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Paradox as resistance in male dominated fields and the value of (sur)facing enthymematic narratives

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Abstract

Women working in masculine organizational contexts face a challenge of balancing (1) access to power by co-opting masculine discourse in ways that risk reinforcing it, with (2) challenging and resisting practices that privilege masculinity. In this manuscript, we address one communication strategy for navigating that challenge: The denial/acknowledgment paradox in which women explicitly deny that gender affected their experience, but also describe the many ways it affected their experience. To do so, we examined transcripts of interviews with 11 women candidates who ran in the 2017 Virginia House of Delegates election in the United States and demonstrated this paradoxical communication strategy. Our analysis offers five different structures of the denial/acknowledgment paradox and shows how four of those structures engage what we call an "enthymematic narrative" of victimhood. Ultimately, we argue that (sur) facing the enthymematic narrative amplifies the generative potential of the denial/acknowledgment paradox and suggest that (sur)facing enthymematic narratives should be taken up more broadly as a strategy for organizational and social change.

KEYWORDS
enthymeme, narrative, paradox, politics

1 | INTRODUCTION

Organizational literature attests that organizations are not gender neutral and that women in masculine organizations face challenges their male colleagues do not face. Subsequently, women develop strategies to navigate situations involving mistreatment, stereotyping, and/or sexism (Crawford, 2003; Gherardi, 1994; Ross-Smith & Huppatz, 2010). One challenge women face is navigating masculine organizational contexts in ways that balance (1) accessing power by co-opting masculinity in ways that risk reinforcing it, with (2) challenging and resisting the dominance of masculinity (Parson & Priola, 2013). This tension is one form of what has been called a gender paradox. While gender paradoxes seem self-contradictory on the surface, Putnam and Ashcraft (2017) remind us that paradox "activates constraint and creativity, as well as impossibility and potential" (p. 339). Their work pushes scholars to consider how paradoxical constraint, creativity, impossibility, and potential emerge in everyday communicative practices. Accordingly, we argue that identifying "enthymematic narratives" can illuminate how seemingly illogical messages (that simultaneously resist and reinforce masculine constraints) may be read as a skilled use of paradox. Ultimately, enthymematic narratives help to unleash the creativity and potential of paradox in the face of constraint and impossibility.

We developed the concept of an "enthymematic narrative" by drawing on the concept of enthymeme, a particularly powerful form of rhetorical argumentation,

> built on the tacit knowledge and beliefs an audience holds, and these [tacit knowledge and beliefs] are usually invoked only implicitly in the argument itself…enthymematic reasoning leaves unstated whatever premises the audience itself can be counted on to provide. Thus, the enthymeme is a deductive argument in which the audience itself helps construct the proofs by which it is persuaded. (Johnstone, 2001)

Thus, we suggest that the denial/acknowledgment paradox is part of an argument that engages a tacit social narrative of victimhood. Perhaps more problematic, as long as the enthymematic narrative remains largely unstated, it remains unchallenged in everyday discourse. By (sur)facing enthymematic narratives and making them visible, we can scrutinize the narratives' premises, better understand seemingly paradoxical positions, and embrace new strategies for resisting hegemonic masculinity.

Our interviews showed that when participants deny the influence of gender, they refuse the role of "victim" implied by the enthymematic narrative that casts women as victims of sexism. However, their simultaneous acknowledgment of gender's influence mitigates the risk that their denial might suggest that the "villain" of interpersonal and systemic sexism does not exist. By highlighting how the denial/acknowledgment paradox engages with different elements of an enthymematic narrative (the victim and the villain) we forestall arguments that take women's refusal to be a victim of sexism as evidence that the villain of sexism does not exist at all and we call for the endorsement of social narratives that more explicitly acknowledge the prevalence of sexism without rendering women as victims. An alternative narrative might shift from casting women as victims of sexism, to casting them as "superheroes" of extraordinary ability who fight and defeat sexism every day. Our findings speak to women across masculine organizational contexts who use the denial/acknowledgment paradox to sustain agency in masculine power structures.

The data for this study was collected in the context of one high stakes masculine field: electoral politics. We initially explored how female candidates who ran in the United States' Virginia House of Delegates election in 2017 made sense of experiences on the campaign trail—the critical gatekeeping process to governmental power. However, this manuscript focuses narrowly on a communication paradox that emerged during the interviews and thus asks: How does the simultaneous denial and acknowledgment of gender function for these candidates?

2 | GENDER INEQUALITY IN POLITICS

We focus on politics as a synecdoche in which politics offers one manifestation of gender inequality that plagues organizations and society broadly. Men continue to hold the majority of political power both globally and in the

US. This inequality persists even though women's global representation has increased in national parliaments over the past 20 years, with the percentage of women doubling from 12% in 1997 to 24% in 2017 (Inter-Parliamentary Union [IPU], 2021). In the current US government, women constitute 27.1% of the United States Congress, holding 145 seats out of 535; 24% of the U.S. Senate with 24 women serving, and 121 (28%) serving in the U.S. of House Representatives (Center for American Women and Politics, 2022). In Virginia, the 2017 election that we address in this manuscript led to a record breaking with 37 women in the 100 seat House of Delegates, a number that continues to increase (Virginia General Assembly, 2022). This accomplishment was further buttressed by Governor Ralph Northam's appointment of eight women to his 15-member cabinet, the first ever majority women cabinet appointed in Virginia. However, despite the progress and a new surge of women contesting governmental seats, inequality and discrimination persist.

Beyond women being in the numerical minority in politics, existing literature highlights gendered features of governmental politics (Johnson, 2014). Elder (2004) found that political gender role socialization, a lack of political confidence, family responsibilities, and the relatively few numbers of visible women role models in politics make women less likely to run for office. However, Schneider et al. (2016) found greater willingness to run for political office by framing politics as fulfilling communal goals rather than power-related goals. In terms of media coverage, Ross et al. (2020) found that journalists use more negative tones when covering women candidates than male candidates, while Meeks (2013) found that the media tends to focus on the novelty of female candidates rather than their qualifying traits and experiences. Moreover, this gendered media coverage emerges across the globe. In their analysis of coverage of four high-profile Nigerian women politicians, Ette (2017) found a gap between women's considerable engagement and participation in politics and their coverage in news media, concluding that the relative absence of women in the media is "emblematic of the position of women in Nigeria's political system" (p. 1485). Ross et al. (2020) also highlight news media's use of gendered political scripts—different words used for men like assertive or rational, and women politicians, like unfeeling or aggressive—which perpetuates gender normative behaviors attributed to men and women, thus affecting how constituents view candidates' competency, likeability, agenda, and other qualities. On a broad scale, practices like these not only result in gender segregation by profession but a greater value placed on traditionally masculine jobs, accompanied by a greater concentration of power in those positions (Royster, 2003). These studies demonstrate that the gendered dynamics of governmental politics involve more than mere gaps in representation; they involved gendered norms and expectations that are sustained through messaging and maintain gender inequity in political institutions. In short, the stories we tell, whether in media or in casual conversation, influence politics.

However, in her elaboration on gender as a social institution, Lorber (1994) clarifies that gendered inequality, while pervasive and persistent, is socially constructed, processual and thereby open to change. Avent-Holt and Tomaskovic-Devey (2018) point out the central role that organizations play in configuring resources, political environments, and organizational practices, policies, and cultures that legitimize and sustain inequality. Similarly, Martin (2004) points out the role of sociability, practices, and interaction in sustaining inequality. Yet at the same time, this processual, relational, interactive basis of gender inequality creates the possibility for change. As McCarthy and Moon (2018) show, consciousness-raising regarding these constitutive processes is a critical first step toward change. Martin (2004) also points out that the imbrication of social systems that sustain inequality implies that changes in one system can, for better or worse, bring about change in another. Thus, by engaging in consciousness-raising and fostering changes in communicative processes, changes in one social system potentially affect changes in others.

Resisting inequality and practicing agency by disrupting processes, practices, and relations that sustain institutionalized inequality can be complicated and paradoxical. For example, Kahn (1996) suggests that stereotypes can sometimes favor women political candidates stating that, "male candidates are considered better able to deal with foreign policy, the economy, defense spending...; female candidates are considered better able to deal with day care, poverty, education, health care, civil rights, drug abuse..." (p. 9). While these presumptions may encourage constituents to vote for a female candidate, they nonetheless reinforce maternal and relational gender roles prescribed to women. This demonstrates a complicated relationship between the pursuit of individual agency and access to power

(a candidate winning their election) and the reinforcement of systems that constrain collective agency (leveraging constraining stereotypes to achieve that win). Similarly, a study comparing the websites of male and female congress members in the United States found that women politicians were more likely to talk about tough personal traits and less about their families (Lee, 2013) offering a clear instance of female candidates employing communication strategies to resist traditionally feminized roles, complicated by the reinforcement of masculine characteristics as more valuable.

Given this challenge of sustaining both individual and collective agency in masculine contexts, we cast narratives as part of the processual interactive processes that sustain—and potentially interrupt—institutionalized gender inequality. Indeed, narratives enable sensemaking by putting people, things, and events in relationship with one another (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Repetition and retelling of stories reinforces those roles, relationships, and ensuing power dynamics (Mumby, 1987). Thus, acknowledging narratives is a form of consciousness raising that McCarthy and Moon (2018) identify as a critical first step toward change. For example, Padavic et al. (2019) offer an example of narrative function in their study of a midsize global consulting firm. Their work identified an organizational narrative that required long hours, which were not possible for those charged with the care of children and families, as necessary to advance in the organization. By surfacing the "long hours" narratives that structured organizational sensemaking, they showed the need to alter narratives to eliminate constraints on agency. In other words, there must be accepted alternative narratives of paths toward advancement that do not require long hours if those charged with care for children and families are able to advance.

In sum, we approach political campaigns as one of many imbricated social systems in which gender inequality persists despite improvement over recent decades. While the numbers of representation tell a clear story of inequality, a closer look at gendered processes help us to understand that norms, expectations, and messaging around political processes sustain these inequalities across the globe. And yet, while gender inequity remains persistent and pervasive, we are reminded that these sustaining processes are open to change through shifts in consciousness that change our participation in those processes. Discerning implied narratives—and how those narratives arrange people, things, and events in power laden relationships that constrain agency for some more than others—is one way to open possibilities for disruption. With this understanding of gendered political contexts as a synecdoche for gendered institutions broadly, we turn our attention back to our question: How does the simultaneous denial and acknowledgment of gender function for these candidates? To help unpack this communication strategy we turn our attention to the emerging focus on tensions and paradox in organizational literature.

3 | PARADOX IN GENDERED ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXTS

The emergence of gendered paradox as a field of organizational studies has steadily gained prominence since the early 1990s. This field has expanded from descriptive studies that surface the irrationalities of gendered practices and beliefs (Lorber, 1994) to more recent methodological and theoretical approaches that treat paradox and tensions in general as an ontological premise of organizational life (Mease, 2019; Putnam & Ashcraft, 2017). Within this field, paradox has emerged as one form of organizational tension. As Mease (2019) explains, (p. 414) and paradox theory "suggests that organizational outcomes can be enhanced by reframing and transcending seemingly contradictory organizational tensions" (p. 414). Our goal is to offer enthymematic narratives as one strategy for this "reframing and transcending" of gendered paradoxes. But first, it is useful to better understand how the denial/acknowledgment paradox fits in the broader field of gender paradox studies.

Putnam and Ashcraft (2017) show an ontological split in the emergence of gendered paradox studies. Early studies often embraced a modernist approach treating paradox as debilitating, largely due to an unquestioned stable gender binary. This framing traps women in a choice between traditional feminine behaviors accepted in society and traditional masculine behaviors accepted in an organization. This conception points to a *double-bind*, "a situation in which making a consistent or logical choice seems impossible; that is, no matter what a person decides, the response

is wrong" (p. 335). These conflicting norms and expectations are sustained by resources and influences that maintain a hierarchical relationship between masculinity and femininity (Ridgeway, 2001), devaluing feminine norms and rewarding participation and endorsement of masculine norms. Consequently, openly asserting femininity has a cost due to association with the devalued side of a seemingly stable gender binary. It is not surprising then that Ross-Smith and Huppatz (2010) found in an interview study with 255 senior managers in Australia, and "whether they realized it or not, the participants never expressed the view that female and feminine capitals are straight-forwardly assets. They always perceived female and feminine capital as double-edges, as situational, and operating within boundaries" (p. 562). Consequently, a modern approach leaves women's agency constrained by their lack of access to masculinity as the gateway to power and the inability to assert femininity as valued in masculine contexts.

However, Putnam and Ashcraft (2017) also describe a postmodern approach in which "paradox is pivotal to the negotiation of gender and organizational identities. At the same time that paradox may trigger destructive gender dualisms, it is never a guarantee of double-bind entrapment" (p. 339). By letting go of a strict gender binary, gender becomes relational, situational, shifting, fragmented, and, ultimately, a space of creativity and potential. Existing literature demonstrates strategies by which women refuse the binary by playing between categories, for example, performative contradictions that play up feminine qualities when engaging in masculine behavior (Holmes & Schurr, 2006; Pfafman & McEwan, 2014) or using double-voiced discourse, which explicitly voices potential criticisms to mitigate potential backlash (Baxter, 2011). Other strategies cloak resistance in ambiguous play, for example, using humor (Crawford, 2003) or sarcasm (Gherardi, 1994) to resist the binary hierarchy. These ambiguous responses depict how women cautiously assert feminine agency in masculine organizations in ways that challenge the hierarchical status structure. We analyze the denial/acknowledgment paradox in the campaign process by using this latter postmodern approach to reveal its generative potential, rather than its damning entrapment.

Women's denial of gender in masculine fields is not a new finding. Research in several male-dominated fields also suggests that women reinforce (although not always or exclusively) male norms in their workplaces. For example, Hatmaker (2013) notes that female engineers not only neutralize gender but also play up masculine features of asserting knowledge while downplaying feminine characteristics. As mentioned previously, Lee (2013) found that women politicians were more likely to talk about tough personal traits and less about their families, a reversal of traditional gender norms. At a systemic level, denying the influence of gender centers masculinity and casts masculine contexts as normal and presumably gender neutral; it sustains the hierarchy that upholds that system. At an individual level, Liu et al.'s (2015) comparative case analysis indicated that breaking with feminine expectations compromised perceptions of women's authenticity which negatively impacted their perceived qualification for office. In short, denying gender and privileging masculinity comes with both a personal and systemic risk.

However, our unique focus on the paradoxical juxtaposition of *both* denying *and* acknowledging the influence of gender embraces a more postmodern approach that emphasizes the play between seemingly binary categories. By juxtaposing the denial of gender's influence with acknowledging the influence of gender, the differences experienced by men and women are verbally denied, but also acknowledged, which mitigates the risks of overlooking gender inequality. Meyerson and Scully (1995) illustrate how "tempered radicals" also leverage paradox, illustrating why women who desire to change masculine systems might, at times, also reinforce those systems. Drawing on their work, Parson and Priola's (2013) found that women who held positions high in an institution's hierarchy with an elevated level of authority and influence described having to learn to play by the rules, in order to ultimately reshape those rules. The authors offered a continuum of approaches to masculine discourse: *incorporation* occurs when women incorporate aspects of their gendered identity into the masculine discourse, *adaptation* refers to opting in and conforming to institutional rules, and *rejection* takes place when women refuse to incorporate or co-opt the dominant discourse. While both incorporation and adaptation involve developing strategies that allow women to play by the rules of the gendered system, when women refute or dismiss the "game" entirely, they remain on the outside/ as an outsider (while men remain on the inside/center).

Thus, the tension between denying and acknowledging gender that emerged in our data resonates with existing literature that demonstrates similar tensions of complying with and challenging gender norms across masculine fields.

However, taking up Putnam and Ashcraft's (2017) suggestion that "paradox is pivotal to the negotiation of gender and organizational identities" (p. 339), we shift away from a modern binary approach that frames this paradox as a double-bind and instead narrow our focus on understanding the denial/acknowledgment paradox *as a strategy for negotiating gendered organizational contexts*. From this perspective, we focus on this paradox as a negotiation strategy and highlight its potential for disrupting the processual construction of gendered hierarchy in organizations, including the unspoken or enthymematic narratives with which the strategy is entangled.

4 | METHODS

To address our research question, "How does the simultaneous denial and acknowledgment of gender function for female political candidates?", we identified and focused on instances where this denial/acknowledgment occurred. Both the question and the data set emerged from a broader set of interviews with 17 women candidates who ran in the Virginia House of Delegates election in 2017. The interviews occurred after the election concluded and included both candidates who won and lost their election. The semi-structured interviews included a series of questions, most notably: (1) What was the moment, or do you have a memory of when you decided to run? (2) Were there perceptions of (women in politics) that you needed to overcome before deciding to run? (3) Since deciding to run, what have been your most significant challenges? And (4) Has gender influenced any part of your decision-making process or experience running for office? The interviews lasted 30 min to an hour and were conducted by a research team of three undergraduate students and an assistant professor. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed by a professional transcription service. Although we took steps to maintain the confidentiality of our participants, all participants consented to participate with the knowledge that the limited number of women who ran in the 2017 Virginia House of Delegates Election prevented us from guaranteeing absolute confidentiality.

The denial/acknowledgment paradox emerged as we analyzed this data. The second author reviewed and coded the entirety of the transcripts paragraph by paragraph by using an emergent coding method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The themes that emerged from this coding method were denial of gender's influence; experience in male-dominated fields; critiquing/accepting sexism, women's qualifications, and emphasizing personality. Through discussions of emerging themes, we noticed evidence of the denial/acknowledgment paradox within the "denial of gender's influence" theme and decided to investigate that more closely to determine if the paradox was isolated to a few instances or if it was consistent across all participants that denied gender's impact on their experience.

With that in mind, we isolated the 11 transcripts in which participants denied the influence of gender and analyzed them at the level of the transcript in its entirety to discern if there was indeed a prevalent denial/acknowledgment paradox. We found all 11 transcripts that included "denial of gender" also acknowledged the significance of gender by simultaneously elaborating on the ways that gender mattered. With this evidence that paradoxical denial/acknowledgment of gender was a prevalent pattern, despite the fact that it was not our original area of interest, we arrived at the question that drives this manuscript: How does the simultaneous denial and acknowledgment of gender function? Our goal was not to suggest that either denial or acknowledgment is "actually" true but to explore how our participants made sense of, and simultaneously held, these seemingly contradictory claims.

Thus, our analysis for this manuscript began by focusing on the language coded as "denial of gender" to understand how denials were paradoxically structured in language. Taking all instances, we began to group similar structures, arriving at five forms of denial/acknowledgment that accounted for all 12 expressions of denial: (1) then versus now, (2) insulation from systems, (3) separation between personal and professional life, (4) ascription of a new victim, and (5) role models. At this point our focus on analysis shifted to follow the data. Looking across these structures, we noticed how the strategies drew boundaries between themselves and the systems of sexism they acknowledged, offering an implicit rejection of victimhood—although this was never explicitly stated. Given that the denial pointed toward a particular *role* (denying the role of victim), we sought to contextualize that role within a broader narrative structure, requiring attention to other people, things, and events that were part of that narrative structure. We reread

the transcripts to determine how "the villain" that threatened victimhood was characterized, arriving at three themes: domestic expectations, double standards, and aggressive condemnation.

As we fleshed out the narrative, we began to see how the denial/acknowledgment paradox as a communicative strategy cannot be fully understood unless one acknowledges that it builds upon an implied narrative of victimhood. Thus, it emerged that the denial/acknowledgment paradox of gender engaged with a narrative of victimhood, and as such, the "paradox is pivotal to the negotiation of gender and organizational identities" (Putnam & Ashcraft, 2017) in this case, an implied but unspoken narrative. Our conclusions then focused on understanding the paradox we analyzed and how participants were rewriting the narrative of gender through the denial/acknowledgment paradox.

5 | PARADOXICAL STRUCTURES OF DENIAL

Through our data analysis process, we found five distinct communication structures of denial that accompanied our question of whether gender influenced their experience on the campaign trail: (1) then versus now, (2) insulation from systems, (3) separation between personal and professional life, (4) role models, and (5) ascription of a new victim. Our goal here is not to simply document or critique denial but to better understand *how* participants engage the denial/acknowledgment paradox (see Table 1).

5.1 | Then versus now

One way women denied the influence of gender was by drawing a distinction between the past and present. For example, after being asked if gender influenced her campaign experience, Participant 2 stated, "No, not even a little. I've always operated in a man's world as an athlete and a coach and a business owner. I mean…you know, 15 years ago I thought about that, but I just—it's not even a thought in my head at this stage of my life." In doing so, she acknowledged the masculine systems of "a man's world" but concluded by indicating that they no longer affected her. Thus, she suggested that while sexism was persistent, she had garnered tools that assist her in operating within the broader masculine system. Participant 17's response followed a similar structure, "No. I mean, I spent most of my life in male-dominated worlds. I was in (a very masculine field), which was male dominated, through all the sexual harassment crap in the '80s… this was just something that women during this time had to endure." Similar to Participant 2, Participant 17 denied that gender influenced her campaign process, acknowledged masculine structures (including sexual harassment), and separated previous experiences from the '80s from her experience on the campaign trail in 2017. It is also important to acknowledge that while Participant 17 seems to normalize the oppression experienced by women during this time, the function of the word "endure" demonstrates women's need to persevere *despite* negative conditions.

Thus, both Participant 2 and Participant 17 offer a clear denial offering a firm "No" to the questions of whether gender affected their experience while using the prompt to acknowledge persistent masculine environments and

TABLE 1 Paradoxical denial.

Communicative strategies	What it looks like
Then versus Now	"It *did* affect me, but it does not affect me *now*."
Insulation from systems	"Sexism exists and affects women, just not me."
Separation of personal and professional life	"I may have experienced sexism in my personal life, but that does not/should not affect my professional life."
Ascribing a new victim	"There is a victim, but it's not women."
Role models	"I have successful women who I look up and I don't perceive them as victims."

challenges of sexism. Both had been immersed in male-dominated fields for an extended period. Because of that, overcoming everyday sexism within these spaces occurred without "even a thought" as participant 2 explained. Ultimately, this quote shows one way the denial/acknowledgment paradox functions: By separating past experiences where sexism was a challenge from the present where they have learned to effectively navigate gendered structures. Thus, one way the denial/acknowledgment paradox functioned was acknowledging the influence of gender in the past but denying it the present by virtue of prolonged exposure and experience navigating those systems.

5.2 | Insulation from systems

Another way that participants leverage a denial/acknowledgment paradox was by positing one's own experience as insulated from the broader system. For instance, Participant 4 responded:

> No. I mean…I recognize the status of women in our society…I was the only woman in my area running… there were a number of women who ran across the state, but I campaigned with men only, in my immediate area. But…I never felt different. I never felt like a woman amongst men. I just felt like a candidate running.

Here, Participant 4 uses an insulation strategy by referencing her feeling that she was not personally affected by sexism while simultaneously acknowledging the status of women and the gendered imbalance in which she was the only woman among men. In other words, while some women may have experienced instances of discrimination as the only woman running in a group of men, Participant 4 did not. Similarly, Participant 15 stated:

> And I know—I do understand that I am one of the lucky ones. And you know, situationally, temperamentally, whatever it is, I have never—maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I've been completely oppressed because I'm a woman and I'm too stupid to know it, but I've never felt it.

Like Participant 4, Participant 15's personal experience that is not marked by oppression is the basis of her denial, even acknowledging that it might be her "temperament" that insulates her from the effects of sexism. Her statement also provides an explicit example of the double-voice strategy (Baxter, 2011), by stating that she may be "too stupid to know" she forestalls challenges to her claim that she has not experienced sexism.

While both deny personal experiences of inequality, they acknowledge that there are systems of inequality by "recognizing the status of women in society" or acknowledging "that I am one of the lucky ones." In particular, the term "lucky one" indicates that participant 15 viewed herself as the *exception* to a norm that imposes gender discrimination. Thus, the insulation strategy acknowledges the broader system while simultaneously denying that the system has succeeded in individually impacting or disadvantaging the candidate.

5.3 | Separation of personal and political life

Participant 15 also points toward a third structure of paradoxical denial: The separation of personal and political life. After Participant 15 positioned herself as insulated from the system, she described the encouragement she received from her group of friends when she was contemplating running for office:

> My persisters were always saying, "Yeah, go. You're a woman. We need…"—and I'm like, "We need a person." So, that might be disappointing to you in that way because no, I never felt—all my life, I have—

again, except for the personal stuff and being grabbed and assaulted—in my endeavors, I have never for one moment felt I'm at a disadvantage because I'm a woman.

Admittedly, this particular quote was the one that initially drew our attention to the denial/acknowledgment paradox, given the convincing denial of gender to her "persisters" juxtaposed with her experiences of "being grabbed and assaulted." This participant makes an explicit distinction between the abuse she has endured in her personal life and her experience as a candidate in a professional context. In other words, she is acknowledging that while she has experienced overt discrimination in her private life as a woman, it did not affect her perception of her professional self. Moreover, when Participant 15's friends tell her that her district needs a woman, she pivots and states that what is needed is a person, mirroring research of women in masculine fields who neutralize gender (Hatmaker, 2013).

Among these first three structures of denial there is an underlying structure that we call a "deny, acknowledge, persist" structure. Each of these approaches separates the participants from sexism by virtue of time (then vs. now), by distinguishing systems from personal experiences (insulation), or by separating the personal from the professional/political. Nine of the 11 candidates' denial fell into one or more of these three categories, with two exceptions, one that ascribed a new victim and one that referred to role models.

5.4 | Ascribing a new victim

Participant 5 offered a distinct but rather insightful denial, by denying that gender affected her and immediately shining a spotlight on the disadvantages men currently face,

Not at all. Not at all. I think this is a wonderful country in terms of the opportunities overall that are afforded to women. Quite honestly, I have some concerns in terms of the gap that is occurring with fewer men going to college and fewer men working and that sort of thing, so this to me was not a gender decision in any way.

It should be noted that while participant 5 denies the influence of gender, she follows the statement by suggesting the impact of gendered systems on men concerns her most. In this sense, Participant 5 offers an interesting exception that seemingly proves the rule. While the denial of gender appears consistent and less paradoxical, she simultaneously points out the significance of gender systems—because of the disadvantage emerging for men. This example proves particularly insightful as we turn our attention to the victim narrative because she maintains the victim narrative while inserting men as the new victims of a gendered system—a denial strategy not used by any of the other candidates.

5.5 | Role models

Finally, the least paradoxical form of denial came from Participant 1, who did not immediately acknowledge systems of sexism in her denial, emphasizing instead her connection to previous women in politics rather than separation,

No. I've known (role model) for a while. She is...definitely someone that I look up to, and I've known a lot of strong women over my life and a lot of women who are engaged in the political process, whether they're candidates or they work in Congressional offices or part of the (president) administration. So, the idea that there was some special obstacle I would face as a woman never even crossed my mind.

Later in the interview, Participant 1 highlights how following her husband's career and being a mother had both advantages and disadvantages, although this was separate from her initial denial. Her statement aligns with literature

that indicates role models/representation is crucial for women to feel as though they can run for positions or to feel more motivated to run for politics (Elder, 2004). As we look toward the victim narrative, this strategy is the least engaged with a victim narrative. However, it introduced an alternative narrative to the victimhood narrative: One of the role models that have come before and given women someone and something to look up to for guidance and possibility.

In summary, of the 11 participants who denied the influence of gender in their campaign process, nine used evidently paradoxical strategies that fit into the "deny, acknowledge, persist" structures of denial and acknowledgment, while the remaining two had less evidently paradoxical denials. While the denials corroborate existing literature that suggests women in masculine fields tend to downplay the importance of gender (Hatmaker, 2013; Ross-Smith & Huppatz, 2010), our close analysis of denial as a communicative strategy suggests that it is often paradoxically coupled with acknowledgment of systems of gender discrimination. Following Putnam and Ashcraft's (2017) suggestion that (1) paradox is often evoked as a response to gendered contexts and that (2) we embrace the possibility proffered by paradox, our next step in the analysis is to better understand the gendered context these paradoxes engage and how the paradox inserts possibility into that context.

6 | EMERGING NARRATIVE OF VICTIMHOOD

As we looked across these five emerging structures of paradoxical denial/acknowledgment, the enthymematic narrative of victimhood began to emerge. We saw this emergence as an opportunity to gain insight into the gendered context of politics, as narratives are a critical aspect of gendered structures in organizations (Mumby, 1987; Padavic et al., 2019). Although participants did not explicitly acknowledge this narrative, the rejection of the role of a victim became increasingly evident as a response to our inquiry of whether gender influenced the participants. When asking about the influence of gender, candidates interpreted our question as implying that the relationship between the influence of gender and the candidate was necessarily a relationship of victimhood in the face of a "villainous" system of sexism.

Take for example, this "insulation from systems" response where Participant 9 acknowledged systemic oppression in a broader sense, however denied gender influencing her personally:

> I've never really felt obstacles, necessarily, in my life...nothing—not sexism or misogyny, clearly—and of course it affects me, but I don't know that it's necessarily held me back in really marked ways. But perhaps it has some people, and I don't know why that is...Maybe that's even hard to identify, but you know, for some women I think it really is just, you know, family obligations or thinking they can't win because there just aren't enough women in office and they don't see themselves in office. It just has never dawned on me, to be honest...

Participant 9 used an insulation response structure when she identified ways the system impedes women, and even acknowledged that it affects her. However, her denial is grounded in the fact that it has not "held [her] back in really marked ways." Thus, she acknowledged that the system exists while denying that she has been defeated by that system. In this way, her denial is specifically attached to the implication of defeat, as she rejects the role of a victim who has been held back by that system in a remarkable way.

Participant 8 echoed the insulation response that rejects taking up the position of a victim. She explained her changing awareness of disparities as she grew older:

> You know, I've lived my entire life in environments—I became a (masculine profession); I didn't think of gender. I just thought of what I wanted to do and what I dreamed of being...I never thought of my being female as an impediment. I would say as I grew older, society made it an impediment. But

> I personally never thought, "Oh, I can't do this because I'm a girl."... I may be an anomaly, but it never hit me...

Participant 8's refusal to take on gender as "an impediment" regardless of the fact that "society made it an impediment" points us to a refusal of a common narrative in which "society" might limit or constrain her because of her gender. She goes on:

> It's later in life in my career progression as an adult woman that I started recognizing certain things that were subtle but very intense. You know, where I noticed that there was in fact disparity in treatment, but I always fought it so I didn't step back and say, 'Oh, it's because I'm a girl.' It was, 'Well, if they're going to have a requirement that I must go through some kind of training program, that I have to climb a pole (conduct a professional task), well, dammit, I'm going to get into it and I'm going to do it.' So, that's exactly what I did...So, it didn't stop me.

In this section, she highlights how she persevered despite these barriers ("it didn't stop me") and clearly reframes her role as someone who "fought" the threat of gendered systems. It is this refusal to be stopped or impeded—the refusal to be a victim—that is the foundation of her denial.

In both examples, asking about the influence of gender seems to imply not just *any* influence, but it invokes a particular story in which the influence of gender is cast as a villainous system of oppression that renders women victims. Their paradoxical denial/acknowledgment attempts to disrupt this narrative structure in which acknowledging the influence of gender implies a role of victimhood for women. Leveraging the paradox allows them to refuse the role of victim while sustaining that there is a villain of sexism. In doing so, they prevent their denial from casting masculine norms as gender neutral. Once the victim narrative emerged in our analysis, it became visible across our first four structures. The "then versus now" approach demonstrates a persistence that refuses to be defeated and has developed skills for succeeding in enduring masculine systems. The separation of personal and political experience approach offers a refusal to let specific instances of potential victimization define other aspects of one's existence. Perhaps most insightfully, the ascription of the new victim approach offers a surprising fidelity to the victim narrative. Although it denies women are victims, it sustains the victim narrative by putting men in that role.

Thus, when we asked women if gender had influenced or affected their experience, our question appears to have elicited an implied social narrative. With the exception of participant 1, they responded as if we had asked, "Does the narrative of women as victims of sexism, resonate with your experience?" This narrative is never explicitly acknowledged, and yet it appeared to dictate the response to inquiries addressing the influence of gender. Surfacing narratives that privilege some groups over others is not a particularly novel form of analysis, for example, Padavic et al. (2019) demonstrated the problem of narratives that cast long working hours as necessary for promotion. However, this *enthymematic narrative*, which functions as an unstated premise and sustains the claim that gender does not influence a candidate's experience can prove particularly insidious.

As mentioned previously, an enthymeme is "a deductive argument in which the audience itself helps construct the proofs by which it is persuaded" (Johnstone, 2001). Our participants' language offers a logical argument structure: *I am not a victim. Therefore, gender did not affect my experience.* However, this argument implies a missing premise that is sustained by the narrative of victimhood: *The relationship between systems of sexism and women is* necessarily *a relationship of victimhood.* The power of the missing premise in an enthymeme lies in its taken-for-granted assumption by both the speaker and audience. Because it is left unspoken and unacknowledged as a premise of the logical argument, it is both reinforced as common knowledge and seldom examined for its truth. Failing to examine this missing premise, and the narrative that sustains it, puts women in a double bind: If they admit that sexism exists, they must take the role of victim; if they refuse the position of victim, they risk implying that sexism itself doesn't exist.

This brings us back to Putnam and Ashcraft's suggestion that "paradox is pivotal to the negotiation of gender and organizational identities" (p. 339) and our focus on understanding the denial/acknowledgment paradox *as a*

communication strategy for negotiating gendered organizational contexts. Having acknowledged the enthymematic narrative, we can now read the denial/acknowledgment paradox as engaging a constraining yet unspoken narrative of victimhood. It is a strategy that denies the role of victim while acknowledging that sexism exists. By acknowledging the enthymematic narrative, we accentuate the potential of the denial/acknowledgment paradox, pointing us toward the need to rewrite the narrative of victimhood and to challenge the assumption that the villain of sexism necessarily makes victims of women. Thus, the next step in our analysis is to focus more squarely on how our participants leveraged the paradox to reconfigure the relationship between a villain and victim and offer new narratives of gender in an organizational context.

7 | (SUR)FACING THE ENTHYMEMATIC NARRATIVE

Thus far, we have suggested that by acknowledging the enthymematic narrative we can better understand how the denial/acknowledgment paradox addresses different parts of the enthymematic narrative of victimhood by denying women's role as victims, while sustaining that the villain of sexism indeed exists. If we fail to address the enthymematic narrative, we risk reading women's denial as a denial that sexism exists or affects them at all, ultimately reinforcing the masculine status quo. Thus, we shift our focus of analysis from the role of victim, to focus more clearly on the "villain" associated with gender and how the candidates related to those villains while on the campaign trail— without rendering themselves as victims (see Table 2).

7.1 | Villain #1: Domestic expectations meet the village, partners and persistence

While male candidates are viewed favorably by voters as fathers, female candidates are often at a disadvantage as mothers and simply as their status as a woman candidate within the political realm (Stalsburg, 2010). While on the campaign trail, our participants described the expectations placed on women as different from those placed on men candidates or politicians, especially with regard to domestic expectations. Our participants expressed added

TABLE 2 Characterizing sexism.

Villains of sexism	What it looks like	Counter narratives
Domestic expectations	• Childcare • Household chores	• Support systems in the form of male allies, partners, "villages"/communities of collaboration, and other women • Women belonging in and essential to the political sector • Political representation as resistance
Double standards	• Harsher critiques of female politicians than male counterparts • Unequal depiction of men and women within leadership • Unequal qualification of similar investment endeavors (male candidate portrayed as a "real estate investor" whereas female candidate was described as, "not employed")	• Ignore and persist
Aggressive condemnation	• Destruction of property (slashing of tires) • Critiques on women candidates' attire • Questioning of women's competency to run for and hold public office	• Acknowledge, ignore, and persist

domestic responsibility, creating stress and greater challenges when running for office. Being a caretaker of children was one evident example. Participant 4 explains

> ...I mean, you know, one of the struggles is childcare and so we did end up spending a lot of money on childcare, because my husband works a lot and the children—you know, as it is for many families, become primarily...fall under my catch...So, it is a lifestyle adjustment but again, I never really—I mean, men—it's easier for them to walk out and do their thing than it is for women, so you have to take that into consideration and strategize how you're going to arrange your village to help you accomplish that and make sure that your children don't suffer beyond repair, essentially.

For Participant 4 (and as she suggests for many families), childcare fell in her/women's domain. However, she overcame the stress that accompanies childcare by strategizing and arranging her "village" with the aim of ensuring that her (and others') "children don't suffer beyond repair." Here, Participant 4 essentially advised women to meet the challenges of domestic expectations by having a support system in place, thus relying on traditionally feminine forms of organizing through community and collaboration.

Although childcare added many challenges for the participants, it was not the only domestic expectation discussed throughout these interviews. While Participant 13 admits that "my husband and I were empty-nesters, so there's no children at home or anything like that, so it's not like I have to worry about any of those things," she nonetheless recalled how household responsibilities differed from that of her male colleagues:

> ...my male colleagues who are (in the same profession) don't have to come home and cook dinner, for the most part. You know, they don't have to—the things that I do when I get home are things that their wives are doing. I've told people many times, "What I really need is a wife!" (laughs) in order to do this job well, you know? But what I mean by that is, if somebody was taking care of home while I'm out in the community doing all the things that I'm doing—and my husband is so wonderful. He's so supportive and he, yes, picks up the slack.

This idea of women working at their professional jobs and then coming home and having to fulfill their household duties is a testament to the "second shift" (Hochschild & Machung, 1989). Additionally, she acknowledged that if she were not an empty nester, navigating younger children and running for office would have contributed its own set of challenges (as noted previously by Participant 4). Thus, while she denies that gender affected her personally, she differentiated between her responsibilities and those of her male colleagues.

Participant 13 also shows two different ways of navigating this challenge: First, she deployed humor when stating that what she needed while on the campaign trail was a "wife." As previously mentioned, humor is one of the many navigational strategies used by professional women to deflect or mitigate potential backlash/social penalties (Crawford, 2003). This is a critical observation because while perceived as a joke, it nevertheless perpetuates gender roles while simultaneously pointing out those systems as creating inequality for the joke teller. Second, she points out the importance of male allies, noting that her "husband is so wonderful. He's so supportive and he, yes, picks up the slack." Still, suggesting that his contributions are "picking up the slack" suggests that domestic labor is her responsibility. The importance of having a partner who shares this responsibility was echoed by many of the participants.

Participant 17 acknowledged these domestic expectations as well but rendered them a relic of the past, emphasizing her campaign itself as a form of resistance:

> And I also think that we are underrepresented. I mean, women need to be in government because there is a lot of us, and we are way beyond the '50s where we are expected to stay home and cook and clean. I mean, women are in every aspect of American society and in every aspect of American military. We need to be represented and the only way to do that is to run [for political office].

As Participant 17 stated, women belong in and are essential to all sectors of society. In addition, unlike Participants 4 and 13, Participant 17 critiqued the structural sexism that is present and concluded by demanding that more women run in order to gain more representation. As women rejected the role of victim at the hands of the villain of domestic expectations, they recast themselves as victors, sustained by networks of support, partners who share responsibility, and through persistent (and sometimes humorous) defiance of domestic expectations.

7.2 | Villain #2—The double standard meets persistence

Many participants hinted, or explicitly stated, that there was another villain: The double standard used to judge women and men for similar behavior. Participant 17's example of previous presidential elections depicts this contrast:

> Even if you look at the Hillary campaign—they called her all sorts of names, and whether you like Hillary or not, they attacked her because she's the woman. And then you see Donald Trump, who's grabbing p***y and all this other stuff, and they don't seem to care about it because he's a guy. I mean, there are double standards and the only thing you can do is know that there are double standards and just not care about them and push on…

Participant 17 provides a contrast between male and female politicians and the leniency that men receive. Her response, "to know…not care about (double standards) …and push on" offers a closer look at the insulating form of denial—knowing that the system would like to make a victim out of you but not allowing double standards to affect, impede, or deter women, and pushing on nonetheless.

In a more personal example, another participant spoke about the media's portrayal of her employment compared to that of her male competitor:

> I basically made some shrewd investments in real estate…my husband and I bought rental properties that I manage…. At one point, a paper had all the different candidates who were running. And they described me as "not employed" and they described (a male candidate) as a "real estate investor." And from my understanding, he does the same thing I do. He has rental properties. In fact, my opponent, (redacted), has rental—he has properties. That's how he lives; he has real estate…So, there's no difference, but somehow nobody questions his livelihood, but they keep questioning mine.

Here, Participant 12 illustrated her personal experience with the unequal depiction of men and women within leadership. It is important to note that this is consistent with past research that highlights the influential and often sexist position the media takes when covering women candidates compared to male candidates (Ryan, 2013). Despite the acknowledged double standard, the candidates offer little in terms of coping mechanisms, other than "ignore and persist."

7.3 | Villain #3: Aggressive condemnation meets balance and persistence

Finally, several candidates who denied the influence of gender simultaneously acknowledged more aggressive forms of gender-based condemnation at a later point within their interview. For example, participant 17 notes criticism and violence she encountered,

> I had several things happen. I had some people send me emails that told me if I dressed more professionally, someone might take me more seriously. I guess they meant to put on a dress; I don't know,

because I wore suits. So, I had people send me that stuff. My field manager got his tire stabbed by a knife, so there was a little bit of violence involved in it...It's like, everybody is so focused on negative politics and women are easier to attack than men... I mean, women always get picked on by men, if you want the short answer, but the long answer is much more complex.

On one hand, this example reiterates the villain of double standards: While research shows that women operating within male-dominated spaces simultaneously play up their masculine characteristics and downplay their feminine characteristics, thus neutralizing gender to reduce discrimination (Hatmaker, 2013), Participant 17 experienced the opposite: Playing up masculine characteristics was perceived as too drastic of an aberration and as a result, led to hostile and aggressive treatment from community members. She acknowledged that this treatment is part of the broader negativity of politics; she also points out how women are "easier to attack" within a complex set of circumstances. Correspondingly, Participant 17 points out a fine line in the response to the villain of sexism, one must carefully balance performances of masculinity and femininity and persist in the face of inevitable failure to navigate that balance in a way that avoids condemnation.

Similar to Participant 17, Participant 9 experienced discrimination from members in her community,

I heard from some folks door-knocking that there were people that wouldn't vote for me because I was a woman. I did hear that, and the man that told me that was a fellow who was in charge of my campaign in (small town), Virginia...he said...he was shocked by the number of folks who said—and not just men, but women who said they didn't think that a woman was capable of being in office. I don't know if it really affected me negatively, but—or maybe I just pushed it to the back of my head that, "Okay, this is still just one more challenge that I have because I'm a female in this race."

The comments that Participant 9 heard from her door-knocking efforts offer an additional illustration of aggressive condemnation of women as not competent enough to be in, or run for, office. Again, the candidate acknowledges and pushes forward as a way of coping.

In this section, we have identified three different versions of the villain of systemic sexism that emerged in the narratives our participants shared regarding their experiences on the campaign trail. Our goal has been to draw out how the participants' stories challenge the enthymematic narrative in which acknowledging sexism implies that women are victims and highlight alternative ways to tell the story of women's relationships to sexism. While the domestic responsibilities pointed to relationships and networks as a strategy for overcoming the challenges, double standards and aggressive condemnation both relied on a response of ignore and persist. This practice of ignore and persist reframes practices of denial as an act of defiance toward sexism (and victimhood), not a denial of its existence. While we do not believe this is an exhaustive list, these stories show us that villains do not inevitably make victims, and acknowledging a villain should not inevitably evoke victimhood. In alternative narrative forms—demonstrated clearly in our culture by DC and Marvel—villains evoke visions of superheroes. When participants spoke about their learned abilities to navigate masculine environments and emerge unscathed, when they spoke of force fields honed by confidence and exceptional skills that protect them from insults and systematic bias, when they spoke of the strength they summoned to continually persist in the face of a villain that could show up, out of nowhere, in new shapes and forms, they show us the truth of their own stories: There is a villain, but they are not victims. They are superheroes.

8 | THE POWER OF PARADOX AND THE ENTHYMEMATIC NARRATIVE: POLITICS AND BEYOND

This analysis was inspired by a specific paradoxical communication behavior that emerged among interviews with women political candidates: Directly denying that gender influenced their experience as political candidate while

simultaneously elaborating on ways that gender did influence their experience. While we focused narrowly on this phenomenon, we believe that the implications of our study shed light on a broader range of professional fields dominated by men and masculine norms, in which women must balance (1) accessing power by co-opting masculine discourse in ways that risk reinforcing it, and (2) challenging and resisting discourses that privilege masculinity (Parson & Priola, 2013). Our analysis offers three major contributions to the existing literature: First, by taking a post-modern approach to paradox (Putnam & Ashcraft, 2017), we demonstrate how a specific paradoxical communication strategy—the denial/acknowledgment paradox—interrupts narrative structures that limits women's ability to draw attention to sexist practices without compromising their own agency and power. Second, we offer the concept of the enthymematic narrative as a much-needed conceptual tool that helps to amplify the possibility and creativity of paradox, as opposed to the damning entrapment of the double bind. Third, we suggest that the concept of the enthymematic narrative has potential contributions beyond paradoxes for fostering change in the always emergent processes upon which gendered institutions are built.

8.1 | A postmodern approach to the denial/acknowledgment paradox

Research in politics (Kahn, 1996; Lee, 2013) and other professions (Hatmaker, 2013; Parson & Priola, 2013; Ross-Smith & Huppatz, 2010) has highlighted how women in masculine dominated fields often reinforce masculine norms by neutralizing and sustaining masculine norms. This emphasis on denial, neutralization, or privileging of masculine norms depicts women's individual agency as constrained by their lack of access to masculinity as the gateway to power, and collective agency as constrained by strategies that reinforce masculine norms. However, we have followed Putnam and Ashcraft's (2017) postmodern approach to paradox by attending to simultaneous denial *and* acknowledgment as "pivotal to the negotiation of gender and organizational identities" (p. 339) and by focusing on the generative potential of paradox rather than its damning entrapments.

Much like women who use humor (Crawford, 2003), sarcasm (Gherardi, 1994), performative contradictions (Holmes & Schurr, 2006; Pfafman & McEwan, 2014), or double-voiced discourse (Baxter, 2011), we found that the majority of our participants did not straightforwardly deny or neutralize masculine norms but played in a paradoxical gray space of *both* denial *and* acknowledgment. Moreover, nine of the eleven participants engaged in strategies that followed what we call "deny, acknowledge, persist" structures of then versus now, insulation from systems, and separation of personal and political. Each of these strategies acknowledged systems of sexism (thus mitigating threats to collective agency) while simultaneously distancing themselves from that system (thus mitigating the threats to individual agency). While our number of participants is limited, our research offers an example of what researchers might find by shifting from a modern approach to paradox that focuses on the damning entrapment of the double-bind, to a postmodern approach that suggests while "paradox may trigger destructive gender dualisms, it is never a guarantee of double-bind entrapment" (Putnam & Ashcraft, 2017, p. 339). Our findings suggest that we cannot take neutralizing, denying, or the privileging of masculine norms in isolation. Scholars must attend to how they are juxtaposed and integrated with other strategies, especially in paradoxical ways.

8.2 | Amplifying the power of paradox: The enthymematic narrative

Our focus on understanding the denial/acknowledgment paradox as a strategy for negotiating gendered organizational contexts pointed us to consider the context with which the denial/acknowledgment paradox was engaged. We were limited by our interview dataset, which offered insight into individual sensemaking but not direct access to the context itself. However, the emergent pattern of rejecting victimhood pointed us in the direction of discerning the broader social narratives with which the denial/acknowledgment paradox engaged. Given that narratives are one technique by which resources, people, practices, and ideas are set into particular relationships with one

another (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000) and that the repetition and acceptance of such narratives reinforces power relations (Mumby, 1987), examining the narratives implied in our data offered insights into the context while remaining focused on the interviews.

Our data showed that when we asked women candidates, pointedly, if gender influenced their campaign experience, their responses built upon an enthymematic narrative in which the villainous systems of sexism prevented women from achieving their goals or being successful, thereby rendering them victims. We developed the concept of an enthymematic narrative by drawing on the concept of enthymematic arguments. Enthymematic arguments are particularly powerful because of an unspoken premise (in this case unspoken narrative) that is assumed and unquestioned. More than just a hidden narrative, enthymematic narratives function as premises for claims, and failing to recognize the narrative as a premise for a claim risks misconstruing those claims. In our case, if the enthymematic narrative is overlooked, one might interpret the denial/acknowledgment paradox as nonsensical or interpret the denial as denying the existence of systems of sexism, thus reinforcing the masculine status quo. However, by engaging the paradox using a postmodern lens that takes paradox as a point of possibility (Putnam & Ashcraft, 2017), we traced participants' language to the enthymematic narrative of victimhood and the wrongly assumed relationship between sexism and victimhood.

Thus, while the postmodern approach points us toward appreciating the potential proffered by paradox, we offer up the concept of enthymematic narratives as one method for pursing that potential and amplifying the possibility for change that paradox portends. When we (sur)faced the enthymematic narrative directly, we revealed how participants rewrite the narrative in ways that enable their access to agency as the victors in a long-fought battle with gender discrimination. By (sur)facing the enthymematic narrative of victimhood, we elevate the subtle potential of paradox to *acknowledge* the villains of domestic expectations, double standards, and aggressive acts of condemnation. Perhaps more importantly, we accentuate the strategies they use to *deny* the role of victim: drawing on networks of support, strong allies in the form of spouses or domestic partners, and by practicing acknowledge-ignore-persist strategies. By (sur)facing the enthymematic narrative we support a shift from an assumed villain/victim narrative to the possibility of a villain/superhero narrative. In short, when we (sur)face the enthymematic narrative with which paradox is engaged, we amplify the power of the paradox by calling attention to the need for alternative narratives and creating the space to build them. Still, we acknowledge that even a narrative of superheroes is not without fault as it risks imposing unrealistic expectations of women as they take on the challenges of gender inequality daily. No doubt, there a many more ways to tell the story of the villain and the superhero than the ones we have highlighted here, and we believe this is a productive direction for future research.

8.3 | Enthymematic narratives beyond paradox and politics

We believe the concept of enthymematic narratives holds great potential as a theoretical tool that can be applied across contexts; even in the absence of paradox. Future research might expand beyond our limited context to explore how the enthymematic narrative of victimhood plays out in other organizational contexts, affecting a variety of identities. Phrases like "playing the race card" or "the woman card" may be implicated in the enthymematic narrative of victimhood, by suggesting that those who point out systemic privilege and disadvantage are necessarily claiming victimhood. By focusing on the enthymematic narrative of victimhood, we shift the burden from individuals who must hone skills for navigating power laden environments to instead shifting toward collective responsibility. Everyone can play a role in interrupting the victim narrative and promoting other narrative structures that both acknowledge gender (or race, or class) inequities while refusing to relegate women (or others) to victimhood.

Perhaps the (sur)facing of enthymematic narratives may help to break down resistance to organizational diversity efforts more broadly. For example, by closely attending to the language individuals of dominant identities use to resist or dismiss diversity initiatives, scholars might discern enthymematic narratives about their privileged identities in relationship to diversity work that sustains a false premise upon which their resistance is built. In such

cases, how might enhancing the narrative's roles of accomplices and allies be expanded to decrease resistance to all forms of equity work? By investigating Enthymematic Narratives, we follow McCarthy and Moon (2018) who suggest consciousness-raising is a critical first step toward change. Awareness of enthymematic narratives opens the door to shifting the practices and interactions that Martin (2004) has shown are central to sustaining or changing the systems of inequality.

9 | CONCLUSIONS

Women operating within male dominated spaces are caught in a paradoxical dilemma in which they must balance choices that co-opt masculine characteristics and reinforce the dominance of masculinity, with choices that resist interpersonal and systemic forms of gender bias but risk ostracization or success. We identify the denial/acknowledgment paradox as one strategy for navigating this dilemma. Examining how the denial/acknowledgment paradox functioned for our participants in the political realm pointed us to an enthymematic narrative that women were resisting; a narrative in which acknowledging sexism necessarily implied victimhood. We believe that there are many enthymematic narratives at play across industries and organizations, in the shadows, unacknowledged, yet constraining the possibility for agency and equity for people of many diverse identities. Without acknowledging and understanding enthymematic narratives and how individuals of marginalized identities engage with them, communication strategies like the denial/acknowledgment paradox will continue to be misconstrued.

Still, our findings are limited by the fact that this phenomenon was not the original focus of our study. Further studies might work to identify additional enthymematic narratives and elicit a broader range of alternative narratives. For example, we are limited in the fact that this manuscript did not address the experiences of those who identify as nonbinary or trans and thus leans into the binary that a postmodern approach might move away from. Consequently, future research might focus on a broader range of identities that experience systematic advantages and disadvantages. We believe that attending to the roles individuals implicitly resist in their everyday talk will to help discern additional enthymematic narratives that limit agency.

Ultimately, we have shown that "while paradox may trigger destructive gender dualisms, it is never a guarantee of double-bind entrapment" (Putnam & Ashcraft, 2017, p. 339). By attending to enthymematic narratives, we move beyond the forced choice between individual or collective agency and reveal the potential power that comes when we acknowledge the gray areas that allow us to move between. In other words, this gray area creates the opportunity to understand the function of paradox. Without surfacing the enthymematic narrative, women's denial may be interpreted as denial of the broader system of sexism, and the onus is placed back on women to harness skills, or what we perceive as superpowers, to fend off the villains of sexism that show up in the form of domestic expectations, double standards, and aggressive condemnation. Instead, enthymematic narrative surfaces the potential for change through alternative narratives that do not render women as victims. However, anyone, regardless of identity, can work to interrupt the perpetuation of oppressive enthymematic narratives once we have identified them. Thus, our concept of the enthymematic narrative offers a theoretical tool that allows us to understand paradox and transform how gendered institutions are constructed. Our hope is that by shining a light on enthymematic narratives we make the most of paradoxical possibility to bring about social change.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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