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The maze: Reflections on navigating intersectional identities in the workplace

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Abstract

Myriam's story is the story of a woman who has faced several intersectional barriers throughout her life and career journey, leading her into a "maze" of dead-ends that has jointly prevented her motion. The telling of this story breaks the conventional masculine patterns of academic writing of recent years and represents a turning point in organizational thought. This piece contributes to the growing body of literature in organizational studies on "writing differently," which advocates for alternative modes of writing and doing research, particularly feminist writing that incorporates storytelling, composite character, and arts-based research. The approach taken is informed by the use of metaphor, which provides an additional means to convey nuanced understandings and insights that may not be easily expressed through conventional academic writing. The account illuminates the way social identities operate in tandem with power dynamics, social and national context, patriarchy, and relationality to shape individuals' experiences of oppression and privilege. The discourse emphasizes how these factors interrelate and reinforce one another, giving rise to multiple forms of inequality that have significant impacts on women's professional experiences and careers. It uses inventiveness and creativity to provide an immediate emotional and embodied connection between the reader and the lived experiences of Myriam. By offering an in-depth written and

visual representation that moves beyond "linguistic impe-rialism," this paper intends to create a critically reflexive and inclusive space that makes the invisible embedded and insidious experience of oppression visible to a wider and more diverse audience.

KEYWORDS

arts-based research, disability, discrimination, feminism, immi-gration, intersectionality, metaphor, motherhood, neurodiversity, storytelling, writing differently

1 | INTRODUCTION

Through this piece, I seek to share a story that illustrates the maze of intersecting systems of oppression or "dead-ends," as I will describe them in this piece. I will thereby account for the simultaneous and co-constituent nature of categories of social difference and the power dynamics that emerge as a result of interconnected dimen-sions encompassing the individual, social, and organizational sphere (Young, 2020).

I have chosen to visualize the multiple intersecting dimensions of inequality and discrimination with the meta-phor of a maze. This metaphor serves to demonstrate the complexities of navigating social barriers and the ways in which multiple forms of oppression can intersect and compound, resulting in convoluted and daunting obstacles and varying degrees of vulnerability that individuals must surmount in order to partake in or flourish within broader societal and organizational structures (Figure 1).

Guided by feminist philosophy that emphasizes the need to create spaces for diverse voices and embodied experiences that dismantle dominant power structures (Alcoff, 2005), and drawing inspiration from the "writing differently" movement, this piece seeks to create an immersive esthetic space for the reader (Biehl-Missal, 2015). This decision was made based on my belief that the male-centered view in academia denies us not only a balanced view, one that encompasses a multitude of perceptions, experiences and genders, but also one that
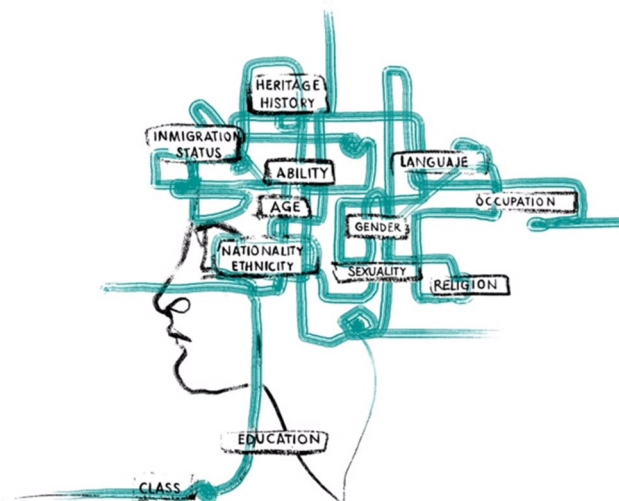

FIGURE 1 The maze of interlocking systems of oppression.

suppresses much of that which is complex and even poetic in the human experience (Gilmore et al., 2019, p. 4; Richardson, 1994). In order to "write differently," it is necessary to reject reductionism and traditional ways of depicting "otherness"; instead, attention must be paid to how the reader needs to understand the diverse range of experiences. Thus, engaging with a distinctive outlet that is less narrow and parochial (Gilmore et al., 2019) is essential.

In pursuit of this objective, an art-based approach has been incorporated, enabling embodied knowing and experience to surface metaphorically, thereby circumventing the constraints of conventional written communication (Biehl-Missal, 2015). In this piece, visual and non-conventional verbal literacies (Ward & Shortt, 2020) have been combined as intertwined forms of artistic and creative representation, resulting in novel and engaging ways of knowing and understanding that are accessible and impactful to a wider audience (Küpers, 2014; Stiles, 2014). Through the interlacing of poetically crafted storytelling and drawing, the paper defies and expands the concepts of "rigor" and "academic writing," surpassing the boundaries of conventional scholarly communication that is often lauded as the de facto standard and influenced by patriarchal ideologies. By embracing a creative, nuanced, and distinctly feminine approach, this work illuminates a novel and insightful perspective on intricate issues, breathing new life into the academic discourse, and elevating the quality of intellectual inquiry. It is pertinent to keep in mind that how we (as researchers) think and what we are allowed to create determines what "readers" feel; therefore, generating and furthermore compounding intrinsic constraints on gender and identity (Biehl-Missal, 2015). This new narrative, therefore, provides a space where creativity and agency find spontaneous and honest expression (Pullen et al., 2020).

As a result, this paper intends to challenge the dominant phallogocentric patterns of academic writing (Mandalaki & Daou, 2021; Widdowfield, 2000) and the phallic forms of representation that dominate management and organizational theory. The visual aspects of this paper reveal abstract, underlying meanings, and allow for a more artistic and curiosity-driven approach to the research (Spicer et al., 2009, p. 549, cited in Riach et al., 2016). The drawings employed to complement and extend the spoken textual narrative are a metaphorical form that add to meaning-making and allow for a deeper reflection on emotional and embodied experience (Küpers, 2014), facilitating the communication and interpretation of knowledge about the phenomena in a more inclusive and accessible way.

To avoid the impact of confronting a traumatic event through expressive writing, the rhetorically shaped character of "Myriam" and her in-depth narrative of intersectionality is described in a way that is accessible to all (Atkinson, 2014; hooks, 2000; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). The story conveys an "emotional true" (Orbach, 2000, p. 196) by incorporating methodological strands that interweave selves and others (Denshire, 2014; Polkinghorne, 1995). This is a conscientious and reflexive process informed by my own positionality (Altheide & Schneider, 2012).

As someone with a history of living in various countries, and because of my other intersecting identities, I have a heightened awareness of the intricacies of lived realities. I have drawn upon the narrative of selves, the narratives of women I encountered during my ethnographic research project, focused on exploring the work and lives of marginalized, neurodivergent, religious and foreign women employed in diverse professional settings. Consequently, I employ the concept of "writing differently" to convey these experiences, while also ensuring that ethical considerations and vulnerabilities associated with research on marginalized workers are addressed (van Ecket al., 2021). Thus, Myriam embodies the polyvocality of narratives shared by multiple individuals who experience the intersection of compounded marginalized identities (Finlay, 2002), which places them at the nexus of various systems of oppression, thereby highlighting the complexities of their lived realities (Willis, 2019). Rather than resorting to simplistic categorizations, this approach has facilitated the representation of collective experiences (van Eck et al., 2021), enabling the integration of otherwise fragmented data into a more comprehensive and nuanced account (Kipp & Hawkins, 2021). Drawing and storytelling have facilitated the representation of the multifaceted meanings that emerge within the fictional construct (Finlay, 2002). I sought to reconsider the theoretical lens of intersectionality and examine its application to the "other side" of power relations (Sang & Calvard, 2019). This endeavor enabled me to create a space for the articulation of experiences that are often silenced in academic discourse and relatively under-explored, including

those related to motherhood (Boncori & Smith, 2019; Jamjoom, 2022), social class, religious beliefs (Özdemir, 2022), disability (Kasnitz, 2020), foreignness, and ethnicity (Cruz et al., 2020).

These decisions were made with the intention that this insight contributes to change by telling a story of discrimination through the eyes of a woman. By telling this real and true story (Rhodes & Brown, 2005; Watson, 2000) through the lens of a third party, I intend to offer space for the reader to view these incidents without a focus on the narrator. I observe her journey like that of a mouse navigating a maze toward rewards and recognition and empirically recording the emotional toll that is taken by the task at hand (Widdowfield, 2000).

With this piece, I not only want to contribute to changing realities in the world of work for women who are at the intersection; I also want to reframe academic writing as inclusive and multi-faceted by surpassing the orthodoxy, colonialist system of credibility that disregards esthetic, reflexive experiences (Anteby, 2013; Mandalaki, 2021). Through the emotional, accessible, readable events of a feminist academic, I intend to make the embedded and insidious experience of discrimination (O'Shea, 2020) visible to a wider and more diverse audience (Christensen et al., 2018).

2 | THE MAZE OF INTERSECTIONALITY

Discourse on intersectionality delineates racism as a "main highway," with other marginalized identities (class, foreign status, disability, sexual orientation, etc.) as crossroads along one's journey (Crenshaw, 1989). Kimberly Crenshaw (1989) used the analogy of a traffic junction to explicate her meaning of the concept of intersectionality and the relationships between interlocking systems of oppression, imagining an individual trying to cross a traffic junction at which four roads meet. If that individual is hit at the intersection by two or more vehicles, it will be impossible to accurately determine which vehicle is responsible for which of the injuries endured. Presenting this analogy, she argued for the need to identify the multiplicity of ways in which individuals are socially positioned and to consider that the subjugation of Black women could be the result of sexual discrimination, racial discrimination, or the intersection of the two. Crenshaw's message here highlights the need to explicitly examine the relationship between interlocking systems of oppression.

This piece is not meant to contradict this claim but to use an analogy as a springboard and to adapt the model in a way that can be embraced by those who view marginalization from an intersectional lens. Myriam cannot pretend to walk the "main highway" of racism. She is a privileged white woman, but she still finds herself struggling to balance interconnected, moving plateaux of other marginalized identities (Van Laer & Janssens, 2017).

I share a story that offers an alternative visual: a maze, one we travel individually as we navigate society, the workforce, and other pillars of "productivity." I see the maze as a way of representing the journey within interlocking systems of oppression and the intricacies associated with the intersection of multiple marginalized identities. I illuminate how institutional structures make particular identities a channel for vulnerability and the subsequent hierarchy of these channels, a hierarchy that delineates some identities as more likely to be victims of exclusion than others (Figure 2). Unlike its predecessors—the labyrinth, the glass ceiling, or the sticky floor—the maze lacks a clear endpoint: it does not lead to a center or liberation (Bendl & Schmidt, 2010). The branches that make up the maze are also an amalgamation of barriers and dead-ends; these branches affect those within the maze at every level, whether this be at entry-level going into the world of work, throughout, or in leadership roles. The concept of the maze offers a versatile framework that can be applied to a wide range of situations. In the present context, I draw on Myriam's experience to exemplify how the maze is indicative of multiple intersecting dimensions of inequality.

Along the journey of the maze, interlocking systems of oppression cross to form a theoretically infinite number of divergent points, "dead-ends" that compel those in the maze to backpedal in an attempt to find and secure a place in a majority-dominated workplace (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Van Laer & Janssens, 2017).

The convoluted pathway is also rife with ceaseless distractions, which can divert and misdirect individuals from their course. Illusions appear and these distractions deceive, camouflaging familiarity with safety and comfort so that individuals end up walking in circles, wandering to places they should never have been. Walking the maze in search
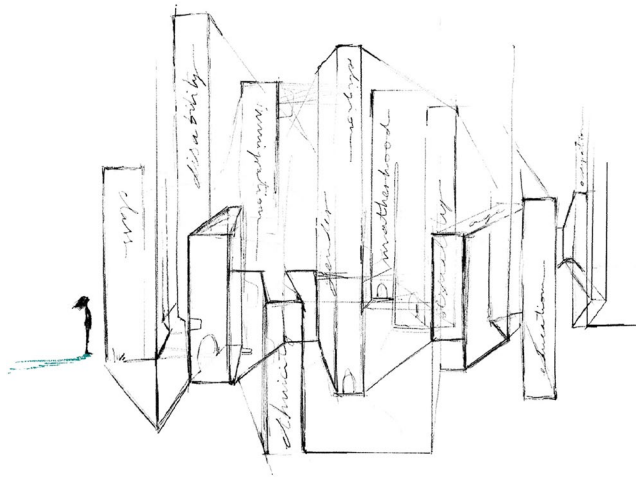
FIGURE 2 The view of the journey into the maze. Women, with their multiple marginalized identities, their resilience, and determination are prepared to embark on a potentially perilous and challenging journey through the maze, their countenance marked by a sense of unease and uncertainty about the path that lies ahead. The hedges symbolize the rigid and inflexible structures of power and authority that uphold the dominant discourse, while the small person represents the marginalized voices that are struggling to be heard and acknowledged within this system. The image conveys the idea that the dominant discourse operates in a linear and binary way, with little room for diversity or complexity.

of an opportunity, they may experience an overwhelming sense of entrapment and stagnation, compounded by the discouragement of repeated failed attempts to find a way forward.

Individuals who simultaneously occupy multiple marginalized social locations find themselves making multiple turns with the illusion of forward motion, only to discover their efforts were futile, their setbacks caused by multiple intersections of barriers that serve to impede their opportunities and perpetuate their oppression. The walls of the maze are high, rigid (Pullen, 2006) with opaque hedges, and it is impossible to see a direct path or know what to expect (Figure 2). Obstacles obfuscate familiarity with safety and comfort, causing individuals to find themselves in repeating patterns and circular routes, rather than achieving meaningful progress. These dynamics coalesce to generate a profound sense of immobilization, compelling those navigating the maze to act out of fear, despair, or dread. This disorienting state often culminates in pervasive feelings of hopelessness, leaving individuals inextricably trapped and unable to find a way forward (Figure 5). Constraints and obstacles include any situation that could reduce or inhibit opportunities, such as access to resources, being underappreciated in a position, being treated unequally in a position, suffering the salary gap, and a lack of policies that promote a balance between family life and employment.

The journey of the white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied man is no illusion of forward motion. Effortlessly, devoid of dead-ends, they walk straight forward to access positions and promotions with ease. Women with multiple marginalized identities, however, are trapped. Jobs may or may not be attainable, but in all cases compounded subordinate identities leave them with fewer opportunities to develop their aspirations and their careers (Fitzsimmons et al., 2020). Do we face barriers because of our religious heritage or because we are women? Or mothers? Because we have a learning disability or because we are foreigners? Trying to uncover the answer is like following the twists and turns of a maze: you escape one situation just to arrive in another, dizzy and confused. Systemic barriers prevent the individual from advancing in acquisition, maintenance, and access to resources. It is at this point that individuals look to another unidentified path, they blindly choose it, followed by the anguish and fear that results from the situation, only to find themselves trapped in yet another dead-end. Therefore, they must go back, trying to remember all the choices they have made so far, so that they do not take the same wrong turn again: the steps along the way require persistence, awareness of one's own progress, and careful analysis of the forks to come (Nash, 2008).

The maze does not converge toward a single center like the labyrinth model proposed by Carli and Eagly (2016). In this vein, the labyrinth that captures the multiple complexities women face on their journey to leadership positions is not disheartening at all, since despite the existence of multiple hurdles, goals and ambitions are achievable and possible, just more challenging.

Similarly, the maze does not describe a transparent obstruction that makes it impossible to advance and reach a specific, visible higher position, like the glass ceiling (Bendl & Schmidt, 2010). The maze also does not refer to the barriers that act like an adhesive tape that glues individuals to the "floor," leaving them attached to their positions, to lower-level positions, with low responsibility and low salary and with few or zero opportunities for a job promotion as the sticky floor metaphor does. The image of the sticky floor by Harlan and Berheide (1994) reminds us of discriminatory practices that slow down the advancement of women, but at the same time, it suggests the possibility of detaching oneself from the floor or from the bottom of the hierarchy, and overcoming barriers to advancement.

While these metaphors have illustrated the structures that constrain women's career advancement and have led to important insights into these structures, they endorse metaphorical differences. The maze divorces the traveler from the comfort of the cardinal direction as there is no single path; instead, there are multiple routes that branch off, forming twists and turns, planned and unplanned, that do not necessarily lead to a point. Therefore, in contrast to the labyrinth, the glass ceiling and the sticky floor, the maze describes more than simply professional advancement and the challenges that women face when they aspire to leadership and progress.

Yet do all women face the same challenges? The metaphors of the labyrinth, the glass ceiling and the sticky floor, although with some differences, emphasize the historical and cultural foundation of the white, male power and supremacy domination. By doing so, they focus on a single aspect of the lives of women and minorities, that is, a single axis of discrimination, forgetting intertwined systemic causes of (dis)advantage. By failing to incorporate the complexities of simultaneous marginalized identity and subject positions, these metaphors do not unravel the complex processes that (re)produce interlocking systems of oppression and inequality within specific organizational settings.

The maze bridges this gap, considering the multiple systems of power, such as capitalism/class, racism, religious discrimination, ableism and white supremacy, that build on each other and interact to create institutions and social differences permeating all boundaries of the life of people who live at the intersection. Thus, the maze demonstrates the social stereotypes that apply to multiple marginalized identities and appear at the time of being hired, promoted, or within an organization in a complicated way (Browne & Misra, 2003; Holvino, 2010).

In the maze, Myriam is not a solitary individual walking alone on a desolate path. In the maze metaphor, a context of interconnected systems and power structures, replicated through the labor market, institutions and everyday practices, shape people's experiences in different ways. The disadvantages are the result of the interaction between multiple subordinated categories and power relations but also the contexts (social and national) in which people move (Cole, 2009). The maze evidences the fluidity of inequality and privilege and the way in which individuals live, understand, and confront power and injustice within the contexts of deeper structures that can (re)produce inequality or privilege in the workplace (Holvino, 2010).

Myriam uses agency to mitigate intersectional effects and her intrinsic resourcefulness in the midst of hostility created by a patriarchal environment dominated by white males, nationals, and able bodies. Through the analogy of the maze, the experiences of individuals like Myriam are exemplified. As we travel the maze, we come to understand intersectionality by witnessing different socially constructed stages and transitions of social and professional roles that require individuals like Myriam to overcome barriers.

This intersectional story brings together in one character (Myriam) the lived experiences of many women whose voices have been ignored and silenced in academia (van Eck et al., 2021), thus offering a unique perspective that seeks to shape a vision of equality that academics and practitioners in the organizational field should cogitate.

3 | THE DEAD-END OF BEING A WOMAN IN A LOWER CLASS

Myriam's early years were defined by hunger, a reality experienced by many, and a symptom of the limitations of her immediate family's social class. The ache of Myriam's hunger was amplified by the freezing temperatures of the winter and sweltering heat of the summer, elements that, for those with more resources and access to adequate housing, are inconsequential. Myriam's lower class status meant she had little autonomy over the conditions that created her world, learning from an early age that she was meant to be controlled by those with more privileged identities than herself (Mittal & Griskevicius, 2014).

Before Myriam's father married her mother, Myriam's paternal grandparents promised him access to their wealth—built from the production of corn, milk, and wine—and control over the reproduction of his own wealth through adequate housing, built on their land. The promise was rescinded when Myriam's father decided to marry a woman of Jewish heritage. Everything associated with Myriam's mother, including Myriam herself, would be stained with stigma in the eyes of Myriam's paternal grandparents.

Myriam's only instance of stepping outside her social class was her relationship with her paternal grandmother, who had a soft spot for her. At the age of five, Myriam's grandmother asked about the child's dreams. "I want to be a classical ballerina," Myriam said. "A classical ballerina you shall be," her grandmother replied. Extending their access to wealth, her grandmother agreed to pay for private ballet lessons, marking a shift in the relationship between Myriam's parents and grandparents. This proximity and access to resources notably offered her family more opportunities to manage their livelihoods. Yet when one stands at the intersection of multiple subordinated categories, every opportunity presents the possibility of a dead-end.

Myriam's social class made her part of the outgroup—she was immediately ostracized (Nesdale et al., 2009). The other students in the class lived in big houses, their parents drove expensive cars, their clothes were designer, and they celebrated religious traditions unfamiliar to Myriam. Even at their young age, the children recognized these items as symbols of their in-group and rejected Myriam for not having access to them (Fehr et al., 2008). Myriam began to ask her mother to pick her up around the corner to avoid revealing herself as a member of the "outgroup." Even then, Myriam was just beginning to grasp that her proximity to in-groups would often be outside of her control. Unless Myriam could move upward in social class or assimilate to the religion of those around her, she would continue to be excluded (Figure 3). These events marked the beginning of a trajectory of "agenting" behavior that influenced her life thereafter in almost every sense (Bandura, 2006). Myriam's dedication to asserting herself and challenging the limitations and entrapment of her environment, coupled with her fortitude, ultimately shaped her into a resilient woman. She embraced a proactive and empowered approach to finding strategies to mitigate the obstacles and constraints encountered within the maze (Figure 4).

4 | THE DEAD-END OF BEING A WOMAN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Seeking acceptance elsewhere, Myriam focused her efforts on excelling in school, but found that interpersonal connections led to more occasions for hitting dead-ends. Her peers appeared to think very differently from Myriam, using a different sense of humor to communicate (Sukor et al., 2020). Her struggles within the stereotypically masculine domains of the classroom also caused her performance to fluctuate wildly. Noise and other distractions left Myriam behind all of her classmates; in moments without such distractions, Miriam found ways to complete assignments on time to the best of her abilities.

Categorizing Myriam took on many forms, vacillating between the "stupid girl" and then the "freaky genius." In an effort to settle the debate, a male psychologist in Myriam's school brought her in for an IQ test. His remarks before the test was administered sexualized Myriam: "Well, aren't you so pretty?" (Graff et al., 2012). Upon receiving a very low score on the test, the psychologist reiterated Myriam's "place" as an object of the male gaze: "According to these results, you shouldn't even be able to read. You're significantly below average. Fortunately, if you continue to pursue classical ballet, you won't have to use your brain!" Myriam pushed back: "Please, can I take the test in a more isolated
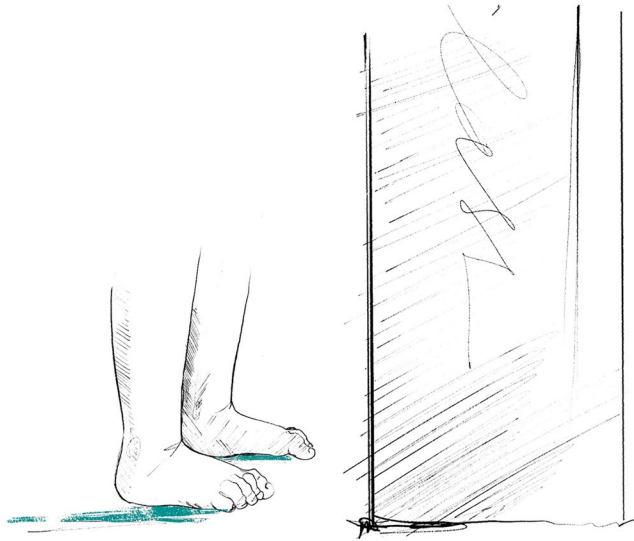
FIGURE 3 The starting point of the individual journey. The small size of the feet and the presence of the hedge, which obstructs the view of what lies ahead, convey a sense of uncertainty and trepidation. From the size, the image suggests that the journey into the maze is a process of growth and development and that each step forward requires courage and perseverance. The image of a baby's feet in front of the maze's towering hedges highlights the starting point of the journey and the daunting task ahead. By drawing attention to the size difference between the baby and the hedges, the image conveys a sense of vulnerability and powerlessness that is often experienced by marginalized individuals who are forced to navigate the maze of the dominant discourse. The high and rigid hedges of the maze can make a person feel small and insignificant, much like a child in the face of an imposing and overwhelming world.

environment? I get distracted easily." Her request was granted, and Myriam's new scores suggested Myriam had one of the highest IQs in the class. The psychologist, who had accepted the girl's intelligence as below average, was shocked. "We need further testing to find out what is wrong here." More tests were provided.

Further evaluations revealed that Myriam's inability to focus in the presence of noise, and ability to perform remarkably in some subjects while falling behind in others, was a symptom of dyslexia and attention deficit disorder. These results took precedence over Myriam's genius-level scores: the first of many systemic devaluations that Myriam would experience throughout her life. Her diagnosis immediately created omnipresent expectations of mental capacity (Dobusch, 2021); when Myriam expressed her intention to pursue a career in law, she was met with the dominant norm of pervasiveness of ableist assumptions that reinforced prevailing prejudices against her learning disability. "There are too many things to memorize... You will not succeed... This job requires high levels of memory and mental speed, and you will be nothing but a piece of meat to those clever men and rich people, it's just not for you." Myriam's diagnosis thereby further prevented her from achieving an idealized professional identity, an identity she was already struggling to take on as a woman (Acker, 1990). Her mental abilities seemed to fall beyond the scope of what was defined as socially acceptable.

The pervasive nature of social constructs acted as a constant distraction to Myriam's intended trajectory, leading her astray and hindering her progress toward her aspirations. These pernicious influences gave rise to numerous inappropriate ableist practices that placed her in an unequal and divergent position (Figure 5).
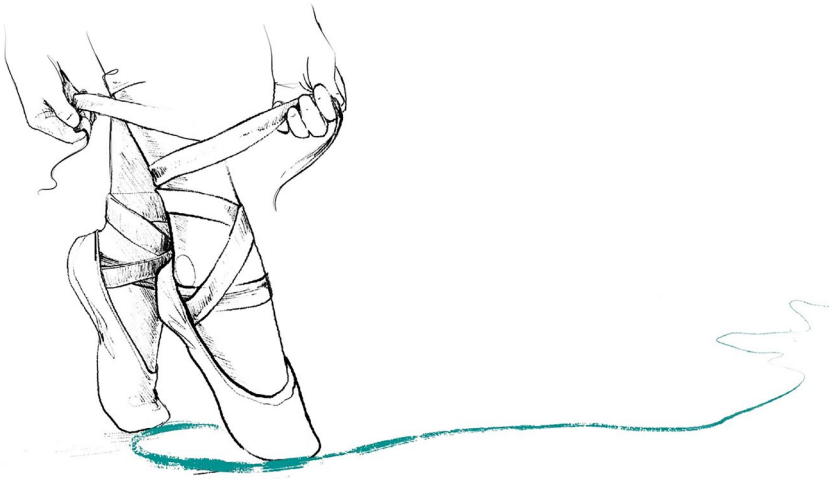
FIGURE 4 Individual agency shapes access to power and resources. By donning the ballerina shoes, the woman not only embodies the idea of individual agency, but also signals her readiness to actively engage with the world and seek out opportunities for growth and empowerment. This act is particularly poignant for women, who frequently encounter significant barriers to accessing power and resources in male-dominated fields. It is a powerful symbol of taking control of one's life, overcoming obstacles, and forging one's own path toward success and fulfillment.
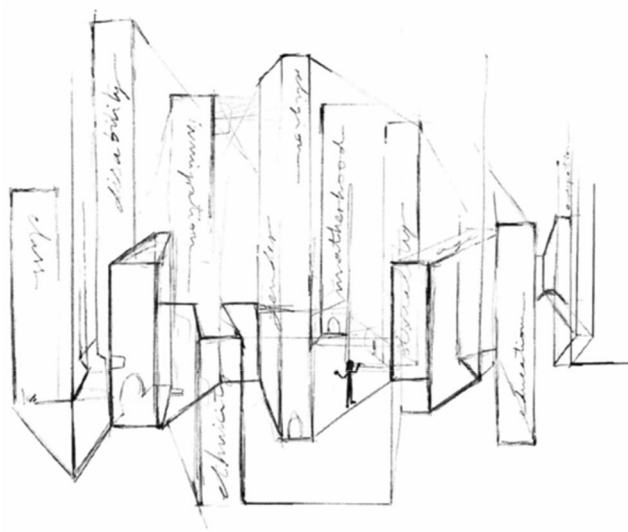

FIGURE 5 Trapped in the twists and turns trying to choose the path to follow. In the middle of the maze, there is a small figure of a woman, depicted as trapped within a large and intricate maze. The tall and imposing walls of the maze represent the obstacles and challenges we may encounter on our journey. The twisted and convoluted passages symbolize the many paths and options that we have to choose from, but which may not always be clear or straightforward. The woman standing in the maze represents the struggle to make decisions and find the right path in life. She is trapped and unable to move forward until she can find a way out of the maze.

5 | THE DEAD-END OF FEMALE IMMIGRANT STATUS

Myriam's identification as an intersectional feminist encouraged her to pursue a career in law. She empathized with those who hit dead-ends as a result of discrimination, prejudice, or unequal access (Abdellatif, 2021). Holding a respected position like a lawyer, she believed, could help alleviate the barriers that marginalized identities, like the one she had been placed in, faced, whilst also offering the same relief to others.

Myriam graduated, moved to Spain, and started her first job as an assistant lawyer. Connections with her partner's cousin offered her access to a temporary position as a practicing lawyer that paid below entry-level wages, giving Myriam an opportunity to be in an "ingroup" solely through familial ties. While employed, Myriam earned a masters, a signpost for many to advance in their social class and seek higher wages, but Myriam did not anticipate how her gender, ethnicity, and immigrant status would continue to present dead-ends while she navigated her new job search (Carnevale et al., 2021). She ran into rejection after rejection despite the fact that she was, by now, highly qualified.

To reach recruiters, Myriam decided to actively push back against the biases that were limiting her access to career opportunities: her position as a female immigrant. She used her partner's name as her surname, even though she was not married, to give recruiters the impression that she was a Spanish national. Typical phone calls began cheerily enough, with the recruiter asking, "Is this Myriam Moreno?" "Yes, this is she," she would say, in Spanish enhanced by her native Italian. "Oh, I did not realize you had an accent," the recruiter would push. "Where are you from?" "Italy," Myriam would say. At this point, the tone of the call would shift. In a gruff voice, one recruiter asked, "Are you going home to Italy for Christmas?" Myriam replied that she was an atheist but with Jewish heritage. The recruiter became even more hostile. "How did you sneak past your mother into Spain?" he asked. "You people don't typically allow such freedoms to women."

Other comments from recruiters served as reminders that Myriam's immigrant status was subordinate to that of nationals. As Myriam walked up to the reception of one office where she had an interview, she was asked by a director, "Are you here for a position at the call centre?" "No," she told them, "I am a lawyer." The director beamed and told her that she was a "very brave young lady" for coming to the office and interviewing. Hopeful, Myriam believed at the time that his comments were promising. Maybe she would finally get the employment she needed, and her gender, nationality, and age could be used as tools to advance her position in life (Sang & Calvard, 2019).

Instead, the director let Myriam know that she should "take a look at their website." "Our firm takes pride in being a national brand, very renowned throughout Spain." Then he began to ask about her Italian heritage: "Are your parents in Italy? Are you married to an Italian? Would you be able to afford to travel for work if you had kids at home or obligations in Italy?" The questions discouraged Myriam, and her hopes of earning the position dissipated.

On the firm's website, what Myriam saw confirmed her intuition. The firm composed of mostly men and not a single foreigner practiced law for them. *This is what he was trying to tell me*, thought Myriam. *I would never belong*.

6 | THE DEAD-END OF MOTHERHOOD

After a long job search, membership within her partner's in-group once again allowed Myriam to find a position as a practicing lawyer. Pregnancy, however, created another barrier. Upon announcement of her pregnancy, Myriam was asked to leave the firm. Without a formal contract or legal protections, she could only offer her job performance, driven by the familiar, female pressure to work harder than her male counterparts, as a bargaining tool (Gorman & Kmec, 2007). In an effort to show her competence in comparison to her younger, less experienced male counterparts, Myriam worked on weekends and reviewed cases diligently. While she was doing this work, Myriam's boss hired a new lawyer, a man who Myriam knew well from her master's program. After 3 months of tireless work, Myriam's boss restated his position: Myriam would no longer be needed at the firm. Her performance was not the issue, and her dedication and conduct at the firm were faultless. In an act of allyship, Myriam's colleague, who continued to work

for the firm, confirmed that her pregnancy (and, consequently, her sex) were the reason for her dismissal. Myriam was able to get a settlement due to this discrimination, but the case remained that she was no longer employed.

7 | MARKING HER OWN PATH

Instead of continuing forward with the barriers of the maze closing in on her, Myriam decided to exit that maze and build her own structures (Figure 6). No longer would she be confined by the structures set up by the traditional workforce. Establishing her own law firm was one solution to constant rejection from the patriarchal hegemony that sat on the other side of the interview table. Without the confines of the maze, Myriam could navigate a career free from the discrimination practiced by those in higher positions. However, discrimination continued, as the limitations of prejudice and stereotypes against women, immigrants, and people with disabilities were not limited to the workforce, the schoolyard, or the area in which Myriam lived.

Another maze of interlocking systems of oppression due to overlapping marginalized identities seemed to follow Myriam throughout the growth of her law firm. One client asked, "Did you earn your degree in Spain?" Myriam answered that she did. His tone became cold. "I don't think you're the right fit for this case," he said. "But you would not want it anyway. It's too much to handle for a woman." Later, she experienced discrimination as she obtained her PhD. Myriam confronted a colleague who was regularly switching on the radio in their shared office space. "I cannot concentrate with the radio on," she said. "Impossible!" he replied, "Women are always able to multitask." Myriam responded by saying, "I don't know what you are talking about. I am dyslexic and have attention deficit disorder: I cannot concentrate with sounds." The colleague was shocked, as he had not knowingly interacted with women with learning disabilities in the workplace before (Brown & Moloney, 2019). "You would not be here doing a PhD in a foreign language if you were dyslexic," he told her. "You wouldn't know how to read and do research. They would have given the scholarship to someone else if they knew. Or perhaps they chose you because they had to show that they were hiring foreign women."

People started to communicate differently with her. Her colleagues spoke to her slowly, assuming she could not understand. The intersections of these marginalized identities felt suffocating. The collectivist culture around her promoted an in-group so exclusive that it formed a container that confirmed and endorsed the liquidity that is now pervasive among more neoliberal institutions and societies, creating multiple forms of otherness (Strauβ & Boncori, 2020).

FIGURE 6 Attempt to liberate from all discursive constraints and power inequalities. Ballerina shoes themselves carry symbolic meaning. The pointed toes and delicate construction of the shoes can represent the physical pain and sacrifice that is often required of women in order to conform to societal norms and expectations. The shoes may therefore symbolize the struggle to resist and overcome these pressures. The ballerina shoes without the women symbolize liberation from societal constraints and power inequalities, reflecting a desire for agency and independence.

Discrimination against Myriam as a mother, foreigner, woman of Jewish ethnicity, and woman with learning disabilities overlapped and wove together, intersecting and creating infinite dead-ends in the maze of her subjective experience.

Myriam counteracted and strategically managed her deviation from the somatic norms entrenched in society, thus creating emancipation and opportunities for the practicing of resilience. After the completion of her PhD program, Myriam decided to move localities and received a job offer at a research university in a different country. She was able to elude these dead-ends by forgoing that maze entirely and entering a new sector (academia) and a different socio-national context, taking on the extra responsibilities of "building" the path ahead for herself and other similarly ostracized and discriminated persons in need of systemic assistance. Her devotion to sharing stories of intersectionality and discrimination in the workforce remains at the center of her work.

We cannot separate the woman from the immigrant, the disabled person from the mother, or the marginalized from the maze. Alleviating the strain of these multiple identities on those who want to access the workforce must be done by looking at their struggles through the eyes of people experiencing multiple marginalized identities simultaneously.

8 | CONCLUSION

This story seeks to broaden our understanding of social systems with writing that breaks through binaries and stereotypes and contributes to research by celebrating the poetry of human experience (Gilmore et al., 2019). This paper aims to contribute to the "writing differently" movement through its exploration of discrimination and sensitivity to that which is discussed in its very method. First of all, it offers a different language to speak and a way of expressing the multiplicity of what can be invoked by feminist writing (Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2022).

Secondly, it allows for a capturing of the inexpressible and interprets what can otherwise be textually opaque (Eisner, 2008, p. 19). Thirdly, this piece is imbued with sentiment and has the power to mobilize and provoke reflection and engagement, creating a space in which rich ideas flourish and the characters within the story are revealed, rather than just a set of characteristics (Mandalaki & Pérezts, 2022).

Finally, the artistic metaphor of the "maze" is not merely a tool for storytelling but also facilitates a profound reflection on emotional and embodied experience (Küpers, 2014). This arts-based approach to meaning-making enables a more comprehensive awareness of intersectionality, transcending conventional intellectual understanding, and empowering us to compose and cogitate in novel ways about intricate social issues. Through empathizing with individuals like Myriam and their experiences within the maze, we can fully appreciate the complexity of social systems and the ways in which oppression operates within them.

The metaphorical construct of the "maze" illuminates the existence of concealed gender barriers and contributes to extant metaphors that portray overcoming obstacles as a unidimensional journey toward a clear exit. Such linear narratives fail to capture the intricate ways in which multiple layers of social disadvantage, including but not limited to gender, ethnicity, class, and ableism, intersect and interweave, generating idiosyncratic and nuanced experiences that cannot be simplistically reduced to a single linear trajectory. By acknowledging the multidimensionality of these experiences and engaging with alternative ways of understanding them, we may strive toward an all-encompassing and intersectional approach to social justice. In this sense, the "maze" serves as a powerful reminder of the critical importance of acknowledging and addressing the interconnected nature of various forms of oppression, thereby facilitating lasting and transformative change.

The "maze" also evidences that the individual's social locations cannot be separated from one another as they are mutually "constructing phenomena" (Collins, 2015, p. 2). The metaphor also serves to demonstrate the intricate entanglement of difficulties involved in navigating social barriers as well as the intersectional and cumulative effects of various forms of oppression. Through an intersectionalist solidaristic effort (Davis, 2020), it highlights how different interlocking systems of disadvantages or privilege are reproduced and reinforced through the labor market, with important implications for women like Myriam at a particular social location.

This piece intends to offer space for the reader to understand the fluidity of inequality and privilege, as well as the way in which individuals experience and confront power and inequality within varying micro- and macro-contexts
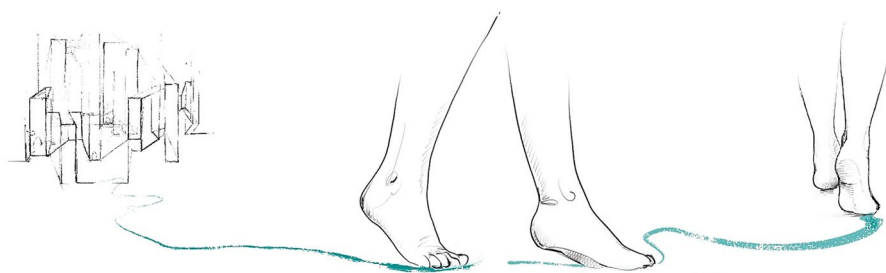
FIGURE 7 Multiple marginalized individuals trying to overcome and negotiate structural barriers through an emancipatory form of individual agency. The bareness of the foot represents an unfiltered and authentic form of personal expression. Overall, the image emphasizes the potential for individuals facing societal oppression and inequality to exercise individual agency and engage in emancipatory action, despite the structural barriers they may face.

(Holvino, 2010), which are important for studying workplace discrimination as they influence which identities are foregrounded (Stryker & Serpe, 1994). An individual's experiences may be temporary, transient, or chronic, or may even reappear as power dynamics within a given setting. The story does not end here. Myriam enters a new world: academia. A new maze lies ahead of her. Indeed, the world of academia is by no means impervious to instances of discrimination despite the fact that, in many circumstances, diversity is increasingly endorsed and encouraged (Bell et al., 2021; Mandalaki & Prasad, 2022; Strauβ & Boncori, 2020). Although it seems that Myriam is capable of exiting the maze, she cannot foresee what awaits her in the new maze that her last maze has led her to. The more she navigates, the more she will have to cope with (Figure 7).

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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