



Article

Gender and Ethnicity: The Role of Successful Women in Promoting Equality and Social Change

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Abstract: This article analyzes the experiences and strategies of white and black women in positions of some power, in which they are able to strive to reduce inequalities and promote social change. From a qualitative perspective, this seeks to open the discussions around the possible applications of intersectionality between gender and “race”/ethnicity for studying the “tokenism phenomenon”. The results reveal six major themes that demonstrate how, while both white and black women share negative consequences of tokenism, the intersections of gender and “race”/ethnicity create dynamics that make black women’s experiences unique. Overall, we may therefore conclude the interviewees represent “agents of change” and deploy their power to promote equality in a variety of ways.

Keywords: tokenism; gender; ethnicity; women leaders; social change



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1. Introduction

Recent decades have seen a positive trend in gender equality in the professional world. However, at this rate, another 135.6 years will be needed before gender disparities are eliminated worldwide ([World Economic Forum 2021](#)). In fact, women are still underrepresented in the management bodies of listed companies ([WoBómetro 2020](#)). In Portugal, the average level is 26.6% (i.e., 3.4 percentage points below the European average (EU-28)). Only Norway, Iceland and France have already exceeded the European average.

In order to combat the prevailing gender inequalities, affirmative action measures have been implemented both in the world of business and in the world of politics. Indeed, 2018 experienced significant growth in the percentage of women in business after the implementation of Law No. 62/2017 (i.e., “Quotas Law”). The “Parity Law” had also earlier triggered a large increase in women in politics in 2009 ([Espírito-Santo and Santos 2020](#)).

These gender inequalities all become evident through the collection of statistical data. The same cannot be said in relation to ethnic-racial inequalities. The collection of this type of data in Portugal results mostly from statistics produced by institutional entities, non-governmental organizations and the media ([European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia \(EUMC\) 2003–2004](#)). These data alone are unable to produce either a reliable or a complete picture of the realities around racial discrimination in the country ([Alves 2019](#)).

This article seeks, in some way, to fill part of this gap by seeking to integrate a perspective that interweaves gender and ethnicity.

1.1. Tokenism from a Numerical Perspective

[Kanter \(1977, 1993\)](#) was the first author to explore the effect of the numerical composition of groups on organizational processes. The author identified how individuals who are in extreme minorities, thus in “skewed groups” (i.e., “tokens”, constituting less than 15% of the group), are disadvantaged compared to the “dominant group”. Due to their low representation, tokens suffer from three negative consequences: (i) high visibility

(generating pressures driving increased or decreased job performances); (ii) the polarization of differences caused by the dominant group (strengthening the barriers separating the groups, and contributing to the marginalization of tokens); and (iii) the assimilation of the stereotypes associated with their belonging group (potentially resulting in “role encapsulation” limiting the range of job functions allocated to tokens).

1.2. Tokenism from a Gender Perspective

From the outset, Kanter’s theory was subject to debate and criticism (Yoder 1991) due to its focus on the numerical proportion as the explanation of tokenism. This author points out how the aforementioned negative consequences might emerge for any proportionally underrepresented group in similar contexts (Santos and Amâncio 2014). Furthermore, Kanter’s gender-neutral research ignored the dynamics and relationships between men and women in a society marked by sexism (Zimmer 1988).

In her study of tokens, Williams (1995) reports how unlike women tokens, whose visibility necessarily produces several challenges, men tokens encounter a “glass escalator” that allows them to ascend quickly in the profession. Organizations are correspondingly “gendered” (Acker 1990), reproducing society’s “gender order” (Connell 2006; Williams 1995). There is also a belief that men are inherently more competent than women (Heikes 1991; Williams 1995), forcing the latter into additionally proving their skills and capacities for authority, as in the case of women politicians in Portugal (Santos and Amâncio 2011).

Therefore, working in a professional area typically associated with the opposite gender benefits men more than women (Amâncio and Santos 2021) as demonstrated by studies of female and male doctors (Santos et al. 2015), male nurses and female doctors (Santos and Amâncio 2019; Floge and Merrill 1986) and female police officers and male nurses (Ott 1989).

1.3. Tokenism from an Ethnic Perspective

While most studies examine the “tokenism phenomenon” from a gender perspective, only a small proportion consider “race”/ethnicity, whether alone or in combination with gender. Wingfield (2009) finds that, unlike white male nurses, who are perceived as more “competent”, black male nurses encounter the opposite reactions. Therefore, the “glass escalator” becomes both a “gendered” and a “rationalized” concept.

Research with white women proves that they are both challenged by paternalistic stereotypes of overprotection and pressures to be feminine and fragile (Yoder and Aniakudo 1997; Yoder and Berendsen 2001). In contrast, black women endure overwhelming challenges and pressures to show great resilience. These differences identify how the racial status of being “black” versus the culturally privileged status of being “white” determines the experiences of tokens (Yoder and Berendsen 2001).

Another important aspect derives from the difficulties black women encounter in separating just what caused their discrimination: sexism or racism (Yoder and Aniakudo 1997; Yoder and Berendsen 2001). These women recognize their oppression stems from the intersection of their racial group and gender and that being “white” provides privilege to their white colleagues. The same demonstrates the inseparability of racism and sexism (West and Fenstermaker 1995). In contrast, white women do not recognize the privilege of being “white” (Yoder and Berendsen 2001).

In the Wingfield and Wingfield (2014) study, black professionals report that a positive aspect of heightened visibility consisted of the support received from other lower-status black professionals, which offset the hostility they experienced in the workplace. However, their achievements were not generalized to their racial group, unlike white men in female professions.

1.4. The Intersection of “Race”/Ethnicity and Gender

Therefore, considering “race”/ethnicity takes a central role in our analysis here. Black feminists have analyzed the oppression of black women (e.g., Collins 2000; Hooks 1984;

Crenshaw 1989), broadening the spectrum of groups of women considered by feminist theories. These studies led to the evolution of intersectionality theory as a theoretical framework (Shields 2008), taking as its starting point the recognition of the intersection of gender with other dimensions of social identity (Crenshaw 1991). Gender, “race”/ethnicity, and class are “intersecting systems”, “interconnected categories” and “multiple bases” for oppression (Collins 2000).

Thus, the intersectionality model (e.g., Nogueira 2017) became one of the major theoretical contributions made by feminist and antiracist theorizing (Shields 2008), although discussion of its methodology has broadly been lacking. However, Leslie McCall (2005) presents an inclusive methodological perspective, proposing three approaches that each differ in their analytic categories: anti-categorical, intra-categorical, and inter-categorical.

In this paper, we adopt the intra-categorical approach, as this does not reject usage of social categories and the reality they reproduce even while recognizing their limitations. Although this type of study focuses on a single social group, this may encapsulate differences. Therefore, making comparisons with standardized groups from previous studies holds particular interest.

1.5. *The Role of Tokens in Social Change*

Several studies (Wright and Taylor 1998) identify how tokenism tends to favor individual actions over collective actions. However, when tokens are able and willing, they are able to act as “agents of change”. Some authors have studied the role of token women (i.e., successful women) in reducing gender inequality. Cohen and Huffman (2007) conceptualize the role of these women either as “agents of change” or as “cogs in the machine”. For change to become possible, women in leadership positions must have the motivation and power to help their subordinates and may undertake this in several ways: (i) through gender group preference in hiring, promotion, and salary decisions (Gorman 2005); (ii) by providing networking and mentoring opportunities, improving the career prospects of other women and minorities (Ibarra 1993); and (iii) by decreasing gender stereotypes in the workplace (Ely 1995).

A recent stream of research provides support to this “agents of change” perspective, demonstrating the impact of women’s representation on narrowing the gender pay gap (Cohen and Huffman 2007; Hultin and Szulkin 2003), increasing access to positions of authority (Skaggs et al. 2012), and decreasing gender segregation (Stainback et al. 2015).

On the other hand, Cohen and Huffman (2007) suggest that token women may have no influence on gender inequalities, serving only as “cogs in the machine”. For example, Maume (2011) reports these women may not attain enough power to influence the careers of their subordinates or may have indeed been selected for their positions precisely because they exhibit masculine traits, thus maintaining the status quo.

This paper aims to deepen knowledge about the phenomena around tokenism, specifically the contributions made by successful tokens to the promotion of equality. We thus seek to verify whether token women maintain the status quo or whether they serve as “agents of change”.

2. Methods

2.1. *Participants*

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 women of Portuguese and African origin (eight white women and eight black women) holding positions of some power and decision-making in masculine and/or white worlds (i.e., tokens). With their ages ranging from 27 to 64 ($M = 46$; $SD = 11$), the black women included in the study were younger ($M = 41$; $SD = 11$) than the white women ($M = 51$; $SD = 9$). Table 1 sets out the characteristics of this sample.

Table 1. Characterization of the interviewee nationalities, skin colors, and professional positions.

Interview Number	Nationality	Skin Color	Job Title
1	Portuguese and African	Black	Politics
2	Portuguese	Black	Education
3	Portuguese and African	Black	Journalism
4	Portuguese	White	Academy and Politics
5	Portuguese	White	Academy and Human Rights
6	Portuguese	White	Journalism
7	Portuguese	White	Human Rights
8	Portuguese and African	Black	Academy
9	Portuguese	White	Architecture and Human Rights
10	Portuguese	White	Academy and Human Rights
11	Brazilian	Black	Psychology
12	Portuguese and African	Black	Television
13	Portuguese	White	Science
14	Portuguese and African	Black	Communication and Images
15	Portuguese and African	Black	Human Rights
16	Portuguese	White	Journalism

2.2. Procedures

The study project was submitted to the Ethics Committee of our institution, and we received approval to conduct the study on 18 December 2020. The first participants in this study were recruited via e-mail through known personal contacts. Then, we applied the “snowball” technique, thus facilitating access to the 16 interviewees. All participants were given details about the main study objectives, as well as guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews all took place online, except for one (Interview 7), which was held face to face in a quiet location. This process took place between 30 November 2020, and 3 February 2021, with the interviews lasting around 60 min.

2.3. Instrument

The individual semi-structured interview scripts were built in accordance with the literature review, with a specific script for white women and another for black women, differing in some questions. The questions spanned three major thematic dimensions: career paths; dynamics in the professional context; and mobilization for equality.

2.4. Analytical Strategy

We then analyzed the interview contents according to the [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#) thematic analysis methodology, which enables researchers to “identify, analyze, and report patterns [themes] within the data” (p. 79). These themes capture something important about the data regarding the research question. This is a method that can be applied in a variety of theoretical and epistemological approaches and is independent of a theoretical framework.

Thematic analysis proposes six distinct phases of analysis: (i) familiarization with the data, by transcribing the interviews, reading the data, and noting down initial ideas; (ii) initial coding of the data, identifying the semantic or latent contents of the data; (iii) the grouping of the initial codes into potential themes; (iv) the review of the themes, seeking to see if the themes work in relation to the codes and the data set, generating a thematic “map” of analysis; (v) the definition and naming of the themes, refining the specifics of each theme and the overall “story” told by the analysis; and (vi) the production of the analysis report, by selecting vivid and compelling examples from the data, related to the research question and literature.

In the present research, a mixed analysis was used. We began with a partially deductive analysis, based on the theoretical interest in the topic of tokenism. However, we were also open to the possibility of finding new themes and sub-themes considered interesting for the research question, since it was also a partially inductive analysis.

This analysis deploys intersectionality theory, taking into consideration the various social categories of token women, in particular their “race”/ethnicity. We considered McCall’s (2005) intra-categorical approach, not rejecting the use of social categories and the reality they reproduce. We focused on two social groups, a more standardized group (i.e., white women) and an invisible group at the intersection of multiple oppressions (i.e., black women).

3. Findings

Thematic analysis resulted in the identification of the set of themes and sub-themes contained in the discourses of the 16 interviewees, as set out in Table 2.

Table 2. Themes and sub-themes.

Themes	Subthemes
Obstacles in the professional context	Racial inequalities Gender inequalities Integration strategies
Visibility	Pressure to perform well Scrutinized errors and trivialized successes Targets of attack Positive visibility
Polarization	Different treatment between men and women Intersection between gender and ethnicity/race Different treatment between white and black women Informal isolation Establishment of alliances
Assimilation	Black women can endure anything White women adopt male behaviors
Imbalances in the professional world	Reactions to ethnic–racial and gender disparities Work–family im/balance Patriarchal and sexist society Implementation of affirmative action measures
Women as “agents of change”	Commitment to their group’s success Elimination of stereotypes and discriminatory policies Networking, mentoring, and visibility Positive discrimination

3.1. Obstacles in the Professional Context

There were three sub-themes identified in this theme: (i) racial inequalities as an obstacle to the integration of black women throughout their professional lives; (ii) gender inequalities as an obstacle to integration for most women; and (iii) integration strategies adopted by the interviewees to better fit into professional contexts.

The first sub-theme conveys how the black women interviewed encountered obstacles based on racial inequalities. These women are targets of prejudice and racial stereotypes, as well as negative comments and hate discourses that seek to delegitimize their positions, hindering their integration into their professional contexts. The interviewees suffer from underestimation by their co-workers, reporting the perception of not belonging, in keeping with how they are treated as foreigners regardless of whether or not they were born in Portugal. In this sub-theme, the salience of “race”/ethnicity over gender is perceptible, as the interviewees report obstacles based on being black professionals in the professional context, paying more attention to racism than sexism.

There are obstacles that are placed on black people (. . .) because there are few black people occupying positions of power, there is a misconception in society that these positions are not legitimate (. . .). So, in this sense, when I became more of a protagonist, as a director of [association x], there were always negative

comments targeting me, trying to invalidate this position I occupied. (E1, black woman, Politics.)

The second sub-theme incorporates gender inequalities as obstacles faced by most women. More specifically, such aspects include the subtle and insidious gender discrimination that hinders their promotion and career advancement, the gender stereotypes and prejudices imposed by society, which create difficulties in saying no, fears over advancing in their career, the guilt associated with work–family reconciliation, and their co-workers' lack of understanding regarding these issues:

“I feel like it was harder. I remember once I competed with a colleague for a position and came second. I shouldn't have come second because according to objective criteria, I had a better degree, for example, I was the same age, my colleague didn't have more experience than me (. . .), but the truth is he got the job. I don't know if it was because I was a woman.” (E4, white woman, Academy and Politics.)

The final sub-theme includes the integration strategies adopted by female interviewees who practice their profession in a male and/or white world. These women register various strategies for managing situations, from trying to establish cordial relations and intervening verbally in meetings, being well prepared and getting straight to the point, making themselves heard, assuming an “attack” posture, encouraging the participation of other women in these contexts, not being afraid, working on their self-esteem, providing themselves with information, being as professional as possible, as well as trying to make the results of their work count for themselves.

“In meetings, where I am systematically interrupted, my strategy is, by not raising my voice, to say in a loop ‘so, as I was saying’ (. . .). It is to not shut up (. . .). I think now my strategy is for more [women to be present].” (E9, white woman, Academy and Architecture.)

3.2. *Visibility*

The second theme identified spans interviewee experiences linked to the factor of visibility. We may correspondingly identify four sub-themes detailing: (i) pressures to perform well; (ii) scrutinized errors and trivialized successes; (iii) targets of attack; and (iv) positive visibility.

The first sub-theme conveys how most interviewees feel an increased need to prove their skills by standing out as women and/or black women among their peers. For black women, visibility came with more severe pressures to perform well due to their racial minority status in the professional context. Prejudices regarding the intellectual abilities of black people force these women to overwork and demonstrate their skills without any margin for error. Moreover, heightened visibility carries extra symbolic consequences, as they cannot act in their own right, but rather carry the additional burden of also representing their racial group. However, this group stigma does not allow for their successes to be generalized to their belonging group, but does transmit their mistakes:

We have this huge weight to do everything right (. . .). One thing I always heard at home was: ‘don't forget that we are performing, and it is enough for one of us to make a mess to contaminate the whole group’ (. . .). What I feel is that I can't be an individual (. . .), I am always [Jess] who is part of a group where all her performance is framed in that package. Again, if it's positive, it doesn't benefit the group. If it's negative, it ends up reinforcing stereotypes. Why do I say it doesn't benefit the group? Because I'm singled out as the exception to the rule, ‘ah, you're different. Ah, you don't count.’ (E3, black woman, Journalism.)

White women also report pressures to perform well, but not as distinctly as those of black women, as they only need to prove themselves in comparison with men. One interviewee also describes feeling extra pressure due to the “glass cliff” phenomenon, which

often arises when women manage to rise in their career and break the glass ceiling but take over positions at particularly risky stages that ultimately compromise their performance:

Women, to become equal to men, have to be much better than men, because they have to be constantly proving that they do their work well. (E6, white woman, Journalism.)

The visibility of interviewees also becomes especially salient when they state their mistakes receive greater scrutiny and their successes are more trivialized when compared to those of men, and, in the case of black women, to those of white men and women. Due to the group prejudice and stigma around black women, their mistakes cost them more severely. Their successes and skills are also downplayed and poorly recognized:

In the workplace, I clearly felt that if I made any mistake, I was massacred. All it took was one. And for my white colleagues, it was different. I always felt the need to defend myself, to be cautious, not to get caught in any unpleasant situation, because I know that the slightest thing is going to be increased in a terrible way. (E2, black woman, Education.)

White women also feel their mistakes are more penalized in comparison to men, that the scrutiny is greater, and their successes undervalued. They feel there is societal pressure for women not to publicize their successes, to be coyer than men:

Being in a management position, I feel the scrutiny is greater and that mistakes are less forgivable, namely, by other men. (E6, white woman, Journalism.)

On the other hand, visibility also penalizes female interviewees because it places them in the line of attack, leaving them more susceptible to insults and humiliation on social networks and even in the workplace itself. This also means they have less privacy and see their freedom conditioned. For black women, these attacks may even come from their own racial group that sometimes unfairly calls them privileged for having access to this visibility, besides expecting “help” from them:

Now that I am [position in politics], I have more visibility (. . .), the hate speech, quite violent comments, which seek to humiliate me, are more frequent in the mailboxes. (E1, black woman, Politics.)

The last sub-theme concerns the positive aspects of visibility. Although some women identified only negative aspects, such as those described above, others found mainly positive aspects, but with the majority reporting both factors to a greater or lesser extent. Most respondents mentioned positive aspects, such as the importance of representing their group, inspiring others to strive for the same positions, and the scope for deploying their power to send out important messages, contributing to a more just society:

Yes, of course, I’m visible, I get a lot of messages from girls who are taking the course and they’re happy to get in touch with me (. . .), because I’m black and I’m fat. So, you’re imagining a black, fat woman being on television and having the impact that she has, people end up seeing that they can make it, because I made it and I don’t match the television standard. (E12, black woman, Television.)

3.3. Polarization

The third theme identified reveals the prevalence of another facet of tokenism—polarization—that further breaks down into five sub-themes: (i) different treatment between women and men; (ii) the intersection between gender and “race”/ethnicity; (iii) different treatment between white and black women; (iv) informal isolation; and (v) establishing alliances.

The first sub-theme demonstrates how all these interviewees have witnessed incidents of the polarization of differences between men and women. The differences in treatment relate to perceptions that men hold more skills than women and they occupy the top positions by merit, and with their performance generally attributed greater value, while women are undervalued and patronized. The tasks traditionally associated with women

still remain assigned to them and are subject to greater scrutiny, while men gain more and better opportunities right from the outset.

[Have you ever been treated differently for being a woman?]: Yes, I remember my first director had a line that was (. . .), there were two women in the newsroom, and he once walked in and said these two girls ‘are our flower vases’. I was just as much a journalist as the others but because we were women, we were just flower vases (. . .). In my time, I experienced that, the harassment for being a woman. And then, to get to senior management, they already think that women are not as competent. (E6, white woman, Journalism.)

In the case of black women, who are mostly aware of the oppressions to which they are subjected, whether because they are black or because they are women, they articulate the intersection of racism and sexism in their lives; that is, they are unable to separate racial discriminations from gender discriminations. However, once again, the salience of “race”/ethnicity prevails over gender because few respondents discussed sexism as a singular experience unrelated to racism, with sexism being perceived as a lesser problem:

[Have you ever been treated differently because you’re a woman?]: Yes, yes . . . I mean, I can’t really separate where gender discrimination is happening and where racial discrimination is happening. Because I’m both, but yes, I think that a lot of times, with black men, I’m treated in a subordinate way because I’m a woman. I think that’s where I can distance myself better from racial discrimination (. . .) but since, in Portugal, my interactions are with white people . . . Well, it’s not easy to know which is which. (E1, black woman, Politics.)

Most white women also recognize their “race”/ethnicity as a privilege in a white culture, and sometimes there are also differentiated treatments between white women and black women, the latter still being more discriminated against and invisible. For example, sexual harassment is taken less seriously for black women, and they are listened to with less attention than white women:

(. . .) when we are in a work context, there may be people who tend to listen more to a white woman’s voice than a black woman, even though that black woman may, from an academic point of view and political positioning, be better than the white woman. (E7, white woman, Human Rights.)

The polarization of differences leads to the exclusion and informal isolation of some women, who are not included in group activities and outings where socialization among members of the dominant group takes place:

Yes, I have been excluded from group activities because I’m a woman, yes. (E16, white woman, Journalism.)

The last sub-theme identified concerns about the need for most interviewees to establish alliances with other women and minorities during their career path to overcome the challenges of polarization. This reports the need to create support networks with other women and minorities, to have women mentors, and to mutually empower each other:

I feel that I needed, and that it would be quite positive for me, to establish alliances with black women with whom I could do articulated work because we face the same difficulties and obstacles. (E1, black woman, Politics.)

3.4. Assimilation

The fourth theme identified reveals the phenomenon of assimilation of the stereotypes generally associated with white women (e.g., fragile and emotional) and the stereotypes generally associated with black women (e.g., strong and resilient), limiting the interviewees’ freedom of expression. This resulted in the identification of two sub-themes: (i) black women can endure anything; and (ii) white women adopt male behaviors.

Most black women report pressures to be more resilient and stronger, which are imposed both by Portuguese society and African culture itself. A subconscious view persists in society, which dates back to slavery, that black women can endure anything, and are even compared to white women when they do show weaknesses. This impacts their mental health, resulting in deep loneliness. Although they assimilate these stereotypes, they maintain it is nevertheless necessary to deconstruct them:

I feel like I always need to be strong (. . .). It's like I can't have moments of vulnerability, and when I do, I have them alone. This is another thing regarding black women, sometimes a deep loneliness (. . .). Because even in African culture, this is expected of the black woman. So, we are attacked on all fronts, which is our culture, and the society where I was born also ends up having the same vision. There is this idea that black women are more resilient (. . .). Black women can take it, black women can take anything, and that is a big lie. (E2, black woman, Education.)

On the other hand, most white women seem to struggle so much against the gender stereotypes associated with them that they assume typically masculine postures as a defense strategy. This stems from the professional world not valuing the characteristics of fragility and emotionality, associating them with incompetence. These women feel they must adopt more masculine postures and stances to gain greater credibility in the male world. However, they always seem to be criticized whether they behave according to the female stereotype or the male stereotype:

Women in leadership positions end up adopting characteristics associated with masculinity (. . .). It's kind of a cloak that is put on (. . .) and what I think is that there is always criticism directed at women (. . .) either because they are too tough and shouldn't be, or because they are too emotional and, therefore, they are fragile and shouldn't be (. . .). It seems like they're never okay because that's not traditionally their sphere. (E10, white woman, Academy and Human Rights.)

3.5. Imbalances in the Professional World

The fifth theme focuses on the imbalances that exist between men and women and between white and black people in the professional world, particularly regarding management positions. Within this theme, we identify four sub-themes: (i) reactions to racial/ethnic and gender disparities; (ii) work–family im/balances; (iii) a patriarchal and sexist society; and (iv) the implementation of affirmative action measures.

The first sub-theme includes various reactions to racial/ethnic and gender disparities in management entities in Portugal. Most interviewees declare it is deplorable that the percentage of women at this level remains so low when women account for the majority in universities. Most also identify the importance of having women at the top who do not reproduce male role models. Others say that despite everything, there is progress thanks to affirmative action measures, but that this is still very slow, so situations of discrimination perpetuate. As for black women, most refer to how the percentage of black women in these positions is even lower, and thus they do not feel included in the gender struggle. To bring this reality into focus, the majority of interviewees stress the importance of ethnic–racial data collection and including these facets in intersectional approaches:

This is not a question of qualifications because we know that women today, in numerical terms, are better qualified than men. (E4, white woman, Academy and Politics.)

Another sub-theme focuses on the issue of work–family in/conciliation with most interviewees perceiving how this issue mostly penalizes women as they cannot compete equally with men, hence the disparities existing between men and women at senior management level. The interviewees feel they must be “superwomen”, able to balance all spheres flawlessly. Many times, this becomes a factor of exclusion, either due to discriminatory issues raised in job interviews or by society in general, that sometimes excludes them from

tasks on account of being mothers or judges them when they do not assume these tasks. The influence of class is also raised, as socioeconomic capacities enable some women to “buy” help, which allows them to gain a more equitable stance with that of men, or else the “luck” of having partners who divide and share these tasks:

I would say that [being a woman] is being a huge juggler. Not having time (. . .), being tremendously overloaded with duties of care, personal life and, at the same time, in my profession, I must prove (. . .). And sometimes when you give less attention to the family sphere because of work, you feel a lot of guilt about that. We must manage various guilts all the time. The superwoman syndrome is very violent. (E9, white woman, Academy and Architecture.)

A third sub-theme describes another reason identified by most interviewees for the imbalances in the professional context and derives from the prevailing sexist and patriarchal society, which places barriers on women:

In Portuguese society, there still is this sexist behavior, reducing the place of women in society in relation to men. This issue of the listed companies, the issue of the lack of visibility of women in the media, is still a reflection of this sexist society that we have. (E15, black woman, Human Rights.)

A final sub-theme refers to the importance of implementing affirmative action measures to correct these imbalances. The interviewees state these measures are emergency public policies, that they are fundamental and a “necessary evil” in order not to perpetuate the status quo. They add that meritocracy is a fallacy to benefit the same people and that quotas should also exist for ethnic minorities. In addition, some identify the need for a regulatory body to oversee the implementation of these measures:

I think these are measures aimed at correcting historical errors. I would very much like them not to be necessary but as long as there is inequality, the mechanisms against that inequality have to be effective, and therefore I absolutely agree with quotas and the parity law for as long as inequalities persist (. . .). That’s not only for women but for all socially vulnerable groups. (E5, white woman, Academy and Human Rights.)

3.6. Women as “Agents of Change”

The last theme demonstrates how, with the exception of two white women, the interviewees act as “agents of change”, challenging regimes of inequality. This dimension incorporates four sub-themes: (i) commitment to their group’s success; (ii) elimination of stereotypes and discriminatory policies; (iii) networking, mentoring, and visibility; and (iv) positive discrimination.

As “agents of change”, the respondents are motivated to campaign and struggle for equality and equally committed to the success of their group, intending to give back, in some way, what is their “privilege”. All black women report this commitment to the black community, and most white women to other women with some also mentioning a commitment to ethnic minorities.

Despite the obstacles that must be removed, I recognize how I occupy a place of privilege that many black people have not been able to achieve and hold. And that is my commitment, and I hope this will be my legacy, to create the conditions so that more black people can occupy the same place that I occupy today. (E1, black woman, Politics.)

How these women go about promoting equality depends on their organizational power in their respective professional contexts, although this is not limiting, as they build ways to promote this equality or exercise pressure on those who have this power. In this sub-theme about the “elimination of stereotypes and discriminatory policies”, most women nurture the deconstruction of racial and/or gender stereotypes by designing public

policies, through training, internal and external dissemination, the articles they write, and by exercising their functions in such a way as to eliminate discriminatory policies:

These obstacles have always existed and are also part of the struggle in which I am involved and mobilized, which is precisely to denounce and dismantle these prejudices (. . .) to work internally in the party so that the ability to interpret this matter is more conscious (. . .), through training, articles that I write, sharing information, integrating governing bodies. (E1, black woman, Politics.)

Another way in which equality is promoted is by providing networking, mentoring, and visibility to other women and minorities. In other words, the interviewees build bridges with each other, sharing career strategies, employment and advancement opportunities, quality information, and resources that boost each other's success. In addition, they build websites to publicize the work of other women and minorities and write books to promote visibility and build a portrait of the black community. They also mentor each other, empowering themselves:

We have a media outlet that is exclusively dedicated to talking about women (. . .). Having a media outlet gives visibility to women, that gives role models to younger girls who are on the path (. . .), you show her that there are women who are there, that it's not an aberration to want to be a leader (. . .). (E16, white female, Journalism.)

Finally, interviewees with some recruiting power or influence in hiring register a preference for women and minorities; that is, they undertake positive discrimination:

I can't handle everything, so I have a team helping me. I generally integrate people to work with me." [Do you feel you should help other women? What about minorities?]: "Yes, I only accept black psychologists. (E11, black woman, Psychology.)

4. Discussion

These results offer important developments for tokenism theory. Indeed, while they demonstrate both groups of women share Kanter's (1977) negative consequences of tokenism, the intersections of "race"/ethnicity and gender create dynamics that render black women's experiences unique.

Regarding the visibility dimension, the interviewees report pressures to perform well and how their mistakes receive greater scrutiny, and their successes are trivialized. These consequences are more severe for black women, as they are perceived as "incompetent" due to racial stigma (Wingfield 2009), suffering additional pressures to perform well (Turner 2002). These women can effectively never become more than a member of their racial group while carrying the burden of representation (Kanter 1993). Interviewees perceive visibility as a negative because of all the aforementioned aspects as well as because it leaves them vulnerable to humiliation and insults. However, as Wingfield and Wingfield (2014) described, this visibility can also be positive, as it allows the interviewees to inspire others to occupy the same roles.

Regarding the facet of polarization, there is differential treatment between men and women in terms of gender, as a perception still persists that men have more skills than women (Williams 1995), with the latter continuing to be patronized. There is also a polarization of differences between white and black women in keeping with the perception alleging white people have more skills than black people (Wingfield 2009). Black women cannot separate what causes their discrimination: sexism or racism (Yoder and Aniakudo 1997; Yoder and Berendsen 2001). Despite sharing gender discrimination with white women, "race" takes precedence over gender in their discourses because, when reporting the challenges they face as women and as black women, racism emerges as a central theme (Bowleg et al. 2003; Turner 2002).

Regarding the last negative consequence pointed out by Kanter (1993), assimilation, this study serves to confirm its impact. There is a stereotypical image that black women

can handle anything and are not subject to vulnerability, and that is harmful to their mental health. White women, on the other hand, do not feel the need, imposed by others, to be more fragile, emotional, or feminine; quite the contrary, they instead feel they must assume masculinized postures to gain credibility and triumph in masculine worlds (Drydak et al. 2018).

Regarding the role of these women in social change, most white women and all black women reveal a commitment to the success of their group. All black women report an obligation to elevate their “race” (Higginbotham and Weber 1992). Most white women exhibit this commitment to other women and minorities, contradicting the “queen bee” phenomenon, characteristic of women who harm and hinder the progression of other women (Arvate et al. 2018). However, black women notably exhibit a more cohesive group identity than white women and are more likely to protect other members from racial discrimination (Eberhardt and Fiske 1994).

Just as Cohen and Huffman (2007) conceptualized, these women act as “agents of change”, deploying their powers to promote equality and social justice in a variety of ways. Most women advocate for the deconstruction of gender and/or racial stereotypes (Ely 1995), exercising their roles to eliminate discriminatory policies (Hultin and Szulkin 2003). These women also foster networking and mentoring opportunities that encourage success and visibility for women and minorities (Ibarra 1993). Finally, in keeping with Gorman’s (2005) findings, female respondents who hold power over hiring decisions, choose to discriminate positively by preferring their gender and/or “race”/ethnicity group.

Taken together, our findings suggest that promoting women and minorities into positions of power may give voice and power to other tokens. Organizations will benefit from diversity, as it is possible that as more women and minorities are appointed to corporate boards, issues of gender and racial segregation will be less of a problem. We hope this will entice others to investigate further on the processes underlying the patterns results shown here, including more women and minorities at a corporate level. Greater detail to these positions through a more fine-grained analysis, and the inclusion of other markers such as “class” or “age” would shed light on when and how tokens do—or do not—promote equality. For example, it would be interesting to include male tokens from different “races”/ethnicities and address their role in promoting equality, similar to Wingfield’s (2009) study.

In conclusion, when applying an intersectional approach, markers such as gender and “race”/ethnicity matter to the study of phenomena around tokenism and may exacerbate the associated negative consequences. Most interviewees here are committed to the success of other women and minorities and strive, in accordance with their organizational power, to promote equality. Therefore, unlike most studies that show that tokens tend to promote the status quo, the present study is more optimistic. It offers an important contribution to literature, as it would seem that, when tokens are able and willing, they go onto act as “active agents” in promoting social change.

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