



# Appointment of women to mining boards – Evidence of tokenism

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## Synopsis

Mining companies are required by law to improve representation of women on their boards. However, progress in this regard has been slow. Boards of directors play an important role in formulating corporate strategy, risk assessment, and effective governance for sustained financial performance. Although some women have successfully maintained board seats, others have been unable to do so. It is difficult to ascertain whether women are being appointed as tokens to satisfy social pressures, as little is known about the experiences of women board members in mining, which may inform or refute tokenism. In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 women and 16 men across six listed mining companies. Thematic data analysis revealed evidence of tokenism where recruitment to mining boards is compliance-based and is informally driven by influential directors. Adverse boardroom experiences that further confirmed tokenism were reported by women, such as disregarding their contributions, condescending behaviour, and limited influence in decision-making, while other women sought to validate their competence and oppose social exclusion. This study recommends that a strong Board Chair and nominations committee is critical to ensure sustainable recruitment of competent and suitably qualified women; and further foster a culture of inclusivity and valuing gender-diverse boards.

## Keywords

women in mining, board of directors, recruitment, chairperson, critical mass, tokenism.

## Introduction

On a global scale, only a few women occupy board seats (Bianco, Ciavarella, and Signoretti, 2015; Catalyst, 2021; Chatergee and Nag, 2023; Deloitte, 2019; Rahman, Zahid, and Saleh Al-Faryan, 2022). To address this problem, initiatives varying from enforced compliance to voluntary targets have been proposed (Botha, 2017), with many companies worldwide stepping to the fore in improving gender diversity (Catalyst, 2021; Szydło, 2015; Terjesen and Singh, 2008; Rahman, Zahid, and Saleh Al-Faryan, 2022). Many companies have argued that there is a limited pool of potential women directors, but research refutes these claims and proves that a lack of suitably skilled and qualified women can no longer serve as a defence (Bosch and van der Linde, 2020; Sweetman, 1996; Moraka, 2013; 2018; Rahman, Zahid, and Saleh Al-Faryan, 2022). In South Africa, it is estimated that women occupy nearly 20% of boards, and the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) requires listed companies to indicate commitment and plans to increase the representation of women on boards as part of listing requirements (Bosch and van der Linde, 2020; JSE, 2016).

The South African mining industry presents a unique setting due to its historical male-dominated culture (Benya, 2016). As such, the sector faces various expectations of transforming its gender profile, along with race, at board level and across all occupations and management levels to correct the historical imbalances (Botha, 2017). The principal influencer of equal opportunities in the mining industry is the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act (BBBEEA), which through the Mining Charter legislates women's advancement in mining at all levels, including the boardroom, as part of government's empowerment strategy (Deloitte, 2015; Moraka and Jansen van Rensburg, 2015). A study conducted by Women in Mining (WiM) in the UK and PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) showed that at a global scale, the mining industry has fewer women on company boards than any other industry (van Dyke, 2020).

In the top 100 global mining companies, women account for only 8% of board seats and just four executive directors in this group (van Dyke, 2020). Although mining companies listed on the JSE have more women directors compared to their international counterparts, the industry still lags with its inability to identify female talent pools, as well as institute development initiatives and retention strategies to attract and sustain women directors (PWC, 2013; van Dyke, 2020). Despite laws enacted, women in mining are reported to still be subjected to social, physiological, and employment barriers (Botha, 2017). These reports should not be expected, particularly because the literature indicates that women on boards makes business sense and provides proven benefits such as higher profit margins, higher return on sales, and higher returns

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on invested capital and equity (van Dyke, 2020). Women have also been reported to be sensitive to ethics, social and environmental issues, and important drivers for sustainability of organizations (Moraka, 2018). Despite all these benefits, and the promulgation of legislation, the recruitment and retention of women to mining boards is still a challenge (Botha, 2017). The few women appointed are recycled and there is a high turnover due to the inability to retain women directors (Moraka, 2018).

This article contributes to the understanding of recruitment practices and experiences of female directors in mining boardrooms. It contributes to the theoretical knowledge of recruitment to boards to refute or confirm claims of tokenism by presenting the experiences of women who enter mining boardrooms. A theoretical perspective is presented that offers a framework to evaluate evidence of tokenism, which has rarely been empirically tested (Rahman, Zahid, and Saleh Al-Faryan, 2022). Then, a discussion is presented on the sampling and interview method with emphasis on the research methodology chosen and interview strategies employed. Lastly, a review and discussion of thematic findings is presented before conclusions are drawn.

### Tokenism theory

Tokenism refers to a practice where members of minority racial, ethnic, or gender groups are permitted to enter spaces and opportunities previously reserved for the majority group to signify inclusivity (Ruby, 2021), when these groups are not genuinely welcome (Ricucci, 2008). Tokenism theory in the context of boards postulates that when only one woman is appointed on the board, scholars are directed to accept as true that the appointment is solely to satisfy social pressure or the perception of inclusion (Broome, 2008; Kanter, 1977; Rahman, Zahid, and Saleh Al-Faryan, 2022; Rixom, Jackson and Rixom, 2023) or as part of the company's corporate social responsibility (CSR); thus, a board's sincere effort to improve board gender composition becomes questionable (Abdullah, 2014). Other indicators of tokenism were established when women were appointed to boards that had only a few or no female representation or when a woman had recently resigned from that board (Farrell & Hersch, 2005; Gregory-Smith, Main, and O'Reilly, 2013). Minorities (in this case women directors) are easily marginalized when their presence in a larger group is diffident (Rahman, Zahid, and Saleh Al-Faryan, 2022; Torchia, Calabró, and Huse, 2011). Bhardwaj (2022) found that women's behaviour toward token treatment is determined by their own value systems and aspirations rather than their minority status. However, other studies showed that the mere presence of a single female director may not lead to positive outcomes and contribution (Bear, Rahman, and Post, 2010; Rahman, Zahid, and Saleh Al-Faryan, 2022), since token appointees may find it more difficult to voice their opinions and be heard (Nemeth, 1986). In an experiment involving 207 Mturk respondents, Rixom, Jackson, and Rixom (2023) found that women are generally viewed as tokens when their numbers are less than the quota according to legislation. Adverse constraints are expected for women joining male-dominated industries owing to their token status (Holgersson and Romani, 2020).

The theory of tokenism (Kanter, 1977) suggests that women minorities are subject to discriminating behaviour during board meetings, and hence face barriers in influencing board decisions. Accordingly, the male board members as the dominant group tends to see women chiefly in terms of the social roles they occupy, embodying the sex role stereotype, and only later as board members (Holgersson and Romani, 2020; Nielsen and Madsen,

2019; Terjesen, Sealy, and Singh, 2009). Gender stereotyping make it difficult for women directors to have their opinions and inputs valued, and importantly, listened to on an equal basis with other board members (Holgersson and Romani, 2020; Ruby, 2021). Elstad and Ladegard (2012) argued that these minority problems should, according to the theory, be alleviated when the ratio of women increases beyond the token limit of 15%. Kanter (1977) studied women working within a male-dominated Fortune 500 firm to explore how the ratio of women in a group affects group processes (Elstad and Ladegard, 2012; Torchia, Calabró, and Huse, 2011). She defined a skewed group as having a ratio of 85:15, where the members of the majority (85% or higher) were labelled 'dominants' and the remaining minority members 'tokens' (Holgersson and Romani, 2020). Tokens are usually perceived negatively, sometimes with downright mockery (Nemeth, 1986), often doubted and not trusted. Being considered a token engenders feelings of discomfort, isolation, and self-doubt (Kanter, 1977), and is likely to affect performance (Nielsen and Madsen, 2019; Powell, 1993; Rahman, Zahid, and Saleh Al-Faryan, 2022; Rixom, Jackson, and Rixom, 2023). Kanter (1977) established that being a token has three behavioural consequences, namely visibility, polarization, and assimilation.

*Visibility* implies that the tokens find themselves being watched all the time, resulting in perceptions of performance pressure. In this situation, there are perceptions that even small mistakes can be serious, making tokens feel that they must work harder to receive recognition for any individual achievements (Elstad and Ladegard, 2012; Rixom, Jackson, and Rixom, 2023). The visibility mechanism in tokenism theory predicts that tokens will avoid conflicts and controversies and side with the majority (Li and Wearing, 2004). At the same time, tokens may perceive a pressure not to outperform dominants (Gustafson, 2008), and some will choose to become socially invisible and maintain a low profile (Elstad and Ladegard, 2012), being careful not to argue against the dominants to protect the dominant group's self-esteem. Empirical evidence shows that tokens exhibit passive and obedient behaviour (Li and Wearing 2004), and feel they are likely to be criticized for their mistakes more than necessary (Gustafson, 2008). For all these reasons, even two women appointed to a board will experience difficulties making a meaningful contribution in the boardroom (Torchia, Calabró, and Huse, 2011).

*Polarization* suggests the contrasting of the dominants (men) with the tokens. It implies that the men feel threatened or uncomfortable around token women, and consequently they heighten their boundaries by exaggerating their commonality and the differences of the tokens (Kanter, 1977; Westphal and Milton, 2000). Demographic differences lower social cohesion in the boards, causing the women to become isolated from the rest of the group, and thus perceiving that there are barriers to information as well as social isolation (Rixom, Jackson, and Rixom, 2023; van der Walt and Ingle, 2003). In a corporate board setting, the polarization mechanism may have two behavioural consequences. First, the men may be less inclined to share information with the minority women members, and second, they may exclude the tokens from social interaction outside the boardroom (Elstad and Ladegard, 2012). For a corporate board, informal discussion and socializing outside formal meetings are important activities (Parker, 2007; Stevenson and Radin, 2009). Women may find it difficult to fully participate in these social interactions with other board members if they are a minority, because they perceive themselves as an out-group (Huse and Solberg, 2006). Accordingly, the polarization mechanism has

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the consequence that token women are not aware of or do not participate in informal social interaction outside the boardroom (Elstad and Ladegard, 2012).

Finally, *assimilation* implies that the tokens are forced into stereotypical categories defined by the dominants (Li and Wearing 2004; Rahman, Zahid, and Saleh Al-Faryan, 2022; Rixom, Jackson, and Rixom, 2023; Ruby, 2021). Tokens are then not seen as they really are. Kanter (1977) labels this role encapsulation, a method that renders tokens into limited and mimicked roles (for example, anticipations as to what is ‘appropriate behaviour’ for a woman). For the tokens, stereotyping may result in perceptions of barriers to exerting influence on decisions in the boardroom. These three mechanisms – visibility, polarization, and assimilation – are predictions of how the dominants behave towards tokens, as well as the subjective reactions of the tokens in terms of their own status. Stereotypical prejudices may also have consequences in that the women’s inputs are less considered in board decisions (Rahman, Zahid, and Saleh Al-Faryan, 2022; Westphal and Milton, 2000) demonstrating tokenism.

## Sampling and interview method

Data in this research is valued, as it is difficult to access board members who are often high-profile persons (Kakabadse *et al.*, 2015). Mining companies were selected for the study due to their male-dominated structure and historical gendered architecture. For sampling purposes, Patton (2002) suggests that sample size sufficiency should be bound by peer review and that sampling decisions should give grounds for justification. Non-probability purposive sampling allowed for the selection of a sample that would respond to the objectives of the research, without compromising the scientific and ethical rules for research engagement. At the time of data collection JSE-listed mining companies were leading global mining companies and thus were considered sources of accurate cases to identify outliers for best- and worst-performing companies in terms of women’s representation. This research approach followed a qualitative methodology, using a multiple case study design. To achieve a robust, theoretical in-depth understanding, the focus was on six JSE-listed mining companies. Thirty-six Interviews (20 women and 16 men) were held with board members in these companies, ranging from five to six per company. Creswell (2002) suggests that for each case, an average of four respondents should be adequate, while Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) indicate that saturation may occur anywhere between the 6th and 12th interview. Given that on average mining boards consist of eight, members, a minimum of three and maximum of six interviews were conducted for each board. Three companies had more than three women on their boards and the other three had fewer than two, which enabled the study to compare the experiences of respondents across cases. The sample consisted of five Board Chairs (four men and one woman), four CEO’s (all men), 14 independent Non-Executive Directors (11 women and 3 men), one Executive Director (woman), and one Financial Director/Chief Financial Officer (woman).

Interviews ranged from 35 minutes to 90 minute each, on average. Interviews were focused on information related to (1) assessing talent management with respect to recruitment of board members (both males and females); and (2) respondents’ views regarding challenges and opportunities experienced post recruitment. In-depth interviews were advantageous as they allowed board members to share their encounters by narrating their stories and experiences and thus became active participants in the research (Stanley and Wise, 1983). The in-depth interviews enabled

different questions to be asked that placed women’s development at the centre of the research (Hesse-Biber, 2007). This strategy ensured that research was undertaken for women rather than about women (Letherby, 2014). Interviews were corroborated with field notes which were prepared for analysis. The transcribed data of the interviews and field notes was subjectively interpreted by a process of thematic analysis, whereby coding was used as a way of indexing or categorizing the text to establish a framework of thematic ideas about it (Gibbs, 2002). The methodology and the research process were transparent and ensured that the findings are clearly presented and open to critical analysis (Hesse-Biber, 2007).

## Thematic findings

Thematic analysis of the interview transcript data revealed evidence of tokenism, which was corroborated with Kanter’s tokenism theory. Six themes emerged to confirm tokenism in mining board recruitment, namely (1) *compliance-based recruitment*, (2) *silence – right to voice diminished*, (3) *limited influence*, (4) *condescension*, (5) *validation seeking*, and (6) *social exclusion*. Table I shows the corroborations of theories, related studies, themes, and supporting quotes.

## Discussion

Compliance-based recruitment was evident where women were recruited to comply with legislation and boards were compelled to be transparent about measures to increase the membership of women (IoDSA, 2016; JSE, 2016). Scholars believe that when only one woman is appointed on the board, it can be assumed that the appointment was made due to social pressures (Arfken, Bellar, and Helms, 2004; Branson, 2007; Broome, 2008; Burgess and Tharenou, 2002; Holgersson and Romanim, 2020; Kanter, 1977; Kogut, Colomer, and Belinky, 2014; Torchia, Calabró, and Huse, 2011). Respondents in this study believed that mining companies would only act based on enforced compliance. It was therefore determined that quotas play a critical role in addressing the poor representation of women in mining. The respondents, mostly women, disclosed their dislike for quotas due to role categorization, gender stereotypes, and being ignored, signifying polarization, but appreciated the impact of quotas which enabled women appointed to boards to insist on more women being added. The general view was that the mining sector is one industry that needs to be compelled through quotas, otherwise there would not be any improvement. The challenge of compliance-based recruitment happens when a woman is appointed on the board without any board- or mining-related experience, as her apparent contribution will not be realized, confirming tokenism. One woman appointee presented an obvious case of tokenism where she mentioned upfront her lack of any mining-related experience in her interview with the nominations committee, yet she was appointed. It was established that her appointment was a reaction to the recent JSE listing guideline, which stated that listed companies needed to develop gender diversity policies, comply with at least 30% women on boards, or explain why they were not able to meet the target. Tokenism theory suggest that the appointment of one woman in response to legislation can be referred to as tokenism (Arfken, Bellar, and Helms, 2004; Branson, 2007). The deferment to tokenism increases when one woman remains the only female appointee for some time and the commitment to gender diverse board could be doubted (Broome, 2008; Holgersson and Romanim, 2020; Rahman, Zahid, and Al-Faryan, 2021; Rixom, Jackson, and Rixom, 2023).

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Theory and rationale	Women on Boards research	Women on Boards Studies doctrines	Themes (Results)	Findings (Quotations)
<p>Token theory Kanter, 1977</p> <p>Appointment of one or two women signals tokenism</p>	<p>Arfken, Bellar and Helms, 2004</p> <p>Branson, 2007</p> <p>Broome, 2008</p> <p>Burgess and Tharenou, 2002</p> <p>Kanter, 1977</p> <p>Kogut, Colomer and Belinky, 2014</p> <p>Torchia, Calabro and Huse, 2011</p>	<p>Boards that appoint only one woman on lead scholars to believe that the appointment of a woman was due to tokenism to satisfy social pressure or the perception of inclusion.</p>	<p>Compliance - based recruitment.</p>	<p><i>Initially I think it was tokenism and compliance and now I think increasingly there's more of an understanding of the actual value that we add to the board. (Female Director)</i></p> <p><i>She's the first woman, so we have one woman on our board now and so the plan is then to also now look to increase it further, but at least we've made that. (Male Director)</i></p> <p><i>I do think with mining it is one of those where I kind of unapologetically and unashamedly say it is that industry that needs to be beaten over the head and compelled per quota. The industry is perverse as well, you need to compel them. That's the only time that there will be any room for growth because we're in a period [where] we can't keep saying that the skill set is not there. (Female Director)</i></p> <p><i>Let's use the quotas because otherwise we're not going to have women. Men do not like [working] with women, so we need those quotas. My view, honest view, is some of the things must be imposed, otherwise they are not going to happen. (Female Director)</i></p> <p><i>I don't like (quotas) but I think they are necessary. I don't like being pigeon-holed I never want to join a board because I am a woman. I never ever would want to be someone like that, you are a woman then we check the box. I think that quotas are important and what I find is that they have created a discipline within boards to search outside of the men's comfort zone. (Female Director)</i></p> <p><i>I think we must make sure that we understand the available pool of women in relation to our objectives. For example, in a Mining Charter 3 draft, the percentages they've got in there, what the mining industry is saying, those percentages are not achievable for two reasons. One, there is the demographics and two, the available skills out there. In terms of just setting our targets or [that] you want to achieve, let's be sober about the pool that's available. (Male Director)</i></p> <p><i>If you look at it, we have two women only at board level. So, the other one is retiring ... I said how can the chairperson of the board be the only queen bee around the table. (Female Director)</i></p> <p><i>I was quite upfront [with] them to say I don't know what made you guys decide to get a candidate of my stature because I'm not going to lie to you and say I understand your business; I don't. But I will try my level best to do what I can ... but they begged me [and said] 'Please, the chairman and one board member would like you to see them'. I stayed but by the afternoon, that Thursday when I was [at that business trip] I was told that they were quite happy, they didn't want to see anybody else. (Female Director).</i></p>
	<p>Broome, 2008</p> <p>Huse and Solberg, 2006</p> <p>Lansing and Chandra, 2012</p>	<p>Women regarded as tokens may find it more difficult to voice their opinions.</p>	<p>Silence (right to voice diminished).</p>	<p><i>Patriarchy perpetuates the status quo, the status quo is unequal and in fact it is based on the majority serving to further the ends of a minority. In that process the majority will only be acquiescent if they allow themselves. That is why I think that one must stand up against inequality. (Female Director)</i></p> <p><i>The culture is male and steeped in all traditions. When I came here, I became very confused because to a very large extent I felt like my brain was directed by the environment. It was not even directed; it was polluted. (Female Director)</i></p> <p><i>It's a real problem, because how people talk, even things like swearing, or you know, where this is just like normal people, oh well we're very informal. We swear, you know whatever, we could shout at each other across the table. You shut a woman up. You also shut decent men up because most people don't like to behave like that. (Female Director).</i></p>

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*Table I (continues)*

Theory and rationale	Women on Boards research	Women on Boards Studies doctrines	Themes (Results)	Findings (Quotations)
	Ashfrod, Rothbard, Piderit and Dutton, 1998 Maume, 2011	Women regarded as tokens may find it more difficult to influence decisions.	Limited influence	<p>I got the sense that, when you're a woman trying to get into an environment like this one, you must go the extra mile in terms of proving yourself that you will be able to do the role. (Female Director)</p> <p><i>You need your strength; you need to be assertive. It is not going to be enough that you are a competent person and as much as possible you cannot be a quiet Jane or a quiet Susan. Okay, you can't</i> (Female Director)</p> <p><i>Expectations are always higher where black women are concerned. As a black woman you must go the extra mile to prove yourself</i> (Female Director)</p> <p><i>Women don't have that aggression and therefore how they make their voices heard is something which they must still think about, because we are still a minority in the boardrooms</i> (Female Director)</p> <p><i>Women who bring their hearts into the workspace and that's what we do. You come with your heart. I am warm, I am kind, I am collaborative; those traits do not necessarily make you a success in a male-dominated environment</i> (Female Director)</p> <p><i>Women who are not confident cannot succeed in the boardroom, so confidence is a big thing. If you do not have it, it is a big thing for you as a person because of the nuances and the undertones</i> (Female Director).</p>
	Eagly and Karau, 2002 Eagly and Carli, 2007	Women's fitness for boards is often challenged, leading to negative evaluations of women irrespective of their preparation, ability, or performance.	Condescension	<p>Do we have a culture that supports that? No. What happens? They [black people and women] become frustrated, White people say, "They are not competent, they are token appointments". You know, white people still hold on to their territory; they do not want to transfer skills. They create polarisation in the workplace (Female Director)</p> <p>It's just people being undermined; that happens a lot. That is a big problem because there are undertones in the boardroom, some people are more respected than others and some people when they speak, they are not respected. Some views are more important than others. The bullies win more than the people that are not bullies (Female Director)</p> <p><i>There are people, directors who are extremely dominant. All the boards, there are directors who dominate more than others. You're going to find that in everybody, because [when] you speak, they don't know what you were going to talk about and then they just chop you down. They do that, they undermine you and they cut you to size.</i> (Female Director)</p> <p>I felt that there was that tendency of condescending, where two members of the board who are the executive board members feel that the board is there to just rubber stamp what they've done and what they're doing. When you then start questioning things, then it becomes an irritation. (Female Director).</p>
	Ibarra, 1992 Mathisen, Ogaard and Marnburg, 2013	Being labelled tokens, female directors may feel uncomfortable and isolated, with low self-confidence.	Validation seeking	<p>If you're interviewing any other black females, you'll probably be getting the same response irrespective of the industry. That you do feel like you need to be doing a lot more star jumps and jumping through hurdles than even your white counterparts, just to get that recognition, and you almost want a validation to be seen that I'm quite satisfied that the academic background and the underlying qualifications are good enough, but you're walking into an industry that's got its own preconditioning and indoctrinated mindset. (Female Director).</p>

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*Table I (continues)*

Theory and rationale	Women on Boards research	Women on Boards Studies doctrines	Themes (Results)	Findings (Quotations)
				<p><i>I was so frustrated, so frustrated. I had piles and piles of information to go through, and I was grateful that they are an organised company, but I truly was panicking. My kids were like I've never seen you like this, you are a confident person, what's happening and I'm like maybe I'm confident in the space that I'm comfortable in. But this is a space [mining] that I have never thought I would be involved in, and I need to cope with that (Female Director).</i></p> <p>You do feel like you need to very slowly and tactfully pull down those barriers to make them see you first as a person before they will recognise you as a professional. Ultimately, your ultimate goal, I think, for any professional is you want that accomplishment and achievement, but to get there you need to ... change the mind shift. (Female Director)</p> <p>You'll work nine times harder than your male counterpart because I think you want to prove a point that I can do this. So, we still have families and you're trying to balance all of that. I mean I must pick up the kids, put them to sleep, start working and it's the same cycle, but I think because you don't want to be seen 'oh no, but you are just a mother', I can be professional and it's not an issue of choosing either or (Female Director).</p>
	<p><i>Elstad and Ladegard, 2012</i>  <i>Gustafson, 2008</i>  <i>Huse and Solberg, 2006</i>  <i>Parker, 2007</i>  <i>Stevenson and Radin, 2009</i></p>	<p>On a board, men may be less inclined to share information with women, and may exclude the tokens from social interaction outside the boardroom.</p>	<p>Social exclusion</p>	<p><i>It's a culture that expects you to fit in. The male board members like golf, I don't play golf. They'll go off to play golf together, and over and above that there's a lot of stuff that goes on there. If you're not a golf player, then it can lead that you're left out of certain things that are being talked about on the golf course (Female Director)</i></p> <p><i>Often the board members stay in a hotel... I don't stay in a hotel; I have a home with a family. I decide to stay at home and that also means that whatever is discussed when everybody is sitting around the hotel room, in the lounge, they drink together, but you can't allow those things to bother you too much, it's just the way they are (Female Director).</i></p>

Although compliance-based recruitment (through quotas) causes women to face negative experiences, such as being labelled as token appointees, results prove that enforced compliance improves representation and further presents opportunities for women. Natividad (2012) asserted that without compliance, the recruitment of women would be slow. However, token appointments trap women in distortion of roles and generate discomfort for women who are less experienced than men (De Cabo, Gimeno and Nieto, 2012; Holgersson and Romanim, 2020). It was questionable why nomination committees sought to appoint less experienced women, who had no background in mining. Could this be a deliberate strategy to perpetuate the dominance of men who are more experienced and make women a mockery (Ruby, 2021)? Assimilation actions became evident in the results as tokens were forced into limited and mimicked roles with no opportunity to make effective contribution. For the tokens, stereotyping may result in perceptions of barriers to exerting influence on decisions in the boardroom. There is evidence to suggest that women less experienced are appointed so that men can retain their power and dominant status, consistent with literature of the tokenism theory (Penner, Toro-Tulla, and Huffman, 2012; Rahman Zahid, and Al-Faryan, 2022). The consideration from Dahlerup and Freidenvall (2005) that quotas have the potential to compromise the competitive

process of finding suitably qualified candidates is demonstrated by this research. What is ignored is the value of previous research, which also submitted that quotas and merit may complement each other (see Sayce and Özbilgin, 2014) precisely if quotas are not the sole purpose for recruitment, which may be counterproductive.

Silence and a right to voice quickly diminished when only one or few women were appointed on boards. Some observations were that women found it challenging to voice their opinions due to their low numbers and their need to assimilate to the male-dominant culture (Broome, 2008; Huse and Solberg, 2006; Lansing and Chandra, 2012). Data shows that patriarchy was the culture that seared through with male dominance, profanity, blasphemous, and obscene language even in the boardroom, which would silence women (also described by Holgersson and Romani, 2020).

Limited influence led women to have little voice on board discussions and decision-making. The literature suggests that women regarded as tokens found it more difficult to influence decisions (Holgersson and Romani, 2020; Maume, 2011). Consistent with the need for visibility and performance pressures, many women felt they had to go an extra mile to prove their contribution, as expectations were higher for women. Women who were not aggressive, but kind and considerate, were considered weak. One woman in the interview reported that despite her 15-year board

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experience, often her inputs were not considered, where she was dismissed as a quota candidate and made her feel like she was there to tick a box.

Condescension was one other way women were subjected to being undermined, second-guessed, and sometimes disregarded completely. The literature suggests that women's fitness for boards is often challenged, leading to negative evaluations irrespective of their preparation, ability, or performance (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Eagly and Carli, 2007). These challenges hold in this study as women felt they were regarded as incompetent, and were undermined by the dominant groups.

Validation seeking was a cause for concern as the culture rendered women to seek validation from men by doing more than usual to get more recognition. Women, as a result, became frustrated and felt they had to break down barriers slowly and tactfully by working harder than men for their potential to be recognized. Consistent with the tokenism theory, being labelled as tokens made women feel isolated, uncomfortable, with less confidence (Ibarra, 1992; Mathisen, Ogaard, and Marnburg, 2013; Rahman, Zahid, and Al-Faryan, 2022) which was the case with women in the data-set.

Social exclusion of women from professional and social networks solidified and sustained the network of men in the boardroom. Several scholars showed that the dominant groups were likely to exclude the tokens from social interaction outside the boardroom (Elstad and Ladegard, 2012; Glass and Cook, 2016; Gustafson, 2008; Huse and Solberg, 2006; Parker, 2007; Rahman, Zahid, and Al-Faryan, 2022; Stevenson and Radin, 2009). Yet the social identity theory presents another lens, where men have strong bonds even outside the boardroom, for example playing golf. It was difficult to argue whether this exclusion is intentional as some women may not find golf an enthralling sport, and some social functions would naturally exclude women due to other commitments that women have such as home and child care. Yet, women were disadvantaged because of exclusions. Whether intended or not, exclusion from informal networks perpetuated the 'invisible woman syndrome', which means that women remain 'outsiders on the inside', as they are often invisible and not included in social activities outside the boardroom (Moore, 1988).

## Conclusion

Boards need to recognize that gender diversity is not achieved with one or two women directors (Broome, 2008). The appointment of one or two raises further problems as women minorities are often categorized, stereotyped, and ignored by the majority (Broome, 2008; Huse and Solberg, 2006; Lansing and Chandra, 2012). The adverse experiences include aggression, resistance, and negative evaluations by the dominant group – men. Cook and Glass (2015) reported that women board members considered as tokens will be regarded directors of low rank. The labelling of tokens makes them prone to being nonvalue-adding members who are not able to alter organizational practices and influence decisions for better outcomes (Ashford et al, 1998; Maume, 2011; Penner et al, 2012). Tokens who express contentious or nonconforming viewpoints may risk intensifying group variances, increasing bias, and provoking social disapproval from the majority. Consequently, tokens face pressures to conform and avoid 'rocking the boat' by voicing provocative or innovative ideas (Bradshaw and Wicks, 2000; Kanter, 1977) that may benefit the sustainability of companies.

This article recommends that boards avoid tokenism by appointing competent and suitably qualified women and derive

benefit from female representation by having at least three women on a board (Fitzsimmons, 2012) of average size (9 to 12 members in a mining company). The critical mass theory suggests that having three or more women on boards allows them to positively influence decisions and impact on the innovation and sustainability of companies (Erkut, Kramer, and Konrad, 2008; Lansing and Chandra, 2012). The real change occurs when there are three or more women on the board and women feel more comfortable, less constrained about what the men think, and their interactions become more positive and useful for the organization (Erkut, Kramer, and Konrad, 2008) and any suggestions of tokenism are easily refuted.

## Limitations of the study and future research

By its design, qualitative research has some limitations, stemming from risks of subjectivity, researcher bias, and challenges of time demands for data processing and coding. Commonly, the generalizability of the results, trustworthiness, and quality of findings are usually questioned in qualitative studies. To ensure credibility of the findings, an independent expert individually co-coded the data simultaneously with the researcher, after which the codes and themes were verified by two other experts, one in women's studies and another from strategy and corporate governance. The methodological process can be traced and ensures that quotes are openly presented, and subject to critical analysis (Hesse-Biber, 2007).

Future research may be beneficial in assessing the impact of women on mining boards or boards in general on innovation, financial performance, and sustainability of companies. This is based on the premise of the critical mass theory that three or more women board members reduce token experiences and may positively impact board processes, decisions, and ultimately improve company performance.

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