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### Catch-22

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**Catch-22: Token Women trying to reconcile an impossible contradiction between Organizational and Societal expectations**

**Abstract**

Extending tokenism theory, and Kanter's (1977a & b) work on numerical representation specifically, we emphasize the external, societal context of gender inequality in order to understand token women's lived experiences at work. Based on analysis of 29 in-depth interviews in a multinational (MNC) situated in the distinctive socio-institutional setting of Saudi Arabia, the paper expands Kanter's (1977a) typology of roles, to capture token assimilation in a context embedded way. In particular, we explore the contradictory interaction of a seemingly Western MNC espousing liberal values, rules and norms within the enduring patriarchal and traditional context of Saudi Arabia. Further adding texture to Kanter's (1977a & b) theory, this study reveals that the organizational context cannot be seen as fundamentally neutral and inevitably interacts with the societal context, resulting in unique manifestations of tokenism.

**Keywords:** Context, Gender inequality, Patriarchy, Roles, Saudi Arabia, Tokenism

## **Introduction**

Across the globe, women continue to be under-represented in management and leadership positions. In 2018, women held 39 per cent of senior roles in the United States, 22 per cent in the UK, and 20 per cent in India (Catalyst, 2018). This figure was only 7 per cent in Saudi Arabia where gender, work and social relations are underpinned by traditional patriarchal structures, tribalism, a conservative adherence to Islam and a strict code of gender segregation (Syed, Ali, and Hennekam, 2018). Recently, the country set a target for increasing women's workforce participation, specifically in leadership positions, by 2030 (Vision2030, 2019). However, these initiatives have been criticized as mere tokenism since Saudi women subsist within patriarchal legal and socio-cultural systems that considerably restrict their careers (Al-Rasheed, 2018). This paper specifically focuses on how token women working in a large Saudi MNC negotiate the contradiction of seemingly egalitarian Western organisational values, policies and norms with an enduring patriarchal societal context. Fittingly, we use the concept of tokenism which Kanter (1977a, 1977b) developed to investigate and highlight key organizational challenges faced by numerically under-represented women including heightened performance pressures, isolation and role entrapment. A significant body of research adopted Kanter's (1977a) theoretical ideas (e.g. Haas, Koeszegi, and Zedlacher, 2016; Simpson, 1997). Our paper extends this literature by focusing on contextually unique experiences and expressions of tokenism which are formed through a potentially contradictory interaction between organizational (encapsulated by an emphasis on gender equality and female quotas) and societal pressures (for instance, skewed gender ratios and patriarchal structures).

This paper uses Kanter's (1977a) theory as a lens yet adjusts the focus from the organisation to the unceasing interplay between individual, organisational and societal level influences that generate

distinct and nuanced forms of tokenism. Using Saudi Arabia as an illuminating case, the central aim of the paper is to understand the *shape* and *form* of tokenism experienced by women and their responses to their token status within the boundaries of their constrained agency at the interplay of organizational and societal contexts. Our paper presents novel insights from an under-researched context, thus adding to the overall repertoire of evidence on mechanisms of gender inequality at work. Importantly, the paper's contribution goes beyond the empirical as we demonstrate how one of the most influential theories of gender and work can be usefully employed in a relational manner, moving Kanter's (1977a, 1977b) theory beyond the confines of an organisational-level focus which implicitly presumes the influence of the societal level as invariable.

The next section briefly introduces Kanter's (1977a, 1977b) theory of tokenism as a useful frame to make sense of the experiences of under-represented women at work, drawing out key criticisms levelled at this theory, identifying the main gaps and explaining how our paper bridges these gaps. Then, the gendered employment context of Saudi Arabia is presented, followed by a description of data collection and analysis processes. Findings present token women's experience of, and response to, contradictory societal and organisational role expectations placing them in a Catch-22, and the subsequent manifestation of role entrapment. The paper concludes with a discussion section which highlights the main contributions of this research, as well as limitations and future research directions.

### **Under-represented women at work: theory of tokenism**

The theory of tokenism (Kanter, 1977a) explores how numerical representation translates into advantages and disadvantages for majority and minority groups, thereby creating three key perceptual challenges. First, members of the minority group (tokens) experience heightened

visibility which leads to perceived ‘uniqueness’ and increased performance pressures (Simpson, 2000; Simpson and Lewis 2005; Torchia, Calabrò, and Huse, 2011). For instance, Gardiner and Tiggemann’s (1999) study of a male-dominated industry shows that women experience higher levels of stress, scrutiny and performance pressures than their male co-workers. Second, members of the majority/skewed group (dominants) may isolate the minority by emphasizing differences, and keeping ‘the token slightly outside’ (Kanter, 1977a: 210), through the deployment of jokes, interruptions, ‘loyalty tests’, limiting tokens’ access to information and excluding them from informal professional networks and collegial support mechanisms (Haas et al., 2016; Simpson, 1997). A third perceptual challenge involves dominants’ stereotypical beliefs fuelling the distortion of tokens’ social characteristics (Lewis and Simpson, 2012). Kanter (1977a) argues that token women in the workplace are pigeonholed into ‘role traps’ assigned for them by the majority group. In Kanter (1997a) study of token women in sales, she observed that women were traps in four roles: (1) a ‘mother’ (emphasizing women’s socially ascribed role as sympathetic care-givers), the assumptions that the mother will be available to comfort the males and emotionally supports one’s problem; (2) a ‘seductress’ (emphasizing their sexuality and desirability as determined by the male gaze), that perform observably in ‘feminine’ behaviours, and usually a male on higher power position within the organisation associated himself with a seductress and adopt the role of her “protector”; (3) a ‘pet’ (underlining their subordinate positions in terms of technical/professional competence) whereby token women are perceived by male group as sweet, amusing, humorous, incompetent, and cheerleader for her male colleagues. The token adopts this role will not view as threatening as she expected to admire and cheer for the male displays but not to engage into them; and (4) an ‘iron maiden’ (symbolizing the aggressive, non-conforming

female) portray token women who are strong, competent, push for full rights, and resist to conform to any of the previous three roles trap.

Overall, role entrapment condensed women in a classification the men can relate to, respond to, define the type of the relationship with male co-workers, and undermine the level of power tokens have either at work or at individual level (Kanter, 1977a & b). However, researches (Childs and Krook, 2008; Chambliss and Uggen, 2000; Gustafson 2008; Powell et al., 2009; Whittock, 2002) highlighted that usually it is less challenging for token women to conform to these roles rather than resisting the general expectations of the skewed group. For example, Whittock's (2002) study on women working in manual male-dominant trades, such as construction, reveals that women often accept the role stereotyping in order to advance in their career and be accepted by their male-colleagues.

Kanter's theory of tokenism (1977a) has generated an influential body of work that studies the experience of token women across a range of occupational and organisational contexts for instance, females working in elite law firms (Chambliss and Uggen 2000); holding executive positions (Lyness and Thompson 2000); or working as managers (Simpson 1997), scientists and physicians (Floge and Merrill, 1986), and firefighters (Yoder and Berendsen, 2001). However, much of the extant research, in emulation of Kanter's (1977) original work, focuses on the interaction between the organisation and the individual (Chambliss and Uggen, 2000; Whittock, 2002) and so we know very little about the *origins* of the roles, stereotypes and expectations observable at organisational level. Additionally, this emphasis on the organisation and work group as the predominant level of analysis underplays the 'contingent nature of tokenism' (Watkins, Simmons and Umphress, 2018: 335). Yet, individual-level interaction and decision-making

processes as well as organisational policies and practices are ultimately embedded within the broader societal context.

Some studies do explore how the negative experiences of token women, specifically problems tied to visibility, contrast, and assimilation, are the result of societal norms being reproduced within organisations (Ridgeway, 1991). However, both Holgersson and Romani's (2020) and Watkins et al's (2018) recent reviews highlight that societal and cultural norms remain under-studied in existing tokenism literature. In this article we draw on primary data from the unique case of women working in a Saudi MNC. Specifically, we go beyond the organisation and draw out tensions associated with token status that are augmented by the contradictions between the organisational and societal context. This context-specificity is important because cultural beliefs and societal structures create a hierarchy of 'nominal characteristics' (for instance, gender, race, and religion) with different levels of cultural prestige and 'status values' attached to each characteristic (Ridgeway, 1991: 368). The societal hierarchy of nominal characteristics impacts patterns of interaction at the organisational and individual levels, which like 'ripples in a lake' help maintain the structural conditions that created the hierarchy in the first place (Ridgeway, 1991: 368 & 375). As there is an inherent circularity of interaction between societal, organisational and individual levels, the societal gender narrative is bound to impact organisational expectations, framing the individual-level behaviours and experiences of dominants *and* tokens.

Furthermore, Kanter's work (1977a & 1977b) has already been critiqued for being gender neutral whereby she expects token men to have similar experiences if they were an organisational minority (Lewis and Simpson, 2012). This gender-neutrality is underpinned by the 'politics of optimism' which sees the effects of gender differences as accidental, and fixable, and instead emphasizes similarities between men and women (Halford et al, 1997). This approach underplays how role

traps, stereotypes and dominants' expectations from tokens are all underpinned by masculine hegemony (Holgersson and Romani, 2020), and unequal power relations between the male dominant centre and the female margins (Lewis and Simpson, 2012). As previous research has highlighted, the experiences of male and female tokens (in terms of wage growth, career outcomes, and performance measurement) are very different (e.g. Wingfield, 2009). Token men in female-dominated professions experience very few adverse effects on account of their minority status (Holgersson & Romani, 2020) 'because men have a higher status than women due to their gender and place in society' (Watkins, Simmons and Umphress, 2019: 351). A key research gap to explore is how token status manifests when a group is *both* numerically and symbolically under-represented. Our research aims to highlight the importance of this symbolic dimension of under-representation which becomes visible only when the societal context is accounted for.

Relatedly and finally, against the societal backdrop of male privilege, dominants in the workplace can maintain their organisational power on the basis of two pre-conditions: i) the organisational reproduction of socio-cultural gender biases has to be unrecognised and 'unproblematized' (Lewis & Simpson, 2012: 146) and ii) the practice of boundary heightening (whereby dominants exaggerate commonalities with each other and differences with tokens) has to be present (Holgersson & Romani, 2020). These two conditions create a visibility-invisibility paradox (Author C, 2017) whereby gender inequality is rendered invisible and legitimate whilst gendered expectations are highlighted and naturalised (Acker, 2006). As a result, token women simultaneously experience hypervisibility, for example, on account of auxiliary features like dress/physical appearance, and invisibility, whereby their negative social interactions with dominants remain unrecognized (Lewis and Simpson, 2012). Our paper evidences these striking dynamics of visibility/invisibility for token women in workplaces that are embedded in the highly



traditional patriarchal societal context of Saudi Arabia which we briefly describe in the next section.

### **Background and Context: Employment of Women in Saudi Arabia**

In April 2016, Prince Salman announced the ambitious Saudi Vision 2030, aimed at transforming Saudi Arabia to a knowledge-based economy. A key objective of this vision is to improve women's economic involvement by increasing their workforce participation rate from 22% to 30% (Vision2030, 2019). Several governmental initiatives involving the 'feminization' of certain jobs and sectors (that is, jobs restricted specifically for women), and mandatory segregation (whereby employers have to provide segregated physical spaces for their female employees in accordance with Islamic principles of modesty) were introduced (Naseem and Dhruva, 2017). Moreover, populist moves like ending the ban on women driving, and changing guardianship laws to permit women to work without their male guardian's permission (Arab News, 2019) were also pursued to increase females' labour force participation. However, these reforms have been criticized as a superficial public relations exercise; for instance, women being allowed to drive is seen as institutionalized tokenism since Saudi women's political and civil rights are completely neglected (Al-Rasheed, 2018). The Saudi regime's contradictory policy agenda is evident in how women who had campaigned for the right to drive remain in prison, highlighting how token public reforms are deployed to divert attention from ongoing human rights' violations (Ehteshami, 2018).

Women's employment generates widespread debate in Saudi Arabia. Liberals promote unfettered female labour participation while conservatives' campaign to limit female employment to "women's jobs" that typically preclude interaction with males (Moshashai, Leber, and Savage, 2018). Governmental initiatives have increased the total number of working women, crucially in

private mixed-gender organisations (for example, a 152% increase in women working in the private sector) (General Authority for Statistics, 2018). However, the role of Saudi women in society remains a divisive topic. Those who hold conservative views restrict women, as representatives of family/tribal honour, to the domestic sphere (Syed et al. 2018), and see attempts at gender equality as endangering the family unit and traditional Islamic identity (Moshashai et al.,2018). However, the liberal elite supports females' social emancipation via Vision 2030, and women from these circles specifically benefit from exceptional 'first' tokenism appointments (Al-Rasheed, 2018). A third narrative views these reforms with scepticism as political tools designed to cement the Crown Prince's leadership rather than a genuine expansion of women's rights (Eum, 2019).

Nevertheless, institutionalized gender inequalities at the cultural-political level remain and influence gender regimes within organisations (Acker, 2006 ), generating context-specific forms of gendered schemata for sorting, allocation and valuation of employees. For instance, Saudi women predominantly work in the segregated public sector (primarily education and social care) that is considered gender appropriate (Syed et al. 2018). Additionally, women's career advancement is hindered by patriarchal attitudes (Hennekam, Tahssain- Gay, and Syed, 2017). For example, Elamin and Omair's (2010) demonstrate that male supervisors' traditional attitudes toward female employees curtailed women's autonomy and power and hindered their ability to fulfil their job responsibilities. Similarly, Hennekam et al's (2017) study of Middle Eastern organisations' implementation of the quota system (aimed at increasing female participation in the workforce) highlights the policy as a managerial box-ticking exercise that conversely heightened prejudices and stereotypes *against* women. There is also evidence of significant vertical segregation whereby men hold top-level, high-status jobs while women occupy support roles (Syed

et al. 2018). Similarly, our research shows how patriarchal societal norms manifest at the organizational level, highlighting women's challenging integration in mixed-gender organisations given slow normative change with respect to female empowerment (Moshashai et al.,2018).

## **Method**

Tokenism research has highlighted the impact of gender imbalances at the organisational level (Simpson, 2000; Kanter, 1997), however, little work explores how broader societal contexts impact individual token's organisational experiences. We undertake to extend tokenism theory by qualitatively drawing out the complex interplay of the individual, organisational and societal levels - exploring the tokenism experiences of female employees in a Saudi MNC. Qualitative method allows in-depth understanding of the context and captures the participant's attitude, opinions and lived experience (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017). Primary data (gathered by one of the authors) includes multiple sources principally, interviews, non-participant observation and company documents.

### ***Case study: SaudiCo***

We draw on a Saudi Arabian MNC (SaudiCo) with a global presence; chosen because it is a) a mixed-gender organisation in contrast to Saudi Arabia's gender-segregated public sector, and b) as one of the largest energy organisations is subject to both local *and* international influences. SaudiCo was originally established by American interests but eventually became entirely Saudi state-owned. Given its historical antecedents, SaudiCo has maintained an American style of management (for example, English is still the official language) and applies its own rules and values that may differ from more conservative laws of the country. For example, women were allowed to drive freely within organisational premises *before* the driving ban officially ended in 2017. SaudiCo's fenced-in residential compound resembles an American town where the

employees live with their families. Christmas and Halloween are celebrated, employees' children are enrolled in the on-site school that teaches an American curriculum, and most striking is the conspicuous absence of religious police and the presence of unveiled women.

SaudiCo has developed a positive image in the media for supporting women's development and empowerment, integrating women into traditionally male-dominated jobs in engineering, science, and technology, and promoting women to leadership positions in key roles/divisions (for example, appointing the first female executive director, first female petroleum scientist, and first woman in charge of an overseas subsidiary) and advocating for socio-normative change *beyond* the organisation. Recently, SaudiCo also announced an ambitious target to increase female representation to more than 20% of its workforce in line with Vision 2030 (currently, only 8 % of the company's total workforce of 76,000 are women). The MNC presents the organizational emphasis on women's careers as a 'motor of change' for society at large. To this end the company has financed 250 small-scale projects run by women, invested in women's technical skills, funded expensive study-abroad programmes/conferences and created employment opportunities for women in the external labour market. Many of these organizational initiatives could be classified as atypical in the Saudi Arabian context, pursued with the specific intention of presenting a progressive and 'Western' organizational image.

### ***Data and analysis***

This research focuses on female participants' experiences of, and responses to, their under-represented status in SaudiCo. While research access in Saudi Arabia is challenging (Zahra, 2011), one of the author's background (as a native Saudi woman) and her personal connections played a major role in gaining access to the organisation and alleviating interviewees' initial anxieties in

openly discussing their lived experiences. The researcher also engaged in one month's non-participant observation which offered many opportunities to engage with the participants informally, observe their daily work activities, and gain a deeper insight into the work setting and organisational culture. The researcher also had the advantage of a shared cultural, social, and linguistic background with the participants and therefore, was accepted as a native insider during fieldwork. Being recognised by local people as a cultural insider generates trust, and enables a researcher to handle interviews "in a sensitive and responsive manner" (Bishop, 2008: 148). However, the researcher's position as an insider (that is, a Saudi national) was also supplemented with her position as an outsider (that is, an academic who had been living and studying in a Western country for over ten years).

For access to the organisation, we adopted a non-random selection approach (Stake, 1995), of a gender-mixed Saudi Arabian MNC with 8 % of women comprise of the company's total workforce, i.e. less than 15% identified by Kanter (1977a) as token. Participant recruitment relied on purposive and snowball sampling (Yin, 2013; Patton, 2002), relying on one of the authors' connections in the Saudi society to ease contact with three gatekeepers in SaudiCo (purposive sample), while the remaining participants were recruited via recommendation by the interviewees (snowball sampling). The selection criteria included being a woman, Saudi national, and having more than three work experience in the organisation. Based on this sampling strategy and criteria. 34 women employees were invited to participate - four declined the invitation and one refused to continue the interview given discomfort with being recorded. In total, 29 semi-structured interviews were conducted, capturing a diverse range of perspectives across different ages, marital status, family structures, types of jobs, years of work experience, hierarchical positions and occupations (see Appendix 1)

The semi-structured interviews were chosen as the best suited data gathering method for in depth information on how participants construct themselves and their organisation in naturalistic settings (Patton, 2002). Our interview schedule derived initially on factors that highlighted in Kanter framework as barriers for token women such as organisational practices (for instance, developmental opportunities and promotion processes), gender relations in the workplace (tied to socio-cultural norms/values), and participants' lived experiences at work (for instance, job satisfaction, work-related stress, and frustration), but was flexible enough to allow focusing on emerging themes. This flexibility allowed participants to share reflection about their work experience in greater depth.. Interviews were conducted on SaudiCo premises and typically lasted for 30-40 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Arabic, fully transcribed and translated into English. To ensure the accuracy of translation, a sample of transcripts was back-translated to Arabic by a third party, and then again to English.

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Insert Figure 1 about here.

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Thematic analysis was carried out using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) three-stage protocol of coding. Interview transcripts, organisational documents and the researcher's observation notes were coded into successively more sophisticated and interrelated patterns that illuminate how our participants experienced tokenism at work (see Figure 1). The next two sections present the key findings from the data analysis.

## **Findings**

Our analysis highlighted that in spite of SaudiCo's Western antecedents, implementation of organisational policy (by dominants), as well as the responses of token women, were intrinsically tied to the distinctive societal context. In the first section below, we present the paradoxical situations (that is, catch-22's) created by this contradictory interplay of the organisational and societal levels of analysis and individual interpretation of this incongruence. We then extend these findings to study Kanter's (1977a) notion of role entrapment specifically, with an emphasis on the lived experiences of token women.

***Caught in a catch-22: the contradictory interaction of organisational policy and societal norms***

Overall, SaudiCo presented a progressive and 'Western' organizational image by proactively offering a range of equal opportunities and positive action initiatives, atypical in the Saudi Arabian context. Degree programmes and conferences abroad were funded because 'the management tries to... .. advertise that the company has female employees' (Management & professional development advisor, 29 years old, married, BSc). Commitment to a modern organizational image meant that in external interactions (with other businesses, the media or the Royal Family) women employees were more likely to be chosen as presenters and hosts – notably those women who physically conformed to the liberal, 'Western' image.

*...when they have a business trip they don't nominate females who wear Abaya. Although the company is a Saudi company...they want us to be Western... (Administrative Assistant, 38 years old, single, Diploma)*

There were also instances of positive discrimination whereby women were sometimes offered atypical career opportunities compared to their male counterparts which went against established gender social norms that tend to favour men,

*In the same week the female geologists returned to the company after finishing their degree abroad, we received direction from the upper management that they should be sent for a master's degree...although the system in the company is that any employees to be sent for master's degree should have minimum 3 to 4 years working experience, and these females are fresh graduates. So, imagine, some of the guys with amazing GPA's were waiting for 5 years for their turn to go for a master's degree, and they found out that their (female) colleagues who were fresh graduates were (being) sent (immediately). (Management & professional development advisor, 29 years old, married, BSc)*

However, these progressive organizational policies per force interacted with societal norms that continued to favour patriarchal traditionalism. For instance, the cultural norm of male guardianship, whereby women cannot travel without a mahram's (that is, a male guardian like a father/brother/husband) permission (Syed et al. 2018), impacted female employees' actual uptake of these atypical training and development opportunities often involving international travel.

*...(we) can't go out without a Mahram... they (SaudiCo) say that they can't spend money on you and your Mahram...(so) it is easier and cheaper to send a male (instead) (Digital cartographer, 35 years old, married, BA)*

*When a woman goes for an assignment she must... take a Mahram... The company will not be responsible for (the extra financial cost...) but when a male goes to the same assignment and if he is married (with) three or four wives he can bring all his wives...(Supervisor, 40 years old, married, BSc).*

Applying a relational lens was instrumental in capturing this uneasy and often invisible interaction between the progressive organisational norms (mirroring 'Western' norms) and societal traditionalism (rooted in immutable cultural and religious mores). Our participants' lived



experiences highlighted many unacknowledged instances of prejudiced, unsupportive and discriminatory behaviour from male colleagues whereby male managers informally requested a woman employee be shifted out of their team, pregnant women were excluded from lucrative projects and men walked out of meetings if women were attending.

This contradictory interplay of societal and organisational contexts in turn created paradoxical situations which we classified as catch-22's – that is, instances where contradictory conditions of modernity/progressiveness and social convention/traditionalism coexisted. The first catch-22 that emerged from our data analysis was the politics of visibility and invisibility. Tokens experienced heightened visibility on account of their numerical minority *and* physical appearance (given increased emphasis on the latter in the Saudi Arabian context). Crucially, this visibility was controlled by the dominants whereby unveiled women were used to present a progressive image of the organization externally (signalled higher external visibility) while veiled women were excluded from training, development or promotional opportunities (signalling higher internal invisibility).

*Certain types of women are usually encouraged to apply for senior positions or to go for training abroad... they have an image and the lady who fits this image will go for training abroad... She must be open-minded, have western looks, not wearing the Hijab (veil). They have a certain design in their mind, and ladies who fit this design will get the benefits.*  
*(Digital cartographer, 35 years old, married, BA)*

Token women were aware how this contradictory manipulation of their visibility by male colleagues further enabled their numerical token status. Crucially, dominants' manipulation of visibility politics resulted in the creation and/or replication of 'feminine spheres' which further normalized token women's occupational and professional invisibility. Therefore, dominants'

societally-driven interpretation of progressive organisational norms reinforced the professional invisibility of the token women.

*The girls are just as good as the boys...but unfortunately a lot of supervisors will treat their female employees as admin assistants...regardless of their degree... and regardless of where she studied they will give her the fluff work. It is a cultural thing! (HR Systems Analyst, 51 years old, divorced, BSc)*

A second catch-22 was the micro-level reactions of token women themselves whereby contradictory responses of endorsement *and* rejection co-existed. A small minority of interviewees actively agreed with societal norms that symbolically buttressed their token status; and dominants' reproduction of these societal norms within SaudiCo. These token women eschewed progressive organisational policies and instead advocated gender-segregation (in meetings and physical office space) and women being assigned backend/support work, refused to travel without a male guardian (even to nearby locations like Dubai), and embraced the veil in line with Islamic principles of modesty.

*Not all jobs suit women...God created our bodies in a way that... we aren't physically or mentally strong... Female engineers can't work for long hours under the sun in the field, but men are capable of doing that... (Safety group leader, 42 years old, divorced, BSc)*

*I think that some women's personalities aren't fit to become leaders... Women are... weak and emotional, they are not strong enough to be managers... (HR systems Analyst, 51 years old, divorced)*

However, other interviewees actively rejected their token status through persistent questioning of both societal norms and contradictory implementation of organizational policies. Some female

managers actively criticized persisting gender inequalities in the workplace and advocating for policy changes with senior management. For example, one of the respondents highlighted how they were trying to initiate change in international assignments policy that funded male employees' dependents while they were abroad while female employees had to self-fund their dependents.

*...they talk about the role of females, but deep inside they look down at us...But I (will) continue doing workshops...I will do things that...make me competent ... that will make me seen (Training & professional development advisor, 41 years old, PhD).*

### ***Token women's experiences of role entrapment in SaudiCo***

Our data analysis highlighted that traditional patriarchal structures prevalent externally, were also reproduced within SaudiCo, whereby men were perceived as the primary/sole breadwinners while women were venerated as mothers and wives that needed to be provided for (Syed et al. 2018). These stereotypical cultural beliefs resulted in token women being ascribed specific attributes, constituting what Kanter (1977) calls role traps. The 'mother' role, which describes women's role as the caring and comforting support act, was a predominant one in SaudiCo and manifested in two key ways: i) token women were predominantly delegated to subordinate, support roles and ii) their identity as mothers/wives/daughters *outside* of the organisation was actively maintained by the dominants *inside* the organisation and given precedence over their professional/work identity.

SaudiCo's organisational structure was strongly gendered and a majority of the women employees appeared to be clustered in support services with very few occupying positions in the core operations of engineering and geology. Women were primarily recruited as administrators, office assistants, junior advisors with the aim of providing support for senior male colleagues, regardless of their qualifications or previous work experience.

*Management always put women in jobs that facilitate male jobs...(we) provide services that make men's jobs easier. Women (are) concentrated in low-productivity jobs... (even) highly educated Saudi women... (Administrative Assistant, 38 years old, single, Diploma)*

*Women's roles are limited to specific positions that men are ashamed to work in, for example, training coordinator, HR coordinator...these positions (are) dominated by women only. (Trainee advisor, 31years old, Married, BSc)*

Additional gendered horizontal segregation emerged whereby dominants replicated and maintained societal support roles conferred on women (as wives/mothers) by assigning them office work. Office work was seen as safer and more appropriate for women and therefore, token women were deliberately excluded from the more financially lucrative field-based work which required travelling and atypical hours that could potentially create tensions in women's acquittal of family responsibilities.

*...female geologists are not allowed to stay in the company after working hours. The management argue that it is not safe; they believe it is not safe for female employees to enter the building alone and work alone with the guys at night time (Management & professional development advisor, 29 years old, Married, BSc).*

*Although the girls are willing to work late, they are willing to give up some of their weekends, but their supervisors feel no, she is a girl, we can't do this to her... this is a cultural thing (HR systems analyst, 51-years old, divorced, BSc).*

Furthermore, women were expected to marry and take charge of their households/families and were not seen as primary breadwinners, irrespective of their actual circumstances or preferences. Dominants' application and maintenance of these societal gender norms meant that women were

expected only to *'meet the minimum requirements in your appraisal (and) don't show any initiative'* (HR coordinator, 46 years old, single, MBA), bypassed for promotions, and given unimportant tasks when pregnant or with a young baby while *'men are put in first priority when it comes to getting a higher grade or a promotion ...'* (Professional development program coordinator, single, 27 years old, BSc).

*"Usually managers say that males need promotion, that they are the household (head)...you don't know much about me, maybe I am sending money to my parents, maybe I am also a (breadwinner), how do you assume I am not, because I am female?"* (Training and professional development advisor, 41-years old, married, PhD).

*"...most promotions are awarded to male first because of the social belief that men... have more responsibilities than women"* (Travel consultant, 33-years old, BA).

Interestingly, these gender biases were so deeply entrenched that even expatriate managers from more gender egalitarian contexts were seen to replicate them,

*"...(my) American manager... not (even) an Arab...said that we will not give you a good evaluation because your income is disposable...you are going to fritter it away on make-up and stuff you don't really need"* (HR Systems Analyst 51-years old, divorced, BSc).

Kanter's (1977) role trap of 'pet' also emerged in our data analysis whereby: i) SaudiCo's women employees were seen as incompetent on the basis of their gender (regardless of their actual qualifications/work experience) and ii) this presumed incompetence was visible both implicitly and explicitly through a range of organisational practices. Several interviewees highlighted that male managers had low expectations of women, considered them less competent, and therefore gave them very few chances to progress and develop.

*Whatever we do they will not appreciate it...they will think that we got help in doing this hard work... they will never believe that this work was done 100% by a woman (Travel consultant, 33 years old, Single, BA)*

*The general attitude is that a woman is not capable of thinking and working like a man (Division secretary, 31-years old, married, BSc).*

This narrative of gendered incompetence, and women being treated as ‘pets’ with lower capability, was visible in the obvious mismatch between their qualifications/skills and assigned jobs. Implicit manifestations of the ‘pet’ role trap included the example of a woman manager with a PhD and 20 years of work experience in SaudiCo who was never chosen to stand-in for the division head while he was on annual leave,

*Our division head is a PhD-holder like me, and every time he goes on leave, I have never been called to cover for him. They bring another male from another organization to cover for him. What does that mean? It means that they think I am not capable (Training and professional development advisor, 41-years old, married, PhD).*

Explicit manifestations of the pet role trap were the many instances in which women were working beneath their qualification grade and in functions not relevant to their expertise. The demographic information of this study’s participants (see appendix 1) offers a salutary snapshot of many interviewees holding degrees in varied subjects (ranging from business, engineering to computer sciences) and still being recruited into administrative/support positions.

*When they first employed me, they gave me a choice to go for either the help desk or HR. I decided to join HR, which is not related to my major. My major is computer information systems (HR coordinator, 28-years old, Single, MSc).*

*I am an Admin Assistant... My degree is in finance. I am not really happy in my job because this is not what I want to do...it is very far from my education but this is what I (was given) ”*

*(IT technical clerk, 35-years old, married, BSc)*

Interestingly, the catch-22 on visibility/invisibility of token women generated a completely new role trap which we have titled the ‘Hecate’. Hecate is a Greek goddess who symbolizes a crossroads (between the past, present and future) and represents polarities like night and light. In line with this terminology our analysis highlighted that in the Saudi Arabian context women employees faced a dually-binding trap of simultaneously representing progressive *and* traditional values. Thus, while senior and predominantly male managers actively contributed to the maintenance of mother and pet role traps (emphasizing caring, non-influential and powerless roles for women within the organisation), they also used women employees who were overtly confident, did not cover their heads and had embraced a more Western style of dressing to represent the organisation externally. Our participants were conscious that women were deployed as an organisational symbol of progressiveness and Westernisation in business or media presentations that involved the Royal family, competitor foreign organisations or the Western media.

*“Whenever we have an event or tour from outside, females are the ones who are chosen to participate. It is for the organization’s image” (Management & professional development advisor ,29 years old, married, BSc)*

Yet, despite being symbols of progressiveness, women were still expected to uphold traditional Islamic principles of modesty, cover up/take the veil, be meek, and implicitly judged for working in a non-segregated organisation like SaudiCo.

*A lot of male supervisors say to us that women should stay at home. They usually quote the verses of Qur'an that say 'stay in your houses, and do not display yourselves like that of the times of ignorance'... Men use the Qur'an as a weapon (to) justify the discrimination against women (Training and professional development advisor, 41-years old, married, PhD)*

*Some of the men...don't even speak to you...some people will walk out if you are in a meeting with them. They don't want to be in a mixed meeting (Project manager & HR group leader, 49-years old, married, BSc).*

Crucially, the role trap of 'Hecate' and associated expectations of traditionalism/modesty versus modernism/confidence was seen to be controlled by the dominants. This enabled the replication and preservation of societal masculine hegemony within the organisation, reduced female agency and consigned tokens to the margins.

### **Discussion & conclusions**

Through employing a relational lens to Kanter's tokenism theory (1977a & b), this study sought to capture the interplay between individual, organisational and societal level influences that generate distinct forms of tokenism. By focusing on an under-researched and illustrative societal context this research revealed how token women negotiate the contradiction of superficially progressive Western values and rules at the organizational level against the backdrop of a traditional and patriarchal context. Our findings highlight that Saudi women, even when working in an MNC that actively pursued gender equality, experienced heightened visibility (tied to their physical appearance), unequal access to career opportunities and gender-based discrimination. This is in line with previous studies on tokenism that have shown how women as minority workgroup experience a range of negative experiences in the workplace (Gardiner and Tiggemann,



1999) ranging from heightened visibility and isolation (e.g. Haas et al., 2016; King, Hebl, George, and Matusik, 2010; Simpson, 1997) to occupying fewer senior positions and experiencing career barriers (Simpson, 2000). Crucially, instead of being seen as individuals they bear the burden of representing their entire sex (Cleveland, 1994). Previous work has also highlighted how heightened visibility conferred upon women by dint of their gender puts pressure on them to outperform their male colleagues (Simpson, 2000; Simpson and Lewis 2005; Torchia et al., 2011). However, our findings extended this gender visibility narrative by highlighting the co-occurrence of heightened ‘visibility’ because of numerical representation *and* physical appearance. Crucially, this heightened visibility manifested itself in conjunction with heightened ‘invisibility’ with respect to token women’s occupational and professional identities and access to work opportunities. This was tied to the contradictory interaction of societal (conservative and traditional) and organisational contexts (progressive and Western). We argue that by adopting a relational approach to the study of tokenism this research highlights the importance of the societal context and the limitations of adopting homogenous conceptualisations of Kanter (1977a) work.

The paper demonstrates how Kanter’s (1977a & b) work can be valuably utilized to offer a relational understanding of token women’s experiences. Specifically, we argue the necessity of moving beyond the predominantly explored organisational-level conceptualisation of tokenism and also drawing out societal impact on organisational norms and individual organisational agents. In line with Holgersson and Romani’s (2020) and Watkins et al’s (2018) critique of the lack theoretical and empirical conceptualisation of the role of societal and cultural norms in existing tokenism literature, the present study suggests that SaudiCo’s policies, in spite of being disguised under a progressive/Western rhetoric, are inextricably tied to societal traditions which crucially reinforced the symbolic level of tokenism beyond the numerical under-representation of women

in organisations. Our research highlights that gender hierarchies and masculine hegemony are under-written by cultural beliefs and societal structures which reinforce the token status of women in the overall society and also impact patterns of interaction at the organisational and individual levels within workplaces.

Our findings offered important theoretical implications for Kanter's (1977a) third perceptual challenge of assimilation— that is, the process whereby tokens attempt to imbibe the stereotypical gender characteristics assigned to them by the majority group via 'role entrapment'. The data revealed that role entrapment was experienced through a circular interplay between the societal, organisational and individual levels, in particular when token women found themselves at the intersection of contradicting organisational and societal role impositions. Furthermore, our research highlighted that Saudi female employees were primarily perceived as either 'mothers' (offering emotional support for men both within and outside the workplace) or as 'pets' (occupying non-influential and powerless roles that required lower levels of skills and competency). Interestingly, our analysis did not offer any support for Kanter's (1977a) other identified roles of 'seductress' or the 'iron maiden' potentially because of the unique societal context of Saudi Arabia. The prevalent religious ideology of Islam, in combination with enduring patriarchal norms whereby females are seen as representations of family and tribal honour (Syed et al. 2018) perhaps mitigated the overt sexualization of women. Thus, public manifestation of their femininity was culturally abhorrent and subsequently organizationally impermissible. Furthermore, Kanter's (1977a) conceptualization of the 'iron maiden' role trap signified female agency and proactive resistance which is unlikely in the Saudi context given strong political control by the royal family and the government, lack of enforceable equal opportunity legislation, and the absence of employee representation structures like trade unions.

Furthermore, women in the workplace can engage in critical rejection of these role traps but this individual-level response cannot translate into active resistance because of enduring cultural and structural barriers in Saudi Arabia. More crucially, the token women may actively accept their low levels of agency by endorsing the societal norm of gender inequality as a consequence of internalisation of and compliance with the gender regime of specific cultural-political environments they are located in (Acker, 2006).

Interestingly, a new role trap emerged from our data, i.e. Hecate, which is more context-specific and reflects the dually-binding trap of token women representing progressive and traditional values at the same. Our theoretical contributions, under-scored by the absence of ‘seductress’ or the ‘iron maiden’ roles in Kanter’s (1977a) existing typology and the emergence of the ‘hecate’ role underline how the societal context interacts with the organizational level of analysis resulting in a unique manifestation of tokenism. However, previous work has suggested that the social context does not play a significant role because “the same pressures and processes can occur around people of any social category who find themselves few of their kind among others of a different social type” (Kanter, 1977a: 240). In line with Yoder (2002) critique of Kanter’s (1977a) theory, we argue that role entrapment cannot be studied at the organizational/occupational level alone and broader social, cultural and religious forces that constantly impact the organisational level of analysis also need to be considered. In this paper we demonstrate that the organizational context cannot be seen as fundamentally neutral and is inevitably impacted by the societal context with respect to prevalent work attitudes (of both male and female employees) as well employment experiences and outcomes (in terms of career opportunities, workplace dynamics, and horizontal and vertical job segregation). Thus, our study highlights that token status is not only a matter of

numerical representation but equally of symbolic representation whereby one group holds a dominant position over the other in the broader societal context which is then translated into the organisational setting. In doing so, this paper shines a light on a blindspot in the concept of tokenism stemming from the espoused gender-neutrality in Kanter's theorising (Lewis and Simpson, 2012; Holgersson and Romani, 2020). Our expanded relational approach to tokenism can also be usefully employed to explore the experiences of other groups (for instance, sexual, racial, ethnic or religious minorities) that are numerically under-represented in the organisation *and* hold a status of historical and structural disadvantage in the society.

Our approach of focusing on the interaction of the organizational context with the external societal arrangements has also relevance for large swathes of the global south (Ashraf, Ayaz, and Hopper 2019; He and Wu 2018; Hennekam et al., 2017; Gupta 2015) that have distinctive contexts in comparison to the largely Western context studied in extant literature on tokenism (King et al, 2010; Young and James, 2001). While Yoder (2002) and Watkins et al. (2018) have called upon gender researchers to consider different social contexts when conceptualizing tokenism, our study is the first empirical attempt that offers a relational perspective of the societal context with respect to tokenism. Researchers have previously concentrated on narrower markers of the gendered context for instance, race unorthodox work occupations (Whittock, 2002) but there is no research to date that investigates tokenism vis-à-vis the societal context. Therefore, this current research expands existing conceptualizations of gendered contexts and offers a broader assessment of perceptions of gender equity.

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Figure 1: Data analysis process

