy can also exist with...¹ my parents, for example. You know, I could say I’m having dinner with my father at a restaurant, so the policy says we couldn’t have dinner together because of intimacy, but then there’s an issue.” And that professor said, “Oh, you’re sleeping with your father?” And then people at the table laughed. No, no, no! That’s not right! [Camille exclaims during the interview, as she recalls the situation]. We left the meeting in tears, largely due to frustration, but also, you know, because of having to deal with jokes while discussing the policy.

I interpret this passage as an instance of *institutional humiliation*. The student administrator, who likely has legislative expertise, tries to question the notion of “intimacy” because the term is too vague. She shows that “intimacy,” by itself, does not necessarily bear sexual connotations, but can also be employed to refer to a relation of familiarity (“I could say I’m having dinner with my father at a restaurant.”) She is presenting an argument in favor of tightening the terminology, since ambiguities can limit the practical implementation of policy. However, a board member jumps at the opportunity to make a remark that Camille describes as a “rape joke” (“Oh, you’re sleeping with your father?”), taking advantage of the double meaning inherent in the term “intimacy” and thus undermining the student administrator’s intervention. Notably, Camille uses the term “rape joke” to describe what could also be referred to as an “incest joke” (a father having sexual relations with their daughters). This could be because Camille does not differentiate between rape and father-daughter incest, since the latter is widely considered a form of sexual abuse. However, it may also be because she wants to emphasize that the joke itself constitutes an instance of sexualized assault. Many would find an incest joke to be disgusting and inappropriate in any given situation. It is even more shocking, however, when uttered in the context of a board meeting, characterized by stark hierarchical relations accentuated by the age difference between professors, administrators, and student representatives. Additionally, since the professor is male and most likely age-wise could be the father of the student, who is female, the joke may contain a hint of sexual innuendo.

The professor’s comment transforms a policy conversation into a moment of sexualized humor, undercutting the student administrator’s authority. In Camille’s narrative, no one intervenes in defense of her colleague, such as by reprimanding

1 In the interview quotes, an ellipsis ... indicates a pause. This may be because the interviewee is trying to recollect the events or is looking for the most appropriate words to describe her experience.

the professor. This is all the more surprising given that the circumstances were the adoption of a new policy against sexual violence. The laughter from others at the table reinforces his intervention, revealing how the institutional space keeps trivializing gender-based violence. The emotional impact of the event (leaving the meeting “in tears”), is not just a reaction to the comment, but to the cumulative frustration of being cast aside during the board meetings. In this passage, Camille also emphasizes the contradiction between the institutional climate and the purpose of the discussion, which was to create and uphold the institutional commitment to address sexual violence. Thus, this moment illustrates how institutional power operates through sexualized humiliation, reinforcing hierarchical and gender norms and silencing the student representatives.

4. Institutional Harassment

After the meeting, Camille explained that she and her colleague decided to fight back by reporting the incident to a student newspaper, thereby informing the broader student community. The professor—according to Camille—was quick to respond with anger when the incident was described as harassment, even though they made sure to protect his anonymity. She also noted that their actions breached the norm of confidentiality surrounding board meetings, which put them at risk of disciplinary sanctions. From Camille’s perspective, harassment during these meetings was common, but the confidentiality rule functioned as a control mechanism that constrained her ability to speak out against the board of directors, while also limiting her capacity to report the issue to other students and mobilize political resistance. Camille could have contacted the university sexual harassment resource center to file a harassment complaint against the board of directors. However, as she observes, though she considered this, she was hesitant, because the coordinator of the university sexual harassment resource center was also a member of the board of directors. Thus, she felt she had no formal avenue for complaint that she could fully trust.

Camille nonetheless describes that she enjoyed the support of many other student activists, and emphasized that conversations with former male student representatives helped her recognize that her experiences may have been shaped by gender discrimination.

The dean at the time, we really didn't get along. [...] It was a woman dean, after many men, and there was this cattiness towards other women, she had [a tendency] to infantilize me, to always say “ah no, but Camille doesn't understand” and then just move on [with the discussion]. So, I experienced that, and the people before me, the male student representatives, you know, we were friends, we always

had the same positions, we say the same things, but they didn't receive the same treatment, they were really treated better. But after I was well surrounded [the student community rallied round] and I continued [to sit on the board], but it's just... outside the meetings it was fine, but during the meetings it wasn't easy.

In this passage, Camille describes how her interventions were met with recurring patterns of dismissal and delegitimization. During the interview, she explicitly described the hostility of the dean and the other board members as “psychological harassment.” I prefer the term “institutional harassment,” because the dynamic described in this excerpt reveals an institutionalized repertoire for neutralizing dissent, which upheld the gendered power dynamics embedded within the university governance. This passage also shows that gendered power dynamics can also be upheld by women. Camille reflects on her tense relationship with the dean, observing that she is a woman in a historically male-dominated institution. However, in Camille's experience, the shared ascribed gender identity² does not provide a source of solidarity, but rather a gendered form of antagonism, marked by infantilization: “Camille doesn't understand.” Camille interprets the dean's attitude towards her as a form of female rivalry (“there was this cattiness towards other women”) that is usually designed to please the male gaze, because it prevents the establishment of feminist solidarity. As described by Camille, the dean's behavior could reflect, on one hand, an interiorization of sexism and misogynistic beliefs. On the other hand, it could be a strategy to strengthen her authority in front of the board, which may be fragile given that she is a woman in a position usually reserved for men (“she was a woman dean, after many men”). Additionally, I suspect that Camille became the target of ostracizing behavior because she was outspoken, politically active, and refused to be sidelined from the conversation.

Camille's narrative describes the board of directors as an institutional place of power where women struggle for the legitimization of their authority and knowledge. The comparison of the dean with her male predecessors confirms, for Camille, the persistence of gender biases within the university's system of governance, even when some women occupy positions of institutional authority. Thus, in her experience, institutional harassment has emerged as an obstacle that prevents her from being heard and taken seriously by the board. On the other hand, Camille implies that the support from other students helped her get through the hostility from the board of directors (“but after I was well surrounded and I continued”). Although she describes being a student representative on the board of directors as mentally taxing, being part of a student union enables her to compare her experience with that

2 Personally, Camille does not identify as a woman because, she explained, she does not want to be treated like the “weaker sex.” However, within the institutional space of the board of directors, she is still perceived as a woman by the other members.

of male student representatives. This allows her to make sense of the situation and realize that the resistance she encounters is not just directed at the content of her claims, but also at her legitimacy as a feminist actor within governance spaces.

5. Institutional Avoidance

Camille recollected that during her time as student representative on the board of directors, she organized an internal campaign to prevent a professor from becoming the director of a research institute. Years before, she explained, a feminist collective had accused this professor, among other things, of sexual violence, by means of a public campaign that circulated on social media. The event generated a small scandal in the Québécois media and sparked a heated debate within the university on the legitimacy of public accusations made outside the formal complaints system. It is not possible to know if the professor in question was accused via the university's reporting system, as this kind of information is usually protected by a confidentiality clause (for an overview of relevant legislation, see Lafrenière Abel 2020). However, Camille emphasized that the professor's abusive behavior towards the students was well known within the university community.

Accordingly, Camille was negatively surprised when she found out that the board of studies had nominated the professor. She mobilized her network, contacting feminist collectives, faculty members, and administrators, hoping that they would intervene to oppose the nomination. Then she went to the board meeting, where she confronted the administrators about the situation. Camille was satisfied by the outcomes of her campaign: During the meeting, the dean decided to postpone the appointment, and later the board selected another person. However, Camille seemed to believe that the dean intervened to protect the university's institutional reputation, rather than the students' interests:

When I presented to the board of directors, I said "What's going on? I've heard the news already. I've seen [it] in the newspaper [...] ... There are problems [with the professor's appointment]." And the dean, who was [a member of] the board of studies [...], [she] knew about [the professor's appointment]. But she acted like... She said "Ah no, I don't know... Okay, I'll check on my side. We'll put the file on hold. I'll check." So in the end, rather than talking about it, rather than me naming "assault": because that's it... the board of directors doesn't want to hear... In the end, she said "I'm pulling the file, we put it on hold, we'll talk about it again". And a few meetings later, another person was appointed.

This excerpt reveals how institutional silence on sexual violence perpetrated by professors can persist within university governance, even after the issue has been pub-

licly exposed by student activists through a campaign that generated broad interest. During the meeting, Camille tries to discuss the appointment, questioning why nobody opposed the professor's nomination. Camille's mention of the newspaper ("I've seen [it] in the newspaper") suggests that the nomination was publicly well known and widely acknowledged. Yet, when confronted, the dean performs strategic ignorance ("Ah no, I don't know"), despite being likely aware of the nomination. The fact that the dean did not pretend to be unaware of the professor's negative reputation is further proof that his behavior was well-known among the institutional authorities and not just the students. However, instead of admitting that the board of studies had nominated the professor to a position of leadership, demonstrating a lack of attention and care towards the safety of the student body, she decided to "put the file on hold." This behavior—delaying action to protect the institutional reputation—reflects an institutional dynamic of avoidance. In this case, Camille was able to turn the situation to her advantage thanks to widespread support from her network, whose members were equally appalled by the nomination. However, the negative consequence is that student activists such as Camille have to rely on feminist activism to maintain institutional memory, while student turnover does not guarantee that students will mobilize around these issues next time. Camille was aware of this problem. During our interview, she mentioned that student unions and feminist collectives were wondering how to preserve institutional memory of feminist struggles and had not yet found a solution.

6. The Silencing Effects of Institutional Resistance

Camille's experience provides valuable insights into how institutionalized power dynamics operate within academic governance. It reveals an institutional logic that frames the political engagement of a feminist activist as disruptive rather than democratic, thus silencing students who are addressing gender inequalities, despite the formal commitment to combating violence and discrimination. Throughout the interview, several recurring modes of institutional resistance emerge that hinder Camille's full political engagement and participation in university governance. In the first instance, Camille witnessed a professor making a sexualized joke at the expense of a student representative who was presenting an argument to clarify the terminology of the university's new policy against sexual violence. According to Camille, rather than reprimanding the professor, the board members responded with laughter. As a result, Camille and the other student representative left the meeting feeling frustrated, not only because of the joke itself—which notably took place during the adoption of a new policy against sexual violence—but also because their perspectives had not been heard. I define this episode as an instance of *institutional humiliation*, a silencing mechanism that targets the students' attempt to

participate in the conversation. This instance of institutional humiliation perpetuates gender inequality, not only because the incident involved a male professor and a female student representative, but also because it trivializes the entire discussion of gender-based violence.

In the second instance, Camille described becoming the target of ostracizing behavior and stigmatization from the board members, especially from the dean, in this case a woman occupying an institutional position of authority that is usually filled by men. In Camille's narrative, this hostility has gendered connotations: first, because Camille felt that she could establish a relation of feminist solidarity with the dean, and second because she perceived that she was being discriminated against because of her perceived gender identity as a woman. Additionally, I suspect that Camille became the target of institutional harassment not only because of gender biases, but also as a result of hostility towards feminist students who are outspoken and politically active. Furthermore, Camille felt she had no avenue to report institutional harassment, as the coordinator of the sexual harassment resource center was also a member of the board of directors. This shows that even within an institutional context that has acknowledged the problem of gender-based violence and has formally committed to addressing it, university members can still face institutional obstacles that prevent them from filing formal complaints. I define these hostile forms of resistance that Camille experienced as *institutional harassment* because of its silencing effects; which left Camille feeling as though her perspective was not considered worthy of consideration by the other board members. The power asymmetry between her formal role as a student representative and the discretionary power exercised by institutional actors underscores the structural nature of the resistance she faced.

I define the third instance of institutional resistance as *institutional avoidance*, reflecting Camille's observation of the institutional authorities deflecting conversations about sexual violence involving professors, displaying strategic ignorance, and delaying action. Here, Camille successfully exploited institutional avoidance for her own political purposes: Rather than having to explain to the board of directors why a professor with a negative reputation was appointed in a position of leadership, the dean suspended the appointment. However, even here, the institutional silence on sexual violence by professors was maintained. Camille described the professor's abusive behavior as being widely known within the student community, as it had been exposed by a feminist collective. However, she also pointed out that, due to student turnover and the institutional tendency to forget about feminist struggles, the next generation of students may not be aware of his reputation. Thus, institutional hesitation to discuss sexual violence perpetrated by professors leaves students unprotected when facing such behavior.

The case of Camille does not downplay the transformative potential of feminist struggles in universities. The adoption of a law in Quebec acknowledging the pervasiveness and structural nature of sexual violence in higher education institutions

demonstrates an important shift in collective awareness of the issue. This change is visible in Camille's narrative as well: Thanks to her network of student unions and feminist collectives who are active on this issue, she has been able to find support that has helped her to navigate the silencing effects of institutional resistance. For instance, she reported the sexualized joke in the student newspaper, challenging the authority of the professor. She also benefited from the support of her network, which helped her to withstand the institutional harassment she experienced on the board of directors and to further develop her critical awareness of gender biases in institutional places of power. More importantly, she also successfully mobilized the academic community to prevent the appointment of a professor to a position of leadership, demonstrating a decrease in collective tolerance of abusive behavior. This shows that feminist networks can find avenues for speaking-out, bringing the political dimension of the issue of sexual violence back to the forefront.

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