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Feminist activism in Austria – and its way to escape a spiral of silencing and inner exile

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Abstract

Recent political developments in European countries indicate a shift to the political right and an increase in attacks on gender equality. This political change has also started to influence scholarly work and teaching of equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) topics in Austria and has led to its re-contextualization by pinpointing the rising counter forces to EDI issues. This text fills a knowledge gap on the EDI counter forces and the experiences of EDI experts and researchers by exploring their increasing silence in these times of change to the right. Based on a participatory action research project, the paper shows that a (self-)reflection on silence opens a demand for recollecting in 'safe spaces.' The paper demonstrates that these spaces do not only allow a reflection on how to overcome a *double fault line* triggered by losing previous EDI supporters and a newly invigorated gender equality opposition. These spaces also give support in escaping the spiral of silence and inner exile. The text discusses strategies addressed in these safe spaces to counter a retraction of existing gender equality policies.

Keywords: inner exile; gender equality; participatory action research; self-reflexive; silence; feminism

1 Introduction

In 2018, Verloo & Paternotte (2018) posed the question 'Is the feminist project under threat in Europe' and focused on the 'various ways in which feminist politics are opposed and why, on what the impact of such opposition is, and how to improve the theoretical understanding of these particular manifestations of gender and politics' (Verloo & Paternotte, 2018, p. 1). Almost at the same time, Austria's Government changed from a centrist government (2007–2017) between Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs (SPÖ, Social Democratic Party) and Österreichische Volkspartei (ÖVP, People's Party, a conservative party) to a right-wing government (2017–2019) consisting of ÖVP and Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ, Freedom Party, a right-wing party). Based on this political change, we feared that this threat voiced by Verloo & Paternotte (2018) could become true in the Austrian context. The signs of change were numerous.

First, the party programs of ÖVP and FPÖ and the new official government program showed a backlash in EDI issues and did not correspond with the gender equality politics of the centrist government of the last decades (see also Stögner, 2022). These formerly centrist gender equality politics should serve to overcome discrimination and essentialist as well as heteronormative perspectives on gender issues in the private and public spheres of life. In this new government, the ÖVP preferred a traditional family model with the mother as the main caretaker in a heterosexual family and the FPÖ supported a sex model based on biologist traits in terms of gender identities (Gebhart, 2019). Also, the monetary funding for crucial gender equality projects declined or even stopped altogether (Gebhart, 2019). Pernegger (2018; 2019) also noticed an increasing absence of EDI issues in the media even though the coalition of ÖVP and FPÖ had more female ministers than ever in the history of Austrian governments. Second, we noticed a beginning of silence concerning EDI issues spreading across Austria (see Lang & Fritzsche, 2018). We perceived increasing insecurity among EDI experts who pondered how to deal with the political change and how to resist the conservative EDI perspectives of the governing parties. Third, SPÖ and Austrian Social Partnership Organizations (e.g., Austrian Chamber of Labor, Union) as established drivers for gender equality and diversity disappeared from the public scene. Fourth and finally, we realized that this political change also started to influence our scholarly work, which resulted in a re-contextualization of our teaching and research activities by pinpointing more on the political context and the rising counter forces to gender equality and diversity issues.

Based on these perceptions, as feminist scholars committed to EDI issues (Bendl & Schmidt, 2012; Bendl et al., 2009; 2014), we wanted to understand these developments and, especially, explore the increasing silence of the EDI experts by comparing it with our simultaneous articulation of political danger and the increased pondering silence. Therefore, in 2019 we set up a participatory action-based research project (e.g., Kemmis & Mc Taggert, 2005) with EDI experts to analyze the development of gender equality politics of the Austrian government from 2017–2019 (see Bendl et al., 2019; 2020; 2021). In this paper, we focus on the notion of 'silence', which became central to the project. Thus, we will shed light on silence by linking our auto-ethnographic reflection of the project (see Hibbert et al., 2021) to findings from focus groups and workshops, which we co-created with the EDI experts. We intend to answer the following questions: What do we learn from these merged data on silence for solidarity, cooperation, collective activism, and inner exile for those working on EDI topics in the context of increasing right-wing politics? What spaces are required to counter a political gender equality opposition? What influences the creation of these spaces?

With this text, we fill a knowledge gap on the notion of silence at the intersection of antifeminist policies introduced by a shift to the political right based on the perceptions of EDI experts and feminist researchers. Our reflection shows that in this situation feminist activism is working on a double fault line. On the one hand, antifeminist policies bolster the everlasting opponents of feminism and gender equality and, thus, widen the gap between proponents and opponents of EDI issues. The voices against gender equality have a tailwind and are becoming louder as well as more visible, while the voices of the proponents are increasingly disappearing. On the other hand, these policies help long-standing EDI supporters to break away – especially those supporters for whom the feminist claim has gone too far (e.g., third gender, too much inclusion of different diversity dimensions, too queer as well as too inclusive) and does not represent ('traditional' binary) gender equality mainstream

anymore. To escape this double fault line, which seems to trigger a 'spiral of silence' (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; 1993) and inner exile (Hibbert et al., 2019), this text discusses strategies addressing these notions.

To do so, first, we are situating silence in equality work based on existing literature. Second, we introduce our participatory action-based research design as collective action can help breaking the silence and disrupting the 'spiral of silence'. Third, we present our findings and discussion in two sections: first, the creation of silence, and second, the disruption of the silence through collective action. Fourth and final, we conclude by connecting our findings to the research questions and by summarizing our main outcomes.

2 Situating silence

The Oxford Dictionary of English (2001, p. 838) defines the term 'silence' as 'a state of not speaking or writing or making a noise.' However, silence can manifest itself in different forms: on the one hand, from a more passive stance, either one is silenced based on power relations and is not able to speak, write or make a noise at all or can only have a silent voice. Here, silence represents the triumph of a system built on conformity pressures, suppression of the self, and moral apathy (Jackall, 1988). On the other hand, silence may also refer to an active part, and the possibility of resistance animates silence. That means to choose not to speak, write or make a noise (e.g., someone does not speak, write and talk very much or does not provide information or refuses to speak, write and make noise about something).

Concerning the former, the more passive form of silence, Noelle-Neumann (1974; 1993) introduces the 'spiral of silence'. The spiral of silence posits that 'when a given political position comes to be seen the majority opinion, perceivers holding alternative view will feel pressured to become silent, thereby contributing to the growing public decline of the minority camp' (Thurre et al., 2020, p. 547). This 'spiral of silence' refers to a positive relationship between opinion climate perceptions and political opinion expression (Matthes et al., 2018) experienced as a fear of being isolated when expressing a possible minority position (Moy et al., 2001). Furthermore, the spiral of silence approach postulates the existence of a vicious circle (Clemente & Roulet, 2015): the longer members of a group fail to express their views or, in other words, remain silent, the more unstoppable the spiral of silence becomes. This idea relies on a micro-level psychological phenomenon where social actors avoid expressing views they consider marginalized. Nonetheless, voice and the format of raising it is a key variable in stopping this spiral of silence. Voice and its verbal expression on the one hand, and the role of interpersonal relationships on the other are important factors to gauge public opinion. Noelle-Neumann (1993) warns of the effect that people exert isolation pressure by frowning or turning away when somebody says or does something that a broader public reject.

Concerning the latter, the more resistant mode of silence, Bell et al. (2003) re-read the term 'silence' and posit expressions on a continuum from silence to voice in their auto-ethnographic text of resistance of black and white women. For them, within silencing, an 'open door' to resistance exists, as silence and secrecy that anchor power and authority 'can loosen its holds' (Bell et al., 2003, p. 407) and make it possible to thwart it. Bell et al. (2003, pp. 407ff) reveal different 'voices of silence'. First, silence can be a 'cloaking device for action'. This perspective indicates that silence is a rhetorical mask for quiet forms of action. It is an active accomplishment, a veneer over more ambitious and radical actions. From this angle,

silence gives women a place to do their work quietly. Second, silence can work as political savvy in situations where the voice might be reckless. Third, silence as a boycott is a conscious strategy for resisting. Fourth, it is relevant to know if one freely chooses silence or if it is the outcome of oppression. Hence, silence as a chosen strategy is more compelling and believable if there is any explicit statement. Typically, emotionally and morally laden issues ignite different opinions. The field of EDI represents such controversial topics, which may render advocates for or against gender equality silent dependent on where the tailwinds come.

Meyerson and Scully (1995, p. 585) consider white women 'who identify with and are committed to their organizations and also to a cause, community or ideology that is fundamentally different from, and possibly at odds with the dominant culture of their organizations' as 'tempered radicals'. These agents of change are activists who are organizational members (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016) seeking to bridge 'inside' and 'outside' perspectives and find ways to shatter the experienced walls within and outside the organization. For Resurrección and Elmhirst (2020), experts in the EDI field are positioned either as 'trojan horses' for feminism within organizations or as 'femocrats', complicit in bureaucratizing feminism and the loss of its transformative edge. Ahmed (2017) describes the willfulness ascribed to feminists and the killjoys, and the walls as well as silences these advocates for gender equality are facing. But what happens to these change agents who seek to rock the boat just hard enough to make change while keeping their job (and thereby keeping both their professional commitment and their future capacity to make change) in times of foreseeable and already given antifeminism, backlash, and antigenderism (see Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018; Verloo & Paternotte, 2018). Are they exposed to a spiral of silence? Or do they act as active members who try to keep their voice in this silencing process?

Together with the experts, we intended to author and co-create perspectives on what happened in this time of change. We were eager to discuss practices that prevent practitioners and scholars from being silenced in the minority camp and/or sent to political exile and/or self-imposed inner exile.[1] It dawned on us that the political change will not only have consequences for EDI issues, EDI experts, and our work but for gender equality politics in general. Next, we present the design of our participatory action research project.

3 Design participatory action-based research project

To closely explore this change in politics and increasing atmospheric silence, we started our feminist participatory action-based research project (see Bendl et al., 2019; 2020; 2021). Action research considers knowledge to be socially constructed, recognizes the embeddedness of research within a system, and promotes a model of human interaction (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003). Thus, it produces knowledge contingent on the particular situation and develops the capacity of members to solve their problems. Action research is future-oriented, collaborative, implies system development, generates theory grounded in action, and is agnostic and

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[1] We refer to inner and not to internal exile. For us, the term 'inner' signifies more what decisions activists have to take in their psychological inner rooms, doors, sanctums, or what different voices are working inside. Internal would only refer to the fact that something is happening inside but is not connected to the most inner motivation of engaging in feminist action.

situational (Susman & Evered, 1978). The focus on socially engaging action research is a collaborative approach in which those typically 'studied' are involved as co-researchers in some stages of the research. Participatory action-based research supports circumstances where people want to make changes thoughtfully after critical reflection (see Arieli et al., 2009). Lived experience is the starting point for such an investigation, and the participants and researchers produce knowledge through collaboration and action (Corlett, 2012). These notions of action research enabled us to seize what triggers the silence of EDI experts in this time of change and to highlight a dialectic political and participatory approach (see also Katila & Merläinen, 2002).

In the first step in June 2019, we organized three focus groups with 16 white female EDI experts being representatives of 14 Austrian public organizations. Most of the experts are publicly well-known advocates for gender equality in their institutions and equipped with institutional and political power for creating change toward more gender equality in their relevant fields. In these focus groups, we discussed the current status of gender equality achievements in Austria. In October 2019 after we analyzed the focus group data, we focused on community building with the EDI experts by presenting the results. We documented this workshop with a written protocol. In this workshop, the idea popped up to bring in additional generational perspectives and link to younger EDI experts. We achieved this in the third step, at a second workshop in January 2020 where each expert invited a younger colleague. Supported by these additional participants, we collected possible actions to envision future activities for breaking the silence and re-gaining visibility. Retrospectively, silence as a topic was part of the action research project all the time but became more visible at every step. In the fourth step in May 2021, we reflected on our own experiences in the project. The trigger point for the auto-ethnographic analysis was the various impressions that came up while preparing the participatory action-based research project. We felt that our experiences in the project make an additional contribution to the data of the EDI experts concerning the silence and the reflections on solidarity, cooperation, and collective activism of EDI experts. In an auto-ethnographic approach (see Hibbert et al., 2021) by using the critical incident technique (CIT, cf. Strauss, 1993), each of us reflected in written form on the following themes: motivation and aims for the project; experiences in terms of the social, content and method of the project; our roles and resources; two key experiences within the project.

Considering all these steps of the project, we have two data sets, which allow us to reflect on the increasing silence: the first comprehensive data set consists of the transcripts of the focus groups and written workshop protocols. For analyzing the focus group transcripts, we applied a qualitative content analysis (QCA) based on Mayring (2014), a systematic procedure in which a text is searched for relevant information with a constructed analysis grid. Additionally, we have data based on the written protocols of the two workshops with the EDI experts and pictures of the flip charts produced by them. The second data set is our written protocols from our systematic auto-ethnographic process of reflection. All three of us reflected on the themes presented above.

The following presentation of the data brings together these two different data sets, first, by presenting the results, which we co-created with the EDI experts (T1–T3 transcripts of the focus groups, T4 and T5 protocol of workshops) and, second, by describing the results of our reflection (written and collected in T6). The combination of these two data sets allows us to give insight into the silence, which has crept slowly over all of us as EDI experts in the different fields during the political change to the right.

4 The facets of silence and activism

Our findings show, first in Section 4.1, the creation of silence through (hostile) political changes away from the progressive interaction with EDI issues. Here we present data from the focus groups, which give insights into why the silence among the EDI experts has increased. Moreover, we explore emotional experiences, fault lines, and ambivalences tightening the spiral of silence. Second, in Section 4.2, our findings show how collective action can counteract this felt silence with the help of safe spaces, feminist reflection, and encounters as a refuge, also by exploring modes of practices and drivers for collective action. Our auto-ethnographic data bring in drivers for collective action, emotional experiences, modes of practice, fault lines, and ambivalences. Additionally, we present the data of the focus groups on the targets of change, which give insight into why the silence among the EDI experts has increased. Altogether, the results of the two data sets allow a first comprehension of how to oppose the feminist experts' and activists' silence in a change to the political right.

4.1 Creation of silence

The creation of silence, resignation, and distancing of EDI experts and researchers is a response to the rise of antifeminist politics and of the right. Therefore, first, we concentrate on the narratives of the expert rounds and on the outcomes of our self-reflection that demonstrate the spiral of silence. Then, we present emotional experiences and fault lines as well as ambivalences found in the auto-ethnographic data, which evolved in the process of the action research project.

Targets of change: Narratives of the expert rounds

Concerning their organizations, some experts expressed worries about generally reduced support for gender equality issues. In this regard, they perceive a decline in awareness, especially among managers at the middle functional level (T2, lines 973f). At the same time, resistance to gender equality is increasing internally among colleagues and externally among customers. Overall, the experts locate fatigue in gender equality policies due to a restlessness between being an advocate for gender equality, external circumstances, and internal organizational balancing acts. To be aware of the complexity, few participants, however, diagnose contrary tendencies (the further development regarding a third option for gender entry, events, and studies with the aim of promoting gender equality, and the implementation of gender equality as a criterion in teacher training).

  Probably the most strongly formulated aspect against the ÖVP/FPÖ government by EDI experts is the fact that ÖVP/FPÖ politics promote unpaid reproductive work. The experts consider this as the basis for returning and cementing hierarchical and dual gender roles and strengthening the single-earner family model (with the man as the sole breadwinner). One expert traces this to the fact that financial measures, such as the family bonus, are mostly paid to the higher income earner in the family, more often men, while there are no investments for expanding childcare (T3, lines 373f). The experts unanimously note a refer-

ence back to the ideal of the heteronormative nuclear family with a re-focus on the role of women in care work, which is particularly evident in labor market policy. In general, they report in this context a shift in interests from employees to employers (T1, lines 340f).

Regarding social norms, the EDI experts unanimously perceive regression and give the following example. No one raised their voice when a local Student Union called for abolishing mandatory gender studies courses on the grounds of free education and freedom of expression in their journal. This lack of objection from students and academics is cited by one expert as a worrying change of attitude concerning gender equality triggered by the political framework of the ÖVP/FPÖ government (T1, lines 1173f). Likewise, experts point to a burgeoning of public discussions on the abolition of existing rights about the 'Fristenlösung' (right of abortion until the third month of pregnancy). These discussions oppose the self-determination of women about their bodies and their lives regulated by Austrian law.

The experts also show an ethnification of gender-based violence and ethnosexism. They speak of a culturalization of gender that discriminates against ethnically marked people (e.g., refugees in 2015) because of their supposedly special, 'backward' attitude toward gender roles in their countries of origin.

Another target raised in the expert focus groups is that digitalization goes together with a noticeable increase in misogynist hatred on the internet. The experts brought in the role of social media and 'shitstorms,' which lead to an increasing need for organizational resources for internetwork to be able to set counterpoints. In this respect, the consideration of not producing a 'shitstorm' for the organization plays a role in the implementation of gender equality, which results in content-related cuts in one's work, e.g., concerning the third option for gender entry. The experts also point out that it would make sense to raise the awareness of gender equality actors about the advantages of digitalization and to expand individual digital skills for better networking and feminist campaigns.

Exploring paralyzing emotional experiences

Connected to the creation of silence is an emotional component. It is a mixture of emotions oscillating between paralysis, fear, anger, and empowerment – in both the participants and the researchers. Next, we present the first three emotional experiences. In the second part of the findings section on the disruption of silence, we talk more about empowerment.

Paralysis was the most striking feeling, which seems to prevent progress and action. It comes in different forms: 'I was very dissatisfied with the paralysis that I felt again and again among the actors' (T6, lines 75f). The perceived paralysis of EDI experts is not only based on the political situation. The cultural boundaries of feminist approaches and the substantive personal boundaries connected to these theoretical boundaries (T6, lines 290f) also create a kind of paralysis in the EDI experts.

The researchers also voice their feelings of paralysis and attribute them to different notions. For example, a self-challenging of the researchers' positions in their feminist doing in terms of 'is it always appropriate?' has the potential to weaken their position. One researcher put the paralysis in the context of the political situation:

> For a long time, I felt a paralysis in the diversity discourse, which has been appropriated by the ÖVP. This paralysis changed for the worse with the shift to the right in the Austrian political

landscape. That is why it was particularly important for me to remember where I come from in terms of interest in politics and science. I come from a feminist background and the political landscape indicated that this topic should be brought up again.' (T6, lines 116f)

She also connects this feeling of paralysis to her status as a researcher and tries to get to the bottom of her 'feminist duties'.

Additionally, anger and fears based on a lack or even loss of perspectives led repeatedly to a discussion about withdrawal. It is experienced as a weakness, especially when associated with personal connections. Difficult personal situations also represent factors causing the slowdown shown in the following quote: 'I experience a very hesitant behavior in myself, rather foaming, as never before in my scholarly life' (T6, lines 174f). The scholars experienced different intensities, especially concerning temporal and energetic limits (T6, lines 211f).

Exploring fault lines and ambivalences

The central ambivalence articulated is the simultaneous decline of collective political claims on the one hand, and a claim for 'new' gender issues based on developments in feminist theory (e.g., on the third gender) on the other hand. 'I had the feeling that we could point out different forms of contradictions and yet did not leave the participants with their personal impressions' (T6, lines 9–13).

Another topic is the emphasis on expansion of cooperation inside own organizations and the unnecessarily ambivalent call for more solidarity outside or beyond one's organizations. In the same vein, there is also the demand to expand collaboration. 'The women are individually connected and networking, but official cooperation across the official committees is very difficult. Protection and belonging to one's own institution are then in the focus or above the common interest' (T6, lines 214f).

Biographical and emotional notions paired with different modes of practice and fault lines can create silence but can also work as a trigger for looking for aspects of opposition. All this should be considered vis-à-vis work overload, which makes the experts run out of steam. These changes toward less gender equality are embedded in an energy-sapping context for the experts. Moreover, to be no longer inquired and heard as an expert not only reduces influence and power but also costs energy. A resulting discomfort may lead to a dis-identification and distancing from the troublesome gender equality work. Hence, we want to focus now on the disruption of silence through collective action.

4.2 Disruption of silence through collective action

To build up new frames for disrupting silence, some of the EDI experts advocate new spaces: 'There is a little missing… a space where you say, you sit down there, you can discuss it without everyone bothering each other and saying, yeah, something might happen. […] I think this is a bundling of forces… and also of topics' (T2, lines 1220f). What is striking about the possibilities for action is the importance of solidarity and the collective. The experts position themselves against existing tendencies toward individualization and call for counter-

strategies. However, to come up with these strategies to escape a spiral of silence and inner exile, more space for reflection is needed. A reflection on escaping silence will be presented later. Next, we refer to drivers for collective action, empowering emotional processes, and changing roles.

Exploring drivers for collective action

Our drivers for collective action in this time of change are manifold: The first and foremost drivers are our feminist biographies. Sharing biographical experiences is enriching, as the following quote shows: 'The return to where I come from, both, politically and scientifically, was particularly important. Coming from the feminist movement and the advancement of women, the political landscape suggested that this issue should become an issue again' (T6, lines 206ff). In this context, the explicit wish is to pass on experiences and knowledge to improve the situation of women and counteract the political situation (T6, lines 133f) – all informed by former feminist activism.

The second driver for collective action refers to the dissatisfaction with the infiltration of achievements in gender equality politics and a re-consolidation of heteronormativity. 'Even if there were many ideas for action, we see that personal branding (*Marke Ich*) of politicians seems to be more important than women's equality politics and a decline in political support for women's issues at all levels' (T6, lines 188ff).

Another strong driver claims sharing experiences and wishes to maintain solidarity. One of the researchers articulates the desire to make strong actors visible and to strive for solidarity: 'I sense that one of my wishes is to re-gain and revive a kind of common ground' (T6, lines 129f). Hence, feminist biographies, dissatisfaction with certain political developments, and seeking solidarity represent potential drivers for collective action.

Exploring empowering emotional experiences

The project had a strengthening effect on EDI experts and researchers and showed that the differences in positions, experiences, and approaches to gender equality are part of the feminist discourse. 'It was not only nice to see familiar faces, but also empowering to see that similar topics are being dealt with in different ways' (T6, lines 168f).

There are many indications for respectful and appreciative interaction and perceived empowerment during the project. Although several passages in the introspections point out that the scholars and experts are discouraged, other sections emphasize positive reinforcement and indicate strength for new activities (T6, lines 18f).

Collective feminist goals and actions developed during the workshops can be considered an interplay of the familiar and the new. 'It was good to experience that we, as two old colleagues and the representatives of the next generation and newcomers, were able to develop a kind of collective feeling, which seems for us important for reaching feminist goals' (T6, lines 154f). In particular, this shared experience evolved through the respectful, appreciative interaction among the scholars (T6, lines 167f).

Exploring mode of roles

In the course of the events that followed the focus group discussions, the roles of the scholars changed. 'We could have made our approaches, for example, with regard to our content-related passive role in the group discussions, more transparent for the participants' (T6, lines 202f). After the focus groups, the workshop format enabled the scholars to be more present and to participate more in terms of content: 'From phase to phase, the roles loosened up, and in the phase that was originally planned, when it was more about activism, they might have been completely dissolved – actually a nice implementation of the goal of the project' (T6, lines 259f).

As the process progressed, the role of the researchers changed into positioning as participants and part of the group. Hence, the scholars adopted other roles, such as moderators, experts, and persons affected by political change. 'In the three focus groups, I had the feeling that I was left out. That has changed with the workshops. We were part of the group' (T6, lines 13f). In this context, the term 'participatory' in the action research project got its meaning and justification: the roles of the researchers blurred and faded out.

In line with this blurring of boundaries and interweaving aspect, the relationships between the researchers have also developed. The role allocation of the researchers based on their different backgrounds, histories, statuses, and individual development of feminist positions (T6, lines 103f) blurred. For example, the senior-junior role allocation that existed at the beginning of the project (T6, line 250f) changed. Additionally, relationships between the experts and researchers have changed (T6, lines 206f).

Last, the importance of 'safe spaces' was emphasized repeatedly. One important practice in our internal discussions was to provide a setting for reflection where the participants could experience a protected space for their assessments. This role of process responsibility in the project was particularly relevant for the focus groups. One researcher experienced the pure moderator role as a special feature: 'I found it particularly interesting to simply let the experts talk in the different group compositions' (T6, lines 38f).

A withdrawal to a 'safe space' was seen by one researcher as protection and, thus, also a possibility to activate new forces. 'The feelings that I have associated with withdrawal strategy: I had previously associated withdrawal very strongly with resignation and defeat, but now I also associate it as an opportunity to generate strength' (T6, lines 22f). Next to a search for, and curiosity about exchange beyond individual networks, the experts were also longing for a safe space (T6, lines 161f).

To sum up, roles, relationships, and spaces changed throughout the practices toward more familiarity and integration, which helps in disrupting silence and forming collective action.

Creation of spaces for disrupting silence

To resist possible disengagement processes and to go on striving for gender equality, the EDI experts need more inspiring and active alliances for gender equality. The creation of these alliances also needs safe spaces. In this context, it makes sense to speak of safe spaces as a process of becoming that serves the kinds of EDI-experts' activities that their critics hold to be all-important. Safe spaces allow the relational work of sharing and recognizing to re-occupy official spaces again (Hill, 2020).

Old and new alliances can strengthen the EDI experts' position by seeking common ground, opening up to other positions, and integrating them. In addition, introducing new publicity based on digitalization and reconnecting again to existing networks nationally and internationally represents a way of supporting collective feminist endeavors for counteracting increasing gender-inequality forces.

For such a reflection, Hibbert et al. (2019) offer *two reflexive practices*, which embrace or avoid taking over responsibility – namely critical- and self-reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2016). In the context of the EDI experts, *critical reflexivity* focuses on the external environment and its constitutive role and positioning for gender equality. *Self-reflexivity* centers on the surfacing and questioning of the values and assumptions taken for granted by the EDI experts while working for gender equality and that are at stake now.

To avoid becoming stuck in regressive gender equality developments, it helps to discuss this critical and self-reflexivity along with Hibbert et al.'s (2019) framework, which addresses the intersection of the target of change (here gender equality) and modes of reflexive practices. According to this framework, a call to change may lead to transformative action either in the *avoidance* or *engagement* mode, both requiring action. In the former, the avoidance mode, the EDI experts may choose between *resigning* (to go on as before) and *relocating* (to place oneself at some physical or mental distance from the equality politics issues that create discomfort). In the latter, in the engagement mode, the EDI experts may reflect on *reconfiguring* (seeking to deliberately transform oneself to fit in with a desired picture or role) and *resisting* (as a way of responding through direct action to challenge organizational authority or dominant ideologies). Such reflections help to situate oneself in the double fault line.

It needs enough space for discussing the implementation of more open concepts of gender as it is a challenge for the experts in this time of antifeminist politics, as they lose old fellow campaigners for gender equality. For these comrades-in-arms, the implementation of the third gender goes too far. To reflect on this problem, Hemmings (2012) proposed the concept of affective solidarity for moving away from rooting feminist transformation in the politics of identity and toward modes of engagement that start from an affective dissonance experience. Being aware of the physiological, emotional, or cognitive sense of being 'struck' and 'stuck' is key to critical self-reflexivity and learning. A focus on dissonance experiences opens the door for questioning ways of understanding and being. Working with EDI issues is a rational process, cognitive work, and emotional involvement. Reflexive thought and practices require a deeper understanding of the entangled role of emotions. Emotions involve the self in the social context, and emotional engagement with others offers a better understanding of the insights provided (Hibbert et al., 2019). Thus, differences in motivation toward reflexive actions may be associated with an emotional tone, for example, positive and stimulating or negative and resigning. For a better understanding of these tones, one needs space and time for setting up compassion (e.g., Davis, 2017) that makes it possible to listen to and understand the suffering of the other to set up new collective actions.

Finally, space is needed for reflecting on observations in other fields of social transformation. For example, 'prefigurative partaking' (Skoglund & Böhm, 2020) as practice in environmental activism is based on a collective movement that is boundaryless insofar as it is transgressing traditional forms of organized politics. To stretch the overused individual strength and boundaries of the EDI experts, a transformative process to overcome regressive gender equality politics may furthermore not be considered as 'a situated struggle against sovereign power and authority, but as a transformative force that is distributed across spaces and times' (Daskalaki & Kokkinidis, 2017, p. 1304). Such a kind of activism can be horizontal,

from which an uncharted alternative form of organizing unfolds, which may be incremental but based on a 'pro' agenda that alters rather than counters. Such prefigurative partaking may open new doors for the EDI experts and allow for coming up with new narratives.

5 Conclusion

To improve the theoretical understanding of manifestations of politics and gender equality during a shift to the right, this paper contributes to gaining more knowledge on the situation of experts working in the EDI field. Our participatory action research project unveils that the EDI experts experience a double fault line, which has the power to lead to inner exile and create silence. On the one hand, they lose former allies and supporters. On the other hand, the EDI experts face a revival of conservative forces, who have been in hibernation and see their chance dawning on the horizon based on the re-encouragement of antifeminist politics.

The EDI experts are exposed to a beginning spiral of silence, which is induced by several points: First, antifeminist and antigender equality positions have become the political majority. In other words, the ÖVP/FPÖ coalition was able to install a positive relationship between antifeminist climate perceptions and antifeminist political opinion expression. This 'new' dominant culture based on the political re-introduction of androcentrism and essentialist notions of gender links directly to the 'old' dominant culture of androcentrism, which EDI experts have opposed with their progressive gender equality politics as tempered radicals (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). Second, the silencing pressure also depends on the open/hidden public and intra-organizational hostility. EDI activists and experts may perceive this pressure differently depending on their insider/outsider status (Brisco & Gupta, 2016). Third, personal and organizational ambivalences concerning the decline of gender equality, anger, and fear as well as a questioning of the own positioning and feminist action nurture the spiral of silence. Finally, this lack of voice based on self-selection and/or forced absence and silencing pressure can lead to inner exile and gives way to even more silence.

To escape the progress of silence, EDI experts should focus more on their part as active members who keep their voice in this silencing process. This means embracing the powerful active-oriented notions of silence. To do so, our participatory action research data ask for a re-collection of EDI experts and advocates in safe spaces. Even if those who need or desire safe spaces are treated as the problem – 'feminist killjoys' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 74), for example – rather than holding a mirror to the institutional space in which they might feel unsafe.

These safe spaces allow reflections on their personal positioning and considerations on questions for whom and for what experts and feminist activists are fighting to create new prefigurative narratives that may stretch out for new allies beyond known feminist territories.

The collection of the data in the focus groups would not have sufficed to unveil the notion of silence and coming up with the double fault line and the suggestions needed to work against the grain of upcoming gender equality opposition. Only the participatory aspect of the project – our work with the experts over almost a year in the workshops and our auto-ethnographic data – made it possible to unveil biographical, emotional, and positioning aspects, which EDI experts face in this time of political change to the right. We have been in a process in which we – the EDI experts and researchers – came together to draw on each other's knowledge to reflect on the complex phenomenon of the influence of right-wing poli-

tics on EDI issues (see Arieli et al., 2009) and to generate mutual learning. By creating this 'community of inquiry' (Friedman, 2001), we contributed to building knowledge on different notions of silence, which would have resulted in taking concrete action against the reverse of gender politics – if COVID-19 had not interrupted our collective feminist engagement.

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