

## Be Patient, Don't Complain (Yet)

*Beyond the Dichotomy of Confronting or Complying with Benevolent Sexism*

**ABSTRACT** Ever been confused about how to react when someone says they are doing something *for your own good* but you know oh-so-clearly that there is nothing good in it for you? Do you call them out for their misplaced benevolence? Or do you just acquiesce and come across as condoning their behavior? Both these options come with consequences, and costs. What should one do? This is a common dilemma for those subjected to benevolent sexism—a seemingly positive form of sexism that nevertheless undermines gender equity and is often hard to recognize and deal with. This article delves into the depths of this dilemma and is based on an autoethnographical account of one of the author's experiences with benevolent sexism. The core narrative, originally written in the immediate aftermath of a significant incident, offers a deep dive into the protagonist's mind as she navigates the decision to seek support politely rather than express outrage at the sexist behavior she encountered. Her narrative serves as the foundation for an abductive investigation, where the protagonist, in collaboration with her co-authors, undertakes a review of extant literature to make sense of her response. Together, they employ introspection and reflexivity to alternate between data and literature, bridging the gap between personal experience and scholarly analysis, and transforming the evocative account into a comprehensive examination of the pervasive social phenomenon of sexism within organizational contexts. Using an abductive, iterative process to interweave theory with an autoethnographical narrative, the article tries to resolve the dichotomy between confronting and condoning, often seen as the only responses to sexism, by proposing an approach that balances the interpersonal and intrapersonal costs and benefits of confrontation. **KEYWORDS** benevolent sexism, autoethnography, stereotypes, gender equity

### INTRODUCTION

*All knowledge of reality starts from experience and ends in it. . . . The only source of knowledge is experience.—Albert Einstein*

Sexism continues to be pervasive in society despite years of policy and research aimed at reducing it. Targets of prejudicial behavior such as sexism deal with its lingering effects throughout their lives. Sexist bosses pose a great threat to gender equality in the workplace,<sup>1</sup> and women are often set back in the everyday workplace during individual interactions with sexist peers or superiors.<sup>2</sup> Studying gender discrimination in all its forms, from the subtle to the explicit, offers the potential to fully address the ongoing challenges of today's working women.<sup>3</sup> There has been very little, if any, high-impact, non-retrospective empirical work on response styles women choose in encounters with prejudice.<sup>4</sup> Research that has observed actual sexist behaviors in naturalistic settings is limited.<sup>5</sup> Unlike experimental studies that investigate responses in imaginary situations, real-life situations involve power dynamics,

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and perpetrator power can have significant impact on the target's confrontation intentions and behavior.<sup>6</sup> Much like studying the engaged view of management, scholars have persistently called for an engaged view of studying discriminatory experiences<sup>7</sup> using qualitative studies that explore the real-world consequences of sexism among diverse groups of women,<sup>8</sup> for designing studies that assess actual behavior rather than response intentions,<sup>9</sup> and moving beyond laboratory studies of response to sexism.

This article uses an autoethnographical narrative to provide an understanding of benevolent sexism and its impact on the target of sexism in a real-life situation. It is based on an evocative autoethnographical<sup>10</sup> note that one of the co-authors wrote when her PhD supervisor told her that he thought she, being a woman, would not want to build a career. The note, penned in the moments following the conversation, provides a look into the thoughts that go through the author's mind as she chooses to seek help politely instead of expressing outrage at what she felt was an unwarranted sexist comment. The author of the note is the protagonist of this article and has chosen to remain anonymous. The other named authors used the protagonists' notes to engage in abductive analysis, theorizing, reviewing extant literature, and interweaving data with theory.

The protagonist author's decision to stay anonymous is driven by several key considerations. First, identifying the protagonist author and her institutional affiliation would have identified the individuals in the incidents narrated in this paper. The intention behind this work is not to single out or accuse specific people or organizations. Although autoethnography allows for a personal perspective, the authors recognize the importance of protecting the privacy and dignity of those involved. While the experiences detailed in the paper are genuine and impactful, the people and institutions mentioned do not have an opportunity to respond or provide their perspectives in an autoethnographical account. By anonymizing the incidents, the article aspires to maintain a balanced and respectful approach. Second, our primary aim is to shed light on the phenomenon of benevolent sexism and its treatment in theory and literature, as well as its manifestation in real life. By focusing on the phenomenon rather than specific individuals or institutions, the article hopes to contribute meaningfully to the academic discourse without directing undue attention or blame toward any particular entity. Lastly, all the authors acknowledge their privilege in being able to share these experiences. Many women and individuals face far graver incidents of sexism and discrimination. As readers will discover, despite confrontation often being considered the right thing to do when faced with sexism, the article questions if confrontation really is the best route. Hence, confronting an institution or individuals is not the agenda of this article. The aim is to highlight the broader systemic issues and the pervasive nature of benevolent sexism.

In the second part of the article, the protagonist's experience is analyzed by reviewing literature on dealing with discrimination, particularly sexism. The protagonist uses introspection and reflexivity to alternate between data and literature. Using an abductive, iterative process, the article interweaves theory with the autoethnographical narrative.

The article argues that literature, largely based on investigations in a laboratory environment or hindsight, has dichotomized the response to sexism as either confrontation or condonement (by not confronting). In certain situations, a woman may choose to downplay

her ambition and underplay the discrimination to seek cooperation from those who control the path to her goals. By not confronting, the woman does not become an endorser of sexism—instead she chooses to stay in the fight for the long run by avoiding the interpersonal costs of confrontation. The article connects to a broad array of themes of how the underrepresented deal with discrimination, particularly how women deal with sexism in the workplace and balance the interpersonal and intrapersonal costs of their responses. It has implications for the fields of sexism, discrimination, and diversity and inclusion initiatives.<sup>11</sup>

Extant studies have typically investigated how participants' attitudes toward seeking or giving help are influenced by their attitude toward sexism. This account shows that benevolent sexism (BS) pervades beyond relationships that explicitly involve helping. BS reinforces inequality even in well-defined roles such as in academia where those in higher status can obstruct routine tasks and hinder progress. This article provides an analytical account of benevolent sexism, grounded in autoethnographical data, to bridge the findings of scholarly research with practical implications.

The story belongs to “anonymous,” and the co-authors decided that the article continue to build on the core note and be written in singular first person, in the protagonist's voice. Hereafter, the protagonist's voice takes over and she writes her story with an “I.”

#### STRUCTURE OF THE ARTICLE

This article is structured in a somewhat unconventional way. Where one normally expects to begin with literature review and methodology, the article begins with data (the core narrative) and then explains the methodology used to analyze the data.

The core narrative, titled “My Man(y) Masters,” that I wrote in the aftermath of the central incident of the story, ends with saying how it led to the writing of this article. The citations used in the core narrative were added later as I and my co-authors abductively searched literature for reverberance with the ideas captured.

The article then presents a dialogical review of literature on sexism layered with analysis to find answers to *what just happened?* The understanding of extant literature is followed by discussion, contribution, and conclusion sections—each section interspersed with autoethnographical reflections. The story is retained as is to retain the aspects of evocative autoethnography that seek to “bring the emotional and subjective meanings of fact-based stories to life” and encourage readers to use their experiencing of protagonist's experience to reflect critically on their own.<sup>12</sup>

I then move into the analytical realm to extract theoretical insights from the autoethnographical account. This data-transcending goal has been a central warrant for traditional social science research.<sup>13</sup> The literature review and analysis sections are clubbed together as the writing moves into abductive analysis and theorizing wherein reviewing extant literature is reviewed and interweaved with data (narrative). In the discussion section, I show both sides—my narrative self and my reflective self—as I make sense of what my experiences really mean. By embedding sensemaking vignettes and micronarratives in the autoethnographical story, I present reflexive and poignant illustrations of “being there,” allowing the reader to enter the story and vicariously experience the events portrayed.<sup>14</sup>

## DATA—MY MAN(Y) MASTERS

### Master 1 (Circa 2020)

*Finally, I could have a discussion with my PhD guide today. Guide—that’s what we call the chief supervisor in the dissertation committee in our country.*

*It has been more than a year since I submitted my thesis—it is based on a rigorous study that few have attempted in the world. It is also nearly five years since I started the doctoral program. The guide made light of the fact that he has delayed the review for so long that it must be an institute record.*

*“Be Patient, Don’t Complain”—my friends in academia warn me regularly. Thy guide is thy master, they say. Before the pandemic hit the world, I would interact with him in person. Sometimes he would have unexpected travel plans and meetings exactly when we were scheduled to meet. In the one year since Covid-19 struck, I followed up through emails with gentle reminders and hope-you-are-doing-well phone calls. But there was little progress. Today, I was eager to discuss and get on with the thesis review in the long-awaited meeting.*

*The meeting starts, and the guide jokes that the review was delayed by a few weeks (a mere fifty-four weeks) because he thought that I, being a woman, was in no hurry to get the degree since I have no compulsion to find a job or make a career.*

*His comment does not hurt me. **It burns me.***

*How has he missed noticing for five years that I have worked hard to do a study that has few precedents across the world and none in the country, that I have used novel tools and methods and hence have struggled to overcome the lack of guidance but never given up, and that I never cut corners or chose the easy way out? He could not have missed the quality of the work even though he did not know that I had forsaken much else in life to focus on the dissertation and complete it on time—waking up at 3 a.m. to work on it before my other chores filled the day, giving up on lucrative work assignments, giving up on family vacations, living in that sorry hostel room on campus, eating the hostel food. . . . All of this, after a long and rewarding corporate career prior to starting a midlife PhD. How did he not notice my work but conveniently assume that the PhD did not matter to me?*

### Be Patient, Don’t Complain—I Warn Myself

*The rage concealed within, I thank him for his concern,<sup>15</sup> and muster every ounce of politeness to say, “Sir, I need to move beyond the PhD. These are tough times for everyone, including my family and me, and I desperately need a job.” I remind him yet again that his review comments are needed to help me move forward as no one would consider my job application unless I defended my thesis. Then I continue telling him the sob story of being in a Covid containment zone, of being overwhelmed by housework and responsibilities, of finances being tight, of so many other compulsions and complications that I need to overcome for my family’s sake. I tell him about our WhatsApp group of PhD candidates and how I had been the one sharing leads for resources and tips on how to move forward with research. However, today others have finished the program while I am still here—waiting and bearing the brunt of their jokes. I too want to progress. And then I say what I feel will finally bring him on my side. “Even my husband is willing to relocate with me if I get a good job.” That*

seems to work! He apologizes for the delay, saying he didn't realize I was so eager to complete and that my husband wants me to take up a job. He agrees to review and revert.

My guide wanted a sob story, and I gave it to him. If that is what it will take to get him to review my thesis and let me move forward, so be it. Sounds simple, right? Except that for a fierce feminist, it is heartbreakingly hard to put out a sob story instead of putting her best foot forward. I hope that after today's conversation, things move ahead. I expect he will tell me one day that he had to "expedite" only because of my sob story and nothing else. I will live with that. I just want to be done with it, be done with him, be done with suckers for sob stories who deny my ambition—until another day, in another place, I have to deal with another one . . . just like him.

I am just another statistic in the population of PhDs—a woman who took *X* many years to complete it. I am sure "they" will attach a few more attributes as well—a woman who had other responsibilities and is unlikely to have been as diligent and serious as men would be. "They" will constitute committees to understand how to help women in research. "They" will offer sops, such as more time to complete or reserve seats for women-only programs, and label it as progress. "They" will debate and discuss how women hold themselves back and must be given concessions to compete. Then "they" will pat themselves on their backs for being torchbearers of women empowerment. All along, "they" will keep doing what they have always done—make convenient assumptions to hide their own incompetence, be afraid of ambitious women, and thrive on sob stories.

"They" are everywhere—the peers who choose not to refer a woman for a position because "they" are certain that she will not want a high-performance role; the academicians who devise programs for women and then systematically select only those with certain "degrees of freedom" that are a function of their household status; the corporate heads who judge a woman's capability for a job or promotion interest on the basis of her personal life;<sup>16</sup> the investors who intuitively know that the woman entrepreneur is building a "lifestyle" business and hence unworthy of investment.<sup>17</sup>

"They" are not always overtly hostile—sometimes they are devastatingly benevolent.<sup>18</sup>

And "they" have helped us stay where we are.<sup>19</sup>

"They"—the man(y) masters of our universe.

### **Be Patient, Don't Complain**

I try to look beyond "them." I try to find solace in the existence of "the others"—the ones who believed in equality and treated me like an equal, who complimented as well as critiqued my work, who helped me remove the roadblocks or explore new paths. But there are so few of "the others." It feels like a gamble—as though the chances of success depend on who I encounter along the way—"them" or "the others." Like the roll of a dice—odd number means I am stuck with "them," even number means I get "the others." Each roll adds weight to one side of the scale—"them" or "the others," "go home" or "go on," "quit" or "persist." I use every ounce of my strength to balance the scale in my favor. But I never know, when the next roll stacks "them" up so heavy that it breaks the scale and breaks me—forever. I am human, after all.

"They" say that things are changing, the times have changed. Yes, but do they know that the progress is despite them, not because of them. The progress might have been faster if "they"

*had not feigned benevolence. While I am grateful for “the others,” I am tired of the scattered crumbs of equality. It is 2020, did “they” notice? Do “they” even know that “they” are the “they”?*

*I am tired of “them.”*

*“Get out of my way!” I want to scream.*

*“GET OUT OF MY WAY!”—I scream. Loudly. In my diary.<sup>20</sup>*

*Will “they” hear?*

***Be Patient, Don't Complain***

## **MAKING SENSE OF THE INCIDENT—HOW I DISCOVERED THE SUPERVISOR'S NEED FOR A SOB STORY**

For the last several months, I had that feeling that my work or competence was not going to be enough to move the guide to do his job of reviewing my work. I had started noticing his *benevolence* some time ago. He rarely commented on my work. He had more to note about my life. On several occasions he had insinuated that my career should conform to what is convenient for my husband. A few months ago, when I had tried discussing job options with him and urged him to let me submit *my* article to a journal, he had asked me not to worry about getting published, as even without a publication I could get a job at one of the nondescript local colleges in my city. That would be better instead of trying for a reputed college in another city that would require me to relocate and hence affect my family setup, he advised.

For over a year, I had shared with him about journals that would value my research, sent him painstakingly crafted articles which *we* could submit to conferences and publications, asked for a review so I could finish my thesis. But he just existed, like an abyss—no comments, no progress, no next step—just an abyss. One year gone, just like that. I feared I would remain suspended in this abyss for a long, long time—waiting for a review, approval, degree, reference, job interview, acceptance . . . I could feel the energy drain just by thinking what lies ahead, and what does not. I can see my spirits sap. There is no support. There rarely is. There never was. I am on my own. I am stuck—in the abyss. I have to get out of it myself.

Today he unabashedly justified the delay in not clearing my thesis for over a year because he was sure I wasn't interested in disrupting my family life by completing the program sooner and looking for a good job. Knowing him, this wasn't totally unexpected. I think I knew this was coming, and I was prepared—with a sob story.

I accepted my helplessness in the situation and asked for his help today. I replaced his version of the story he created for me—the story of a woman who was working at her doctoral dissertation without expecting to complete it on time and make a career of it—with my version of the story: the story of a woman who desperately needs a job because of her family situation and hence is eager to complete her dissertation. I succeeded in not letting his “benevolence toward my family” stall my PhD.

This is the first time I have taken help through a sob story. It feels like I have crossed a line. I don't know what that line is, but it's there. It feels that way. It is a strange mix of

feelings. I feel a tinge of guilt, as though I have let down my ilk of strong women who don't use sob stories.

I also feel a tinge of victory, at having figured out a way to persuade someone to do his job—by telling them a sob story.

I feel a tinge of anger at those who need a sob story, and at those who tell one.

I feel a tinge of anger at me.

But what other option did I have, I ask my guilty self. What good was I to myself or to anyone while languishing in that abyss, I rationalize.

The explanation opens up a floodgate of several incidents from the past. I remember my many masters from the past—they are there in my head, and in my diary. With 15+ years of corporate experience before I enrolled for my PhD, I have experienced as well as observed innumerable incidents of sexism. Incidents where I could have rewritten or replaced *their* version of *my* story with *mine*. Maybe instead of anger and confrontation I would have chosen to play the game of my benevolent masters. Oh, why did I not figure it out sooner!

I go back to my diary for vignettes of other incidents in my life. In the mirror of hindsight, they look so much clearer—there was always a price to be paid for confronting, a price that was visible to the world. The price of not confronting—the internal turmoil, the emotional upheaval and the cognitive dissonance—was known only to me. Meet some of the others: Master 2, Master 3, and Master 4.

#### Master 2—(Circa 2018)

*The professor had submitted the paper I wrote as part of my course assignment to an academic journal. It has been accepted for publication. The professor tells me to revise and resubmit. He wants to put his name as the first author for an article he did not put a comma in. "What will you do with being the first author anyways? You should be happy it is getting published," he tells me. I check his profile. He has a history of co-authoring his student's work. But in all those works he is second author. In all those works, his students (and first authors) are men. I dwell over it for days wondering what made him claim first authorship only on my article. My past experiences are all fresh in my mind and staring back at me from my diary. Standing up to unfairness has always backfired. The professor is a member of my dissertation committee—not the chief supervisor but one of the members. My mind is fighting a battle to decide whether to confront or to stay silent. In the past, the feminist me has suffered negative consequences for speaking up. Earlier, this was not a dilemma—calling out had always seemed like the right thing, and the only thing to do. But not this time. This time I don't want to win the battle and lose the war. I cannot have a confrontation jeopardize my PhD. At the same time, I do not want to be the woman who did not speak up. I talk to my friends for advice. Incidentally, they are men, and they tell me without blinking, "let it go." One of them who has seen my passionate public avatar of a feminist tries to pep me up by saying, "You will have more articles and opportunities. This will not matter in the grand scheme of things." "He is doing this knowingly. What will a confrontation tell him that he does not already know?" another friend chimes in.*

*I let it go. I'll write more. I'll make up for the loss. For now, I need to live to see another day.*

### Master 3—(Circa 2015)

*We have hired a new person on the team. An additional member is much needed to meet the pace at which we are growing. My boss comments in front of the head of the organization that now there will be no problem in running programs on weekends and late evenings since we have a man in the team. I remind him that I have been managing weekend and late evening programs for a year, and we have more than tripled our outreach. What makes him miss a man? He says he is more comfortable asking a man to work on the weekends. One year of labor disparaged with that callous comment! The comment reverberates in my mind for several weeks. I try to analyze the reasons for his discomfort about me working on weekends although I had never shown any reluctance. I never found him feeling uncomfortable piling work on me, weekend or not, without hiring the resources we needed. So why this sudden concern? The work at our organization was such that outreach programs and meetings were often scheduled in the evenings or on weekends. I was the one launching and managing such initiatives. Being uncomfortable was not even on my mind. I dissect all my past interactions with him hoping to discover which word, sentence, gesture, or action led him to sideline my efforts. I could find nothing. I ask him. He has no answer. But he doesn't like that I questioned him.*

*The question ensures my exit. Soon he was promoting the man, far junior to me in qualifications and experience, at every forum. He had created his version of my story—the story of a woman who was better off not working on weekends. I confronted his version with a year's worth of data of the effort I had put in to expand our operations. But it made no difference. His mind was made up. The new man in the team became the face of the organization. The confrontation proved costly. I was pushed into paperwork behind the scenes. Eventually, I was made invisible,<sup>21</sup> and passed over for the promotion that I was strongly being considered for a year earlier. My benevolent master had freed my weekends and stalled my career.*

### Master 4—(Circa 2017)

*My friend is on a call with his friend and helping him with references for a position the friend wants to urgently fill at his organization. He shares several names, all men. He mentions a woman, and then says, "She is good, but I know you are like me. You will prefer hiring a man." I am flabbergasted. Did I just hear two of my educated peers heading their respective organizations talk about preferring to hire a man over an equally (or perhaps) more qualified woman? After the call, I ask him the reason for his comment. He says it is because their work often spills over to late evenings or weekends. A woman will not be able to cope. "But you are not regularly working late. The crunch times are few and far between. Has the woman refused to work extra hours during such times?" I probe further. "No, she is dependable and hardworking," he says, "but I am more comfortable calling a man outside regular work hours than a woman. A woman will always be the primary person responsible for the household. I don't want to disrupt her home life. I'd rather have a man on my team." Someone's benevolent master has just saved the woman's weekends for her family and stalled her career.*

## POSTSCRIPT

I share the note with a few close friends. The ones in academia remind me of my privilege. They say worse could have happened, that I am lucky to have got away with just a sob story. It is no big deal.

I share the story with other women who have worked for several years in academia, corporates, and public institutions and experienced their own share of sexism and gender bias. They acknowledge that the story resonates with their experiences and understanding of feminism, sexism, and so on. A colleague responds to my write-up with her own share of incidents where she too had felt they wanted sob stories, but she was too proud to oblige. I tell her I feel like a traitor. She consoles me and asks what good were you as a martyr? To her and some others, the note becomes a story that needs to be told. I thus find co-authors who join me in the journey to analyze the story and its characters in light of the extant body of knowledge on sexism and gender bias in workplace.

We decide to share the moral of the story: **Be Patient, Don't Complain (Yet).**

## METHODOLOGY

As the autoethnographer I treat my story as, in itself, a source of empirical data.<sup>22</sup> The story primarily hinges on a central event that triggered the writing of the story. However, the thoughts and emotions resulting from the central event led to reminiscing related past events in light of the main event. Thus, the story becomes a collection of autobiographical vignettes that illustrate certain defining moments in my encounters with sexism. The vignettes were readily available, not just in my memory but also in my diary, which I had been keeping over the years to write about significant incidents. Though I had done it without foreseeing that I would write a research article, scholars suggest that women are better able to recognize sexism after keeping a diary in which they have logged instances of sexist behavior in their own lives.<sup>23</sup> Autoethnography offers a unique methodological potential to mine experiences that are difficult to access through observation or positivist research design for theoretical development.<sup>24</sup>

Jones and Clifton<sup>25</sup> posit that an ideal site for analyzing the construction of experience as sexist, or not, is narrative. The research was thus driven by the themes that came up in the story, and there were no a priori hypotheses that I sought to prove to guide the analyses.

The narrative is the data for analysis. The narrative also becomes the inquiry and the analysis itself. Anderson<sup>26</sup> posits that autoethnography requires that the researcher be visible, active, and reflexively engaged in the text. In interrogating my own story, I question my thoughts and actions, and “use autoethnography as a narrative X-ray machine to make visible to what is often hidden from observers—what I’m thinking about what I’m saying.”<sup>27</sup>

The questions I ask myself guide the analysis. I review the literature on sexism to find answers to my questions, and to perhaps find validation for my conduct, or be wiser for the next time. I enter into a dialogue with literature as I dissect my experiences (data) and analyze them in the light of theory. The dialogue continues in the discussion section as I take readers along on my meaning-making journey, and into conclusion.

I wish for resonance with the readers of this work, and inspired by others,<sup>28</sup> I have strived to “actually write the lived experience, not just write about it.” Writing with resonance is a means to an end, and also an end as it seeks to foster an inclination in the reader to engage with, contribute to, and thus bring forward the field of research.<sup>29</sup> Investigations into ways to reduce endorsement of sexist beliefs has shown mere awareness of sexist attitudes is not sufficient to reduce men’s sexist beliefs. Empathy and perspective-taking play a crucial role in changing sexist attitudes toward gender relations.<sup>30</sup>

I abductively piece together the autoethnographic write-up to show the presence of benevolent sexism in instances where the relationship was meant to be a regular transaction. “By exploiting unrivalled access to the inner mind and invoking abductive logic, autoethnography can move beyond the illustration of pre-existing theories and contribute to interdisciplinary theory-building.”<sup>31</sup> While I wish for the raw account to resonate with the reader, I feel compelled to use the account to further “an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena”<sup>32</sup> of benevolent sexism that I have experienced. The article thus constructs a double autoethnography—one that seeks to be both evocative and analytical.<sup>33</sup>

As I delve deeper into the extant body of research, I find reverberations of my story in studies scattered in the field of psychology as well as gender in organization. I become self-conscious that some scholars have suggested that calling out prejudice might just be a coping strategy for some who try to protect their self-esteem from threat by attributing negative outcomes to prejudice, instead of to their own (lack of) deservingness.<sup>34</sup> When my anxiety gets the better of me, I want to shelve the article. But I am egged on by my collaborators to continue. “Sisterhood is powerful and the collective support engendered in sharing practices and techniques of resistance has been shown to provide women with the strength to continue,” they quote Savigny<sup>35</sup> to keep me going.

Following Jones and Clifton,<sup>36</sup> I recognize that while writing a research article I am juxtaposing the story with my subjective knowledge and decide “to simply get on with it, and not get either paralysed or caught up in the infinite regress possible.”

## A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Since the treatment meted out to me was on account of my being a woman, I started with a review of literature on sexism and gender in organizations. I start with questions that arise from data and that I seek answers to. In a somewhat unconventional way, the literature review is presented as a dialogue between my questions, dilemmas, and what extant research presents as answers:

- What just happened?

*It is sexism, I reckon. But my supervisor isn't a bad person. He meant well—after all, he was just concerned about how I would manage work and family. Women are known to often prioritize home over career. He was just being kind. The note paints him as a devil. Should I even be writing the article? Is this sexism—how do I know?*

- Did I do the right thing?

*It bothers me that I did not confront my PhD supervisor. This was not the real me—the flag-bearing feminist who would always call out sexist remarks and jokes. I am not completely at peace with what I did, yet I believe I would do the same should such a situation arise in future. Do the scholars prescribe a response for such a situation?*

- Why did I think putting family first and portraying that PhD completion was for my family's sake and not solely my career aspiration would persuade my supervisor to review?

I engage in abductive reasoning, moving back and forth between literature and data, in search of an explanation for the events.

### WHAT JUST HAPPENED?

The term “sexism” has sparked much debate among academics. For long, sexism was considered as a sort of prejudice rooted in antipathy,<sup>37</sup> which meant deep aversion, dislike, or hatred of women.<sup>38</sup>

However, this view of sexism does not account for the brand of sexism my story reeked of. The masters in my stories displayed no overt intent to harm or humiliate. There was no demeaning language. The insinuation that my work was not important was benignly hidden in the simple assumption—that my supervisor did not think my career was important to me because I am a woman who has family responsibilities. Should I be feeling offended about an assumption stemmed out of concern for my family life? This brand of sexism was not “hostile,” it was almost “sly” and came wrapped in a “I did this for your good” cloak of “benevolence.”

Glick and Fiske<sup>39</sup> call this benevolent sexism (BS)—a set of interrelated attitudes toward women that are outwardly positive and prosocial, but intrinsically sexist in terms of viewing women stereotypically and in restricted roles. It is not unusual for women to be constructed, through methods that are both overt and covert, as the inferior part of the male/female binary.<sup>40</sup> Despite progress in reducing the acceptability of blatant gender discrimination, working women continue to face subtle, ambiguous, and often covert discrimination.<sup>41</sup> Like the self-serving “benevolent” justification my masters provided—to not review my thesis since I should not be building my career at the cost of disrupting my family life (Master 1); to not assign important work or plum positions because women's families are better off if women do not work on weekends—a benevolent sexist provides a comfortable rationalization for confining women to domestic roles<sup>42</sup> and stalling their progress in the workplace (Master 3).

BS is rarely recognized and reported, and much less confronted.<sup>43</sup> Benevolent forms of sexism often do not elicit confrontation because they are not identified as sexism.<sup>44</sup> Even those who recall experiencing BS incidents protest it less often because they may see it as warm, kind, and caring.<sup>45</sup> Hebl et al.<sup>46</sup> highlight that whether a specific instance of such behavior can be labeled as discrimination (e.g., because it is patronizing and undermines the target's status) or mere niceness and politeness is likely a matter of debate.

## DID I DO THE RIGHT THING—WHAT DO OTHERS DO IN A SIMILAR SITUATION?

*My dissertation became worthy of review not because that was the right thing to do as a supervisor. Not even because I was losing time that I could have been in the job market while my hard work lay unattended. My work became worthy of review when I used the plea that I needed a job for my family's sake and with my husband's approval.*

*I feel better when I find that what I experienced was not unique. It has a name—benevolent sexism. I am not the only one who had to deal with it! I did recognize the sexism, but I did not confront it. Not because I found it warm or kind or caring—but because the perpetrator held the key to my career progress. Surely, scholars would have identified people like me. Did I do the right thing? Should I have confronted? What do people in my situation do? What can we do, what should we do?*

*I find solace in Shelton et al.'s<sup>47</sup> assertion that “targets of prejudice incur both affective and cognitive consequences as a result of not challenging prejudice, particularly when they think they should.” It supports my quest (research question) to validate (or invalidate) my reaction to sexism—I want to make peace with my choice of not confronting, and I am looking for support to behave the same way when faced with a similar situation again in future. I delve deeper into the literature on confronting and coping with sexism, particularly benevolent sexism.*

Encountering sexism is commonplace for women, and making decisions about whether and how to respond is a part of their everyday lives.<sup>48</sup> No one says/admits that they condone sexism or bias of any kind. The victims of bias respond by either confronting the perpetrator or staying silent. Confronting sexism is a volitional process aimed at expressing one's dissatisfaction with sexist treatment to the person or group responsible for it.<sup>49</sup> Although women generally think that they will confront sexism when imagining a sexist encounter, in reality most women remain silent or choose a polite response.<sup>50</sup> According to Mallet et al.,<sup>51</sup> women underestimate their tendency to adopt nonconfrontational responses or stay silent. They found that at least half the participants in their study did not make a single confrontation response after experiencing a sexist remark. Instead, they ignored the remark, laughed, or agreed with the perpetrator. Even though discrimination occurs regularly in the lives of women and minorities and is a source of considerable psychological stress, very few targets of discrimination confront experienced discrimination.<sup>52</sup> Staying silent is construed as condoning the bias—a response that comes with intrapersonal repercussions for the victim. Hence victims of sexism are considered to be either those who confront or those who condone (by staying silent and not confronting).

## THE COSTS AND BENEFITS OF CONFRONTATION

Confrontation is costly! According to Kaiser and Miller,<sup>53</sup> virtually all research of confrontation demonstrates that women incur negative costs when they confront discrimination, and that even minor instances of confrontation can have negative interpersonal consequences. Those who report discrimination are often seen as impolite and overly aggressive<sup>54</sup> or as hypersensitive, emotional, argumentative, irritating, complainer,

troublemaker.<sup>55</sup> A woman who expresses anger in professional context is perceived as irrational or incompetent<sup>56</sup> or disliked<sup>57</sup> and must endure retaliation<sup>58</sup> or social backlash.<sup>59</sup>

Does confrontation ever help? Empirical research examining the efficacy of interpersonal confrontation as a prejudice-reduction strategy is surprisingly sparse,<sup>60</sup> yet we have study after study extolling women to confront the perpetrator because of apparent *intrapersonal* as well as social gains of confrontation.<sup>61</sup> Dodd et al.<sup>62</sup> posit that a woman who confronts a sexist remark will have higher self-esteem than if she chooses to ignore the remark. Some, such as Czopp et al., Kaiser and Miller, and Shelton et al.<sup>63</sup> advocate that interpersonal confrontations against bias can have tremendous societal benefits by exposing prejudice-based injustices and thus can serve as opportunities to effect social change. Shelton et al.<sup>64</sup> advocates confrontation by warning about intrapersonal costs of not confronting, particularly when the targets think they should confront. The targets of prejudice may feel they have let down or “sold out” the group in order to make their lives easier and ruminate about their inaction, leading to cognitive distraction and decrements in performance. It appears as though Shelton et al.<sup>65</sup> are talking about me when they suggest that targets of prejudice incur both affective and cognitive consequences as a result of not challenging prejudice, particularly when they think they should. Good et al.<sup>66</sup> suggest training programs that increase sexism confrontation among women. In short, the scholars widely espouse that the virtue of confronting far exceeds the costs of staying silent.

*I again feel pangs of guilt for not confronting. Perhaps it is years of conditioning to believe that confrontation is the right thing. But why does everyone advocate to confront, despite overwhelming evidence that it does not yield favourable results? Why do scholars tell women to confront when there is overwhelming evidence that confrontation leads to negative interpersonal outcomes? I try to make sense of the scholarly findings and advice—when to confront and when not to confront? I delve deeper to understand why and when are we told to confront?*

Despite acknowledging that costs of public responses can be very different from private confrontation,<sup>67</sup> most studies investigate public responses and have examined acceptance and support for confrontation from the perspective of observers or bystanders (such as Gervais and Hillard<sup>68</sup>), and not direct interpersonal confrontation. Much of the existing research on confrontation of sexism has relied on retrospective accounts of participant experiences<sup>69</sup> or imagined responses in experimental analogue studies or participant responses to sexist actions or remarks in lab settings. The reasoning processes of study participants as well as their triggering factors is never fully understood in such studies.<sup>70</sup> Experimental analogues assess participants’ beliefs about how they feel they should or could have responded, but may not accurately reflect what they would actually do because they do not know or they cannot say.<sup>71</sup> The use of hypothetical scenarios does not fully capture the complexity of social interactions involving sexist remarks in the real world.<sup>72</sup> The research is typically conducted in lab settings with undergraduate students as participants. The samples often comprised young, predominantly White, North American college students.<sup>73</sup> Because of this privileged background, such respondents may have fewer or less severe experiences with sexism than less-privileged women, such as older women, women of color, less-educated women, or lesbians. The research simulates public

interactions and judges sexism from comments used by research participants. In these experiments, the confrontation involves little else than pointing out that the perpetrator showed bias. Often the confronter and the perpetrator are only recruited for the study, have not seen or worked with each other, and are unlikely to do so in future (such as in Czopp and Monteith; Czopp et al.<sup>74</sup>). Confrontation by respondents in laboratory experiments does not truly reflect real-life scenarios where one is faced with the decision to confront (or not) those who “control their fates”—such as a boss who holds power over job continuation, promotion, and/or salary, a supervisor who holds the key to getting the degree. Among the rare studies that investigated the impact of confrontation in situations where the perpetrator holds power over the target, Ashburn-Nardo et al.<sup>75</sup> found that people are reticent to confront their supervisors even in lab settings and imagined scenarios.

The literature underplays the possibility that targets of prejudice can ill afford to claim, report, or confront the prejudice they face.<sup>76</sup> Confronters are hailed as activists and perceived to have done the right thing or have socially desirable qualities. For instance, Swim and Hyers<sup>77</sup> found that those who confront sexism publicly have an activist orientation—people who are particularly committed to ending sexism and hence overcome the constraints of confronting. They report higher performance and self-esteem than do the nonactivists. Kaiser and Miller<sup>78</sup> report that the confronters are likely to be optimists—more confident of their abilities to confront sexism.

However, confrontation is sometimes not possible or practical or properly understood. Kaiser's<sup>79</sup> review of studies on coping and confronting shows that targets of discrimination often fail to correctly attribute their disadvantaged treatment to prejudice and instead wonder if there is something wrong with them or their group. This uncertainty is cognitively taxing and emotionally unpleasant. Furthermore, they may come to blame themselves and their group for outcomes for which they have little control, and this could harm personal and collective self-esteem and prevent efforts aimed at changing a discriminatory culture. The intrapersonal consequences of feeling that by not confronting one might have silently condoned sexist behavior is not well examined or understood.<sup>80</sup> Much like sexist humor, benevolent sexism creates an interpretative ambiguity. Humor can disguise the biased nature of a remark creating the confusion—should I confront it because it is sexist and demeaning, or should I let it go because it is meant to be funny?<sup>81</sup> Benevolent sexism also comes cloaked with concern and warmth—*such as my guide's concern for my family were I to complete my PhD and find a good job that requires me to relocate*. Knowing how women respond to sexist jokes and benevolent sexist behavior in a realistic situation is not simply an experimental issue. It is important to study actual behavior through qualitative studies that explore the real-world consequences of sexism and expectations regarding confronting.<sup>82</sup>

## DISCUSSION

After reading the literature, I analyze the data and reflect on what research says and what I experience. Who am I? An activist or a silent sufferer? A confronter or an endorser? I find that the onus to figure out is on me.



a supervisor or boss and has control over the outcomes. There is a tendency to categorize individuals as those who confront sexism or those who condone. This second face is the one that extant research warns about as belonging to those who do not confront (often considered equivalent to endorsing) sexism. Shelton et al.<sup>91</sup> might fault me for having changed my values to match my behavior by deciding not to challenge discrimination and yet feel comfortable about not confronting a perpetrator.

Do I feel a loss of self-esteem? No. I have not felt so empowered even in my encounters with Masters 2 and 3. In one case I had stayed silent, in one I had confronted. Do I feel completely sure if my response was right? No. And that is what I am trying to figure out. But I am concerned that previous studies have by and large recommended confrontation as the response, whereas the same studies have found that confrontation has almost always resulted in negative consequences for the confronter.

As romantic as it sounds, history has never been made by one person or one instance. The fetish for picking up one singular hero or heroine as the changemaker provides a good anchor for an inspirational story. But putting the spotlight on one act of rebellion as a turning point belittles the struggles of thousands, perhaps million others, who become martyrs without a spotlight. Do we want more martyrs, or do we want survivors who will rise the ranks to make a difference eventually?

Echoing the words of a target of racial prejudice from Feagin and Sikes,<sup>92</sup> “when [discrimination] *does* happen . . . you have to formulate a plan of action to still accomplish your goal and let that be your number one priority.” It is all about the goal. The goal should dictate the choice of response. *Be patient—don’t complain yet.*

Swim and Thomas<sup>93</sup> posit that targets of prejudice should anticipate the consequences of their responses on their goals. However, confronting (in various forms) appears to be the suggested response in extant studies. This article suggests the Janus approach to balance the dichotomy of confronting or condoning when faced with discrimination in workplace. While evaluating the potential costs and benefits of one’s responses, accepting the Janus gray is more likely to help in a goal-based assessment of response than adopting a rigid, black-or-white stance of being on the right (or wrong) side of prejudice.

I search for similarities to the Janus approach in extant literature. I find that being Janus is somewhat like the “state of enduring ambivalence” of a tempered radical.<sup>94</sup> The tempered radical may therefore cool-headedly play the game to get ahead but does not want to get so caught up in the game that she violates or abandons her personal identity and beliefs. In this sense, tempered radicals must be simultaneously hot and cool headed.<sup>95</sup> Untempered, this approach may alienate those in power and threaten the tempered radical’s professional identity and status. While a few studies have explored tempered radicalism in organizations, how individuals are able to acknowledge and embrace opposing ideas simultaneously to deal with prejudicial behavior such as sexism has not been studied.

## CONTRIBUTION

This article seeks “to give voice to women’s experiences as constructors of knowledge.”<sup>96</sup> It started with being a story that needed to be told. Autoethnography has steadily gained

acceptance as a research approach to understanding the experiences. Even the bastions of entrepreneurship research were stormed by Mark's<sup>97</sup> critical examination of how her personal story challenges the politically charged narrative of heroism that dominates public and academic storytelling.

I hardly felt like a hero while trying to tell my supervisor why I needed to complete my dissertation for the sake of my family. That I had “permission” to spend three to four years, but the waiting time has added one more year already and, as a family, we could not afford my working on a PhD for so long. My behavior was the complete opposite of what I had trained myself for over the years—the torch bearer of gender equality, believer in merit above all else, the confronter of unfairness. In my last interaction I did anything but confront. I appealed to the perpetrator's sense of superiority. I made my case for making progress by pleading to his inherent commitment to benevolent sexism. I used his bias to work for me—a feat I had been incapable of earlier. I had used a sob story to convey that I was doing it all for my family.

The movement for women empowerment and gender equality may have done well to tell us about role models who “spoke out loudly and bravely to demand the rights that we now have.”<sup>98</sup> But that is only one side of the coin. The role models are women who became role models after excelling in their respective fields. What we know about them is their public persona, their heart-touching or thought-provoking quotes that became famous after they had gained power. No one tells us how to cross the chasm without falling through, in the face of everyday sexism that saps our spirits.

The Janus approach finds reverberance in the scholarship related to negotiations that has shown “by appearing other-concerned, women can make their contributions seem more valuable to their targets than if they appear self-interested.”<sup>99</sup> I wish my story had more liberated elements of speaking up courageously and demanding my right to a timely review. Alas, it is no such heroic tale. It is a tale of surviving for another day when I can contribute more vocally to rectify gender inequalities not just for myself alone. Because what we need are not women martyred at the altar of sexism but those who make progress to reach positions of authority and can help reform the social structures that keep women in their place. In an eerie similarity to what Bowles and Babcock<sup>100</sup> had predicted about crafting a relational account to avoid social backlash over negotiating compensation, I struggled with feeling inauthentic. The idea of using what I continue to refer to as a sob story was offensive.

Yet, as I analyze it, I become surer that it was the wise recourse.

#### **PREACH BUT BE CAREFUL WHERE YOU PRACTICE**

This autoethnographic account offers one possible strategy that women could use to overcome sexism, particularly benevolent sexism. While it does not claim to be a best practice, it tries to shift the attention away from the public and academic discourse that emphasizes that women should confront, despite confrontation being well recognized as leading to negative outcomes.

*I tell myself of how highly ranked the institute where I am pursuing my doctoral program is. I will be ok, eventually. I will pay glowing tributes to “them” in the acknowledgment section of my thesis. I will make progress. I will work alongside “them,” and I’ll eventually learn how to handle “them” better, but I will not become one of “them.” I will probably use a sob story again in the future if the need arises. I’ll forget how I felt the first time I crossed the chasm. But I’ll remember that there are options other than confrontation to deal with sexism and achieve a favorable outcome. I want others like me to know of these options. They are being misled to confront when the odds are stacked against them. And they are being fed with guilt for not confronting.*

*I am surprised that I am no longer angry at “them.” That does not mean I endorse their behavior. Their behavior remains unacceptable, but I have accepted that there is no escaping such behavior. I feel wiser for having cracked “their” code. But it is partial wisdom. Why “they” need a sob story is still to be figured out. Is the collective benevolence a mechanism through which they keep us in our place? Those who suffer need to know so they can negotiate their way through the benevolent roadblocks. We need to know so that “they” can stop with their unsolicited benevolence.*

A multipronged approach is needed to understand when and how sexism can be confronted, and endorsement of sexist attitudes can be reduced. Only a few studies have examined specific ways to reduce sexism. Most studies have looked at the effect of providing individuals with certain information to change their attitudes.<sup>101</sup> However, BS is often overlooked, underreported, and less likely to be challenged.<sup>102</sup> Those who endorse BS are found to lend support to group-level outcomes that are antagonistic to women’s interests, such as disapproval of public breastfeeding, acceptance of the gender status quo, blaming of rape victims, justification of domestic violence, acceptance of paternalistic restrictions on pregnant women’s behavior, and enjoyment of sexist humor.<sup>103</sup> This study provides direct evidence of how BS leads to negative outcomes such as career stagnation and loss of opportunities to progress. It supports the calls to go beyond experimental manipulations to study lived experiences and real-life incidents through the use of newer methodologies such as autoethnography,<sup>104</sup> to bring one’s authentic self to scholarship,<sup>105</sup> and to experience the power of personally relevant research on a topic that affects a large number of people in this world.<sup>106</sup>

## CONCLUSION

*I convoked with a PhD—more than two years after I had submitted my dissertation for review. In the acknowledgment section of my thesis, I have duly thanked my supervisor, various faculty, and staff at the institute. I am looking forward with hope. I will get over the bitterness of losing two years, just waiting. I feel that my master’s story has turned out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Most people will assume that I took so long to complete it because I was not serious about making a career. Sigh! Will they believe me when I tell them that my supervisor admitted to delaying my PhD because he thought I was not serious? Would I ever tell anyone? Why would I?*

“We become a problem when we describe a problem.”<sup>107</sup> Public attributions to prejudice are interpersonally costly.<sup>108</sup> Women who publicly acknowledge sexism pay the price,<sup>109</sup> and those who claim discrimination tend to be derogated even when there is evidence of discrimination.<sup>110</sup>

*I can feel what the women who refused to participate in Bourabain’s<sup>111</sup> study must have felt—the fear of recognition and the fear of repercussion.<sup>112</sup> It is barely the beginning of my academic career. Do I want to confront “them” so openly? No, I do not. I have learned my lesson through experience over the years, and now with the findings hidden in academic literature. Maybe I will start believing that my supervisor had my best interests at heart when he delayed the review.<sup>113</sup> Maybe I will forget all this happened. I am already less angry.*

*An unexpected benefit of the ordeal has been the discovery—be Janus. I feel somewhat smug about having broken through into “their” wall of paternalization. It has been emotionally tiring—the entire process of breaking my head against a wall to figure out a hack through it. Once people find a hack, they remember to use it when the situation warrants it. I will do the same. I will also remember the process of figuring it out, thanks to my diary.*

Perhaps the article completion signals recovery after the flash fire and slow burn.<sup>114</sup> Or it is a rare answer to Shelton et al.’s<sup>115</sup> call for research “aimed at understanding how targets of prejudice manage this balancing act in the face of discrimination in everyday life.” Perhaps I am simply safeguarding my psychological and physical health by expressing my experiences with sexism instead of endlessly wondering if something is wrong with me.<sup>116</sup> Or perhaps it signifies the moment I snapped—my feminist snap – “one moment of a longer history of being affected by what I have come up against.”<sup>117</sup> Perhaps it is the desire for answers motivated by the need for closure.<sup>118</sup> It is perhaps a quest for the kind of self-understanding that “lies at the intersection of biography and society: self-knowledge that comes from understanding our personal lives, identities, and feelings as deeply connected to and in large part constituted by—and in turn helping to constitute—the sociocultural contexts in which we live.”<sup>119</sup>

Why should this article be published? Regardless of how useful and appropriate it seems, informing someone that their behavior is prejudiced is considered a sign of complaining.<sup>120</sup> If members of nonstigmatized groups are not fully aware of the extent to which stigmatized groups perceive discrimination and injustice (because the costs prevent them from speaking up), they may underestimate the extent to which discrimination remains a problem in society.<sup>121</sup> The conversations of sexism in organizations and in society at large need to break out of experimental studies and hypothetical scenarios.<sup>122</sup> This article is an attempt in that direction—a feminist snap that can be the start of something.<sup>123</sup>

*I am less angry, more wise. I have moved on. But I will not forget. Because the words that I wrote after that meeting that day are seared into my memory. Writing the note kept the wounds raw in my mind. Writing this article has been a healing experience.*

*I wish I had learned sooner **to be patient, don’t complain yet.***

It is time for me to dissolve into these pages and embrace anonymity. I will live to die another day. I am not fading into oblivion. I will be right here—at times openly confronting, at times silent and anonymous—putting my Janus face forward to march on. ■

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