



## Article

# Gender in Portuguese Firefighters: The Experiences and Strategies of Women

Beatriz Gomes Lopes <sup>1</sup>, António Manuel Marques <sup>2</sup>  and Maria Helena Santos <sup>3,\*</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (Iscte-IUL), 1649-026 Lisbon, Portugal; beatriz\_gomes\_lopes@iscte-iul.pt

<sup>2</sup> Escola Superior de Saúde do Instituto Politécnico de Setúbal, 2910-76 Setúbal, Portugal; antonio.marques@ess.ips.pt

<sup>3</sup> CIS-Iscte, Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (Iscte-IUL), 1649-026 Lisbon, Portugal

\* Correspondence: helena.santos@iscte-iul.pt

**Abstract:** This study sets out to analyze the negative effects of tokenism among a group of Portuguese female firefighters alongside the strategies they adopt to integrate into a male majority professional context and inherently associated with masculinity. Individual semi-structured interviews were carried out with nine men and nine women before their content was subject to thematic analysis. The results confirm how, in the context of the work performed by firefighters, there is a clear differentiation between the genders, with women both being more visible and leading to conformity to depicting stereotypical femininity. In order to fit in, female firefighters attempt to replicate the attitudes of their male colleagues, demonstrate high standards of performance, and tone down any expression of perceivably feminine characteristics.

**Keywords:** firefighters; tokenism; gender relations; Portuguese women



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## 1. Introduction

Despite an overall positive trend in recent years, Portugal has nevertheless dropped ten places in the Gender Inequality Ranking (WEF 2023) due to continuing and increasing inequalities between men and women across fields such as economic participation, educational levels, health, fertility, and political empowerment (WEF 2023). Furthermore, this is not independent of the continued gender imbalances also observed in professional contexts (Amâncio and Santos 2021), whether dominated by men (e.g., Santos et al. 2015; Santos et al. 2024) or women (e.g., Santos and Amâncio 2018; Santos et al. 2022).

The Portuguese scenario is not unique: occupations worldwide remain clearly shaped by gender. Despite slow changes in the sharing of occupations by people of both sexes, there are clear global asymmetries. For example, while around 80% of health associate professionals and personal care workers are women, the opposite is true of protective service workers, where the male percentage stands at 80% (International Labour Organization 2020).

Included within the protective services category, the firefighting profession displays a clear male predominance all around the globe (Center for Fire Statistics 2023) and is correspondingly subject to attention, particularly in regards to difficulties women face across the fields of recruitment, integration, and retention (Dinhof and Willems 2023). However, the lack of national studies on these issues justifies our carrying out an exploratory study to contribute to better understanding this reality.

Thus, the Portuguese firefighter context is unsurprisingly numerically dominated by men. According to the National Emergency and Civil Protection Authority (hereafter ANEPC—the Portuguese acronym), women make up 23.84 percent of the total of 27,919 professional firefighters in 2023, with some variations across the 18 districts of continental Portugal, as set out in Figure 1 (ANEPC 2023, personnel statement, 21 June 2023).

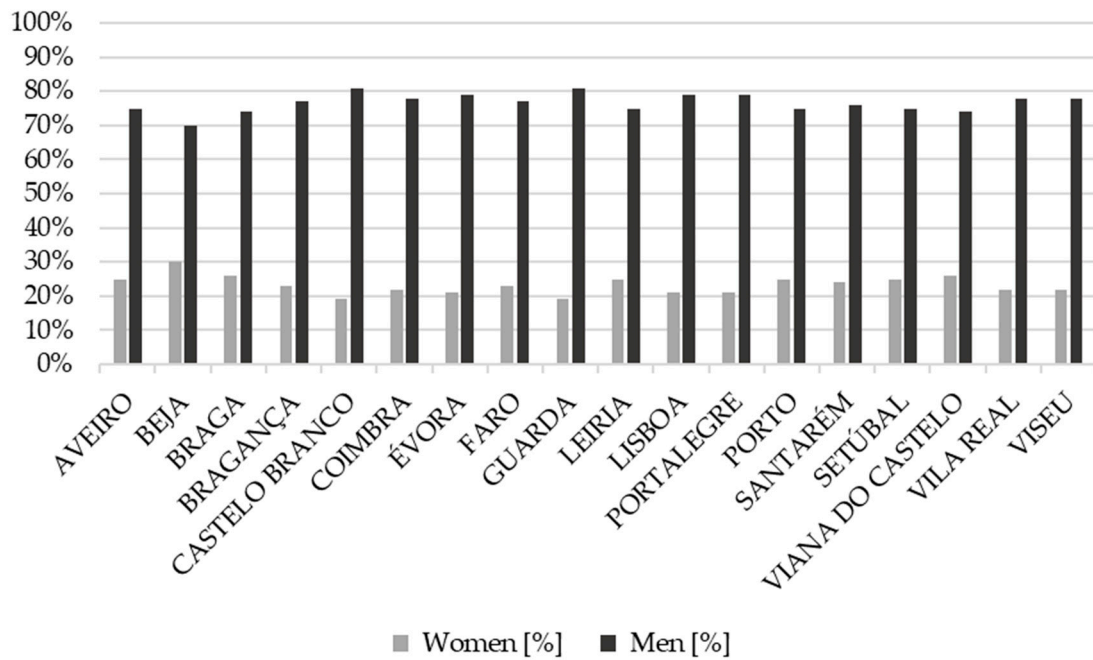


Figure 1. Comparison of employed active women and men firefighters by district.

Figure 2 depicts the percentage of men and women in the fire service command staff over the decade between 2013 and 2023. The proportion of women assigned roles in the around 1100 strong team is clearly a very low proportion of women, while rising slightly after 2020.

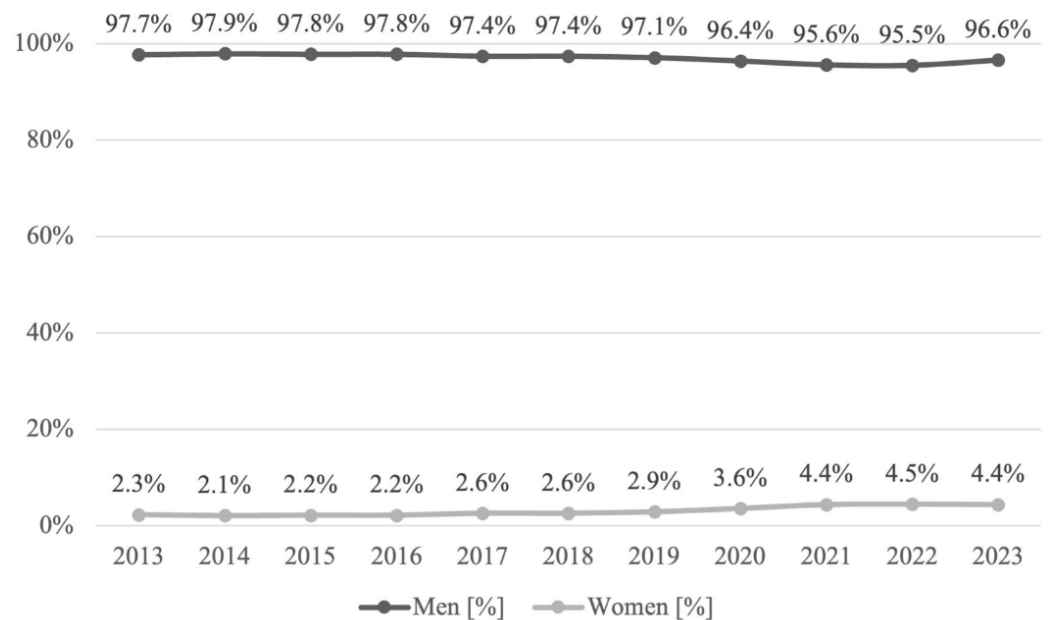


Figure 2. Percentage of men and women in the fire service command staff, 2013–2023.

### 1.1. Tokenism Theory

According to Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977, 1993), women working in male-dominated professions encounter three different factors that place them at a disadvantage: (i) the structure of opportunities, such as training and vertical promotion; (ii) inequalities in the distribution of power and resources; and (iii) numerical disproportion. This last factor is central to her theory of tokenism and encapsulates the interactions between men and

women in organizational contexts where there is a clear underrepresentation of one group in comparison to the other.

Numerical proportions in organized group contexts constitute an important aspect of social life, and their study allows for exploring interactions among groups with different cultural categories or statuses in keeping with their proportional representation (Kanter 1977, 1993). According to the aforementioned author, group compositions span a continuum of gender representation, establishing four different types: uniform groups, skewed groups, titled groups, and balanced groups. Her interest has above all focused on skewed groups, as she maintains they reflect the contexts, with male to female ratios of around 85:15, respectively, where the “phenomenon of tokenism” may be observed.

In skewed groups, the category containing the most members significantly control the entire group and its culture and is therefore called “dominant” (Kanter 1977). The author then refers to members of the minority subgroup as “tokens” in keeping with how they tend to be perceived and treated as “examples” or “symbols” of their respective category, and that prevails over their own individuality (Kanter 1977). The proportional rarity associated with tokens may trigger three phenomena that the author terms “perceptual phenomena” (Kanter 1977, p. 971), which negatively impact tokens: visibility, polarization, and assimilation.

As they belong to a minority group, tokens stand out more in comparison with majority members; hence, they become more “visible” and produce greater awareness of their presence in other members due simply to their uniqueness (Kanter 1977, 1993). In professional contexts, the token visibility phenomenon triggers additional pressures to perform well professionally and “performance pressures” coupled with the need to meet the expectations built around them (Kanter 1977, p. 971).

In turn, the polarization of differences between dominant and token groups results from the increased visibility of the latter and the accentuation of their differences in relation to the dominant group, which can then lead to either the accommodation or the social isolation of tokens (Kanter 1977, 1993).

Finally, regarding the effects of assimilation, dominant groups tend to distort the attributes of the tokens, generalizing their stereotypical roles (Kanter 1977, 1993). This distortion may place restrictions on tokens expressing themselves freely out of fear of deviating from stereotypical expectations, generating the phenomenon that Kanter (1993) calls “role encapsulation” or “role entrapment” (p. 212). As a result, tokens feel trapped in social roles through having to correspond to constructed and disseminated stereotypes, which not only hinders their full integration into the organization but also leads to their marginalization (Kanter 1993).

The launch of tokenism theory was underpinned by studying a working context in which women constituted the minority group (Kanter 1977). This specific feature of the study, unvalued by the author, became the subject of criticism (e.g., Sax 1996) following the author’s assumptions that her observations and conclusions would be applicable to other social groups in minority circumstances. The scope for generalizing Rosabeth Kanter’s conclusions was later contradicted, particularly by studies in which the token group in organizational contexts is men, as, in this case, all the consequences she describes for this status are not present (e.g., Williams 1995).

The token men study by Yoder and Sinnett (1985) demonstrates how they suffer no negative consequences for being underrepresented in majority female contexts and on the contrary, actually benefit from a “glass escalator” that facilitates their ascension in traditionally female career structures (Williams 1992, 1995). In contrast, there is considerable evidence that token women run into a “glass ceiling” (Barreto et al. 2009), a metaphor that refers to organizational obstacles that impede their career progression.

Given Kanter based her theoretical position exclusively on numerical disproportions between groups (with women at an extreme minority), this correspondingly did not take into account factors of a structural, psychosocial, and cultural nature, which constitute facets of social interaction and thereby shape the hierarchization of groups (Santos and

Amâncio 2014). Furthermore, Kanter's (1977, 1993) theoretical proposal focused only on the organizational structure without considering the inherent role of gender as conceived by Acker (1990).

Evidence corroborating Kanter's (1977, 1993) theory has since accumulated, testifying to how whenever women make up 15% or less of the total working population, they rank as tokens and tend to experience the associated consequences. However, understanding and actually explaining the effects of tokenism requires valuing the gender perspective and specifically applying this to organizational contexts and working relationships as recommended by Acker (1990).

### 1.2. Tokenism and Gendered Organizations

This broader approach to the issues around tokenism, as put forward by Acker (1990), incorporates the fundamental perspective idea that organizations are gendered. According to this author, gendered organizations operate across five interactive processes: (i) the division and organization of labor; (ii) the construction of symbols and images of masculinity and femininity; (iii) the interactions between men and women, women and women, men and men alongside all the patterns establishing patterns of dominance and submission; (iv) the production of gender components within each person's individual identity; and (v) the gender-associated representations as conditioned by the prevailing social patterns.

Consequently, organizations function according to gender inequalities, and, correspondingly, interpersonal relationships, the organization of work, and the expressions and structure of power are all subject to the influence of these inequalities and, at the same time, reinforce them (Acker 1990). Definitions of work and workers both display social and implicit preferences for male workers (Acker 1990), as they interlink with socially valued traits, especially in the workplace: leadership skills and the exercise of authority, the willingness to dedicate oneself completely to work, ambitions over rising in the hierarchy, physical strength, and rationality (Britton and Logan 2008).

Thus, this recognizes how "the workplace is not neutral, it is a central site for the creation and reproduction of gender differences and gender inequality" (Williams 1995, p. 15). Hence, fully understanding how organizations work and their respective relationships requires carrying out analysis of the supposedly neutral gender order given its inevitable presence and influence (Connell 2002).

In keeping with Connell (2006, p. 839), organizations, as with every dimension of social life, are governed by "gender regimes" that reflect the "gender order" prevailing in society. We therefore accept the "gender regime" concept proposed by Connell (2002, 2006) to be highly pertinent to this work. This covers the vast pattern of gender relations ongoing in any organization, contextualizing occurrences, interpersonal relations, and individual conduct, as well as involving the dimensions that Connell (2002) identifies as expressing gender relations: (i) the gendered division of labor; (ii) gendered power relations; (iii) emotions and human relations; and (iv) gender culture and symbolism.

In turn, organizational culture takes on the role of (re)producing a continuous pattern of division of labor that influences the structure of authority and power prevailing between women and men that, in many contexts, aligns with the ideal of hegemonic masculinity (Araújo et al. 2021; Connell 2006; Russo 2013). As with the concept of gender, this type of masculinity is both relational and contextual, constructed through specific representations, social practices, and discourses perpetuated at the local, regional, and global levels (Eriksen 2014).

Hegemonic masculinity, as a pursued ideal, therefore plays an important role not only in maintaining the sexual division of labor but also in socially defining the tasks appropriate to "men's work" or "women's work" through gender ideologies and discourses that both favor masculinity and guarantee the dominant position of men (Connell 2006). The sexual division of labor is thereby developed and implemented primarily according to assumptions and social constructions about the competences and feelings of each sex and

far less on any demonstrable and effective differences between men and women (Pilcher and Whelehan 2017).

The multiple contributions to this conceptual framework have deepened our knowledge of how women and men actually experience working contexts displaying large numerical disparities between the sexes and particularly of the consequences of tokenism from a gender perspective.

This theory holds particular significance for our study given it focuses on the professional universe of firefighters where there is a clear numerical predominance of men and with the professional practices and culture tending to express masculinity-related aspects that serve to complexify the integration and retention of women (Ainsworth et al. 2014; Gouliquer et al. 2020; Russo 2013).

### *1.3. Tokenism, Gender, and Masculinity in the Firefighter Context*

As stated above, the firefighting profession has been undertaken, over time and globally, almost exclusively by men and women, correspondingly still only making up a very small percentage (Dinhof and Willems 2023; International Labour Organization 2020). The particularities of this profession in terms of its culture, the experiences of both sexes in integrating female firefighters, and the dynamics of resistance and change have been subject to several studies over the years (Bergmann 2005; Gouliquer et al. 2020; Grube-Farrell 2002; Maleta 2009; Perrott 2016; Yoder and Aniakudo 1996, 1997).

These characterize hegemonic masculinity as the demonstration of traits such as endurance, bravery, competence, and strength, which are socially attributed to men (Connell 2002). Furthermore, there is evidence how this masculinity prevails and is valued in the professional firefighter context (MacDermid et al. 2021; Russo 2013) to the extent that, and especially in more challenging situations, the presence of women is openly questioned by male firefighters (Ainsworth et al. 2014; Whittaker et al. 2016).

However, several factors intersect in this professional context and render it a privileged means for observing tokenism and the dynamics of protecting an identity based on the numerical and symbolic domination of men and masculinity. In this context, and based on this accumulated knowledge, we can observe the barriers put up to the admission and retention of female firefighters and the actions serving to marginalize them and make them feel unwanted or unsuitable for the profession (Bishu et al. 2020; Eriksen et al. 2016; Gouliquer et al. 2020; Perrott 2016).

Based on their study of Australian rural fire services, Meagan Tyler et al. (2019) state that firefighting organizations are “extremely gendered” and shaped by masculinity, with strong resistance to any introduction of measures designed to promote equality between men and women. According to these authors, these observations contradict the position of Sasson-Levy (2011), who identify military organizations as the only entities corresponding to this classification.

In contexts displaying these particularities, we would say the emergence of processes segregating women is highly plausible. These processes demonstrate and portray the difficulties male colleagues experience in accepting the presence of women in various roles alongside the resulting impediments to their career progression, as well as raising the likelihood of harassment, isolation, and devaluation of their contributions to efficient fire brigade operations (Eriksen et al. 2016; Gouliquer et al. 2020; Russo 2013).

Some of the duties assigned to firefighters require dexterity and physical strength, which often serves as an argument for men to defend the unsuitability of women for the profession, emphasizing the “fragility” inherent to their gender (Bishu et al. 2020; Eriksen et al. 2016) while also emphasizing the relationship between the profession-masculinity-risk (Bel-Latour and Granié 2022).

In this context, the distribution of professional tasks in accordance with recourse to stereotypical representations of feminine and masculine beings represents one practice for gender construction (Ainsworth et al. 2014). As Inge Bleijenberg et al. (2013) have shown, in male-dominated professions, the traits deemed to characterize men (gener-



ally resembling those of hegemonic masculinity) are assumed to be those sufficient to guaranteeing the best levels of professional performance. In the case of firefighters, the desirable professional qualities are congruent with those of the aforementioned masculinity, hence: instrumentality, leadership and decision-making skills, physical strength, and the enjoyment of competition (Dinhof and Willems 2023).

Female firefighters, on the other hand, encounter a position of incongruity between their gender and their profession (Dinhof and Willems 2023). The descriptive traits expected of professionals do not align with those socially attributed to women, which presents an obstacle to their inclusion in fire brigades (Gouliquer et al. 2020). As demonstrated by the latter study, the participant females said that the characteristics socially associated with femininity, such as pregnancy, motherhood, smaller statures, and fragility, are undesirable in this professional environment, and demonstrating them may lead to situations of gender-based violence.

This same study reports a noteworthy phenomenon as regards adaptation strategies within that considered a “gender regime” (Connell 2000, 2006). Following the broadening of the types of services and missions carried out by fire brigades, the tasks associated with their interventions in medical emergencies or road accidents have not been equally allocated to men and women (Gouliquer et al. 2020). Hence, the authors of this study inferred how the preferential assignment of these duties to female firefighters only reinforces the gender roles and stereotypes associated with women due to an expected competence in the skills required to care for and support people in situations of vulnerability and victimization.

Incisively, the literature also proposes that, as a minority group in a profession traditionally and exclusively assigned to men, female firefighters may be subject to forms of negative discrimination and segregation, extending to moral and sexual harassment and bullying (e.g., Branch-Smith and Pooley 2010; Griffith and Roberts 2019; Hom et al. 2017; Jahnke et al. 2019).

We believe that this characterization of the firefighter context, based on work from other countries, would resemble the situation prevailing in Portugal and hence the great pertinency of undertaking this study. We correspondingly set out to analyze and understand whether, in the particular context of firefighters, women experience the negative effects of tokenism (Kanter 1977, 1993) in keeping with their minority numerical position in comparison to men. For the reasons discussed above, we furthermore adopt a gender perspective according to this theorization in order to complete the following objectives:

- (i) to identify the eventual expression of phenomena associated with tokenism (Kanter 1977, 1993)—greater visibility, contrast, or polarization of differences and assimilation of stereotypical roles—among women in the firefighter context;
- (ii) to identify the eventual obstacles and difficulties experienced by female firefighters;
- (iii) to identify the strategies developed by female firefighters to integrate into a numerically and symbolically masculine context;
- (iv) to analyze the perspectives of male firefighters around the admission and integration of women into this context.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Nine women and nine men took part in this study, all Portuguese in nationality and aged between 24 and 56 ( $M = 38$  years;  $SD = 9.54$ ). On average, the men were older ( $M = 40$  years;  $SD = 12.05$ ) than the women ( $M = 35$  years;  $SD = 6.13$ ). The 18 participants work either in a volunteer fire brigade in the Lisbon district or in five in the Viseu district and have served as firefighters for an average of 13 years ( $SD = 9.34$ ), with the average length of service for men totaling 17 years ( $SD = 9.95$ ) and 9 years ( $SD = 8.26$ ) for women.

The research inclusion criteria stipulated belonging to a Fire Brigade, serving as voluntary or voluntary and professional firefighters, having been actively engaged in this function, aged between 18 and 65, and Portuguese language speakers.

## 2.2. Procedure

To recruit these participants, we initially contacted people known to the first author by sending out messages via Facebook presenting the study's objectives and requesting their participation. After interviewing these initial participants, we adopted the "snowball" technique (Heckathorn 2011), asking them for the contact details of other professionals. Fourteen interviews took place face-to-face, in a quiet place in the barracks, and four took place online, via the Zoom platform, in accordance with the preferences of each participant.

All the interviews took place following the signing of an informed consent form detailing the study's objectives and procedures as well as guaranteeing the anonymity and confidentiality of the data collected. This document also clarified the voluntary nature of this participation and the need for permission to audio record the interview to ensure its reliable transcription.

At the end of each interview, we held a debriefing to thank the participants and answer any eventual questions about the research objectives. The interviews were carried out between February and May 2023 and lasted for an average of 32 min before being fully transcribed, removing any information that might jeopardize the anonymity of the participants and ensuring the confidentiality of the data collected.

The study, carried out within the scope of the master's thesis of the first author of this article, complied with all the ethical principles for research and the processing of personal data and obtained a favorable opinion from the Ethics Committee of the University of the first and third authors (21/2023) on 19 January 2023. At the end of the research, in order to return the results to the participants, the master's thesis was sent to all volunteer fire brigades that participated in the study.

## 2.3. Instruments

The data collection made recourse to two different instruments. Firstly, a brief questionnaire served to collect the socio-demographic data of participants, specifically self-declared gender, age, nationality, marital status, number of children, academic qualifications, and year of starting work, among other data. The second instrument applied a semi-structured script to guide the interviews, drawn up according to the study's objectives and based on the literature review. This script appeared in two similar versions, one written for female firefighters and the other for male firefighters, while both focused on three main dimensions: gender inequalities in the firefighter professional context; the experiences of women in this context; and the management of eventual situations of inequality experienced by female firefighters.

This choice of an individual semi-structured interview as the main data collection technique stemmed from weighing up the objectives defined for this study, the nature of the data for collection, hence, the experiences, opinions, and beliefs of the participants, and the need for detailed and in-depth knowledge of the phenomena and themes defined (Creswell and Poth 2016).

## 2.4. Data Analysis

In order to analyze the textual corpus produced by the interview transcripts, we opted for Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, as this is considered flexible, rigorous, and realistic, as well as systematic and repeatable, which thereby contributes to the validity and reliability of the research results. This methodological and also epistemological option enables the synthesis of systematically obtained data and correspondingly identifies the similarities and dissimilarities between the ideas and meanings that participants attribute to their experiences (Braun and Clarke 2006).

In this study, we implemented each of the six phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and correspondingly undertook mixed analysis, deploying both deductive and inductive approaches. In the first theory-driven approach, we took the literature review into account, especially the negative consequences of Kanter's (1977, 1993) tokenism, while paying attention to the effects of gender. The interview coding made recourse to the

inferences drawn from the data (Braun and Clarke 2012). Applying the inductive (data-driven) approach, our analytical procedures led to the emergence of the themes and/or sub-themes identified in the data collected in unforeseen ways and of relevance to the study as recommended by the authors (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2012).

The first author began the analysis by familiarizing herself with the data, reading through it, and identifying themes and sub-themes (Braun and Clarke 2006), while the third author adopted the same procedure before comparing the results of these two independent analytical approaches. The aim was to minimize possible interpretative biases induced by the oral expression of participants and thus ensure the validity and reliability of the analysis.

### 3. Findings

This analysis led to the identification of six major themes as detailed in the left-hand column of Table 1 and labeled as follows: (1) Entry into the fire brigade; (2) Integration of women into firefighting services: obstacles, challenges, and dynamics of change; (3) Visibility of female firefighters; (4) Polarization of the differences between women and men; (5) Assimilation of stereotypical female roles; and (6) Strategies of women for managing their token positions.

**Table 1.** Themes and sub-themes.

| Themes   | Sub-Themes   |
|--|--|
| Entry into the fire brigade  | Motivational factors and personal influences                       |
|  | Reactions received   |
| Integration of women into firefighting services: obstacles, challenges, and dynamics of change | Obstacles and challenges for women in the professional context     |
|  | Impact of motherhood on professional careers                       |
|  | Dynamics of change   |
| Visibility of female firefighters  | The attention paid to women and their greater exposure             |
|  | The need for women to demonstrate professional competences         |
| Polarization of the differences between women and men  | Differentiated treatment and negative discrimination against women |
|  | Sexual harassment  |
| Assimilation of stereotypical female roles   | Paternalism exercised by men                                       |
|  | Attribution of stereotypical femininity traits to women            |
| Strategies of women for managing their token positions   | Adoption of masculine postures                                     |
|  | Attempts to counter the female associated stereotypes              |

#### 3.1. Entry into the Fire Brigade

The first theme identified stems from the fire brigade recruitment process, which then divides into two sub-themes: (i) motivational factors and personal influences; and (ii) reactions received.

In the first sub-theme, we encounter several factors that influenced participants of both genders over their joining fire brigades: personal experiences, family influence, adherence to the values of solidarity and altruism, and the feeling of “mission accomplished”, as illustrated by the excerpts below:

“I had brothers who were firefighters and it always really motivated me to see them going out to help. (...) And I’ve always loved the job for its solidarity. (...) Although it’s not a highly valued profession, in the end, when it’s done well, it’s that feeling that I did what I could... And it’s so good”. (I11, woman)

At the time, I already had an example because my father was also a firefighter. As I had this example, I also started going to the fire station with him. (I10, man)



The second sub-theme encapsulates the reactions participants of both genders received over their decision to join the fire service. Our analysis conveys how women encountered greater resistance from their families about their safety and the risks inherent to the profession. On the other hand, the reactions of their friends were positively reinforcing, classing the decision as “daring” while knowing that firefighters are mostly men and the profession is socially perceived as “masculine”. As regards the men interviewed, they recalled receiving positive and motivating reinforcement from both family and friends.

I joined the fire brigade (...) because my brother also decided to join and, as my brother also came, my parents were like, ‘OK, you both go’. But, in general, people like it, it’s a source of pride, especially in my family.’ (I13, man)

They said I was crazy, completely crazy. On a family level, as I have a brother who is a firefighter, on the part of mum and dad, it’s always a worry that we’re both going to the fires, this or that is going to happen and it’s just the two of us... it’s always that worry. My friends even said I was crazy and that I wouldn’t have time for myself anymore. (I15, woman)

### 3.2. *Integration of Women into Firefighting Services: Obstacles, Challenges, and Dynamics of Change*

The second identified theme organizes references to the obstacles experienced by women on integrating into the professional fire service context and highlights two sub-themes: (i) the obstacles and challenges for women in this professional context; (ii) the impact of motherhood on their professional careers; and (iii) the dynamics of change.

The first sub-theme associates the perspectives on the difficulties and challenges of integrating women into the fire service. In the narratives of the women interviewed, there were several references to how well they were welcomed and how easy it was to integrate:

I’m not constrained in any way. Thank God there’s no distinction between men and women in our fire brigade. We’re all equal. I don’t feel my colleagues see me as “look, she’s a woman, maybe she could do that”. No! Here, we do what they do and sometimes it really is them who call on us. I’ve already had this example when there were forest fires, someone was ill and I had a team leader come up to me and ask “From 4 pm, when you leave work, are you available?”; and I said “What for?”; he said “If you’re needed for a fire, you’ll go with us”; and I felt, “hey man, I’m a woman, but they trust me”. I don’t feel there’s any distinction. (I6, woman)

When you spend a lot of time there, you realize that it’s a workplace, so I was well integrated. But, obviously, there’s a whole environment behind it that isn’t always positive, but I was well integrated.’ (I1, woman)

However, several accounts from both men and women describe how the entry of women into the fire service has not always been fully accepted and only with reluctance on behalf of some members of the community. There is a consensus between female and male voices about the centrality attributed to physical strength in the profession, which then affects not only the way female firefighters are viewed and integrated but also the distribution of tasks:

It depends on what action we’re doing but particularly in situations where we need to exert more physical strength. For example, in our lives as firefighters, this happens a lot, there’s equipment that’s very heavy and it’s obvious that sometimes the physical strength isn’t the same. We’re more physically able, for example, and that’s one of the determining factors. (I13, man)

I think that, in this environment, women are still a bit discriminated against because of their physical condition and because they’re women and have their families to look after... I think that’s why we’re still a bit discriminated against. (I16, woman)

The specific characteristics of being female in relation to motherhood alongside the socially attributed family responsibilities remain difficulties and challenges that women have to manage, as reflected in the excerpt above, and constitute the second sub-theme. In fact, the interviewees perceive motherhood as bringing limitations and difficulties in reconciling the professional responsibilities of women with their maternal duties, such as breastfeeding and caring for children, as well as other family duties. According to the women interviewed, these particularities potentially jeopardize their professional performance evaluations and, consequently, career progression:

There's also the issue of being a mother, passing a period with babies and also breastfeeding, there are still some obstacles to this. (...) I don't think there are any obstacles, apart from the children. (I8, man)

It's not easy to reconcile family life and firefighting, it's not... it's gymnastics every day, so it's not easy and I think that's often the case. The women themselves may even want to, and I know some cases of people who said they would, but they can't because of this; because of that; because I have young children. (I9, woman)

Without overlooking these obstacles and challenges, the participants point out signs of change as regards the integration of women into the profession, which provides the third sub-theme. In fact, the women and men firefighters interviewed highlight the importance of gender diversity and recognize the advantages of complementarity between men and women in the profession.

Both emphasize how the reality is changing and with gender no longer a determining factor with professional competence and performance capacity prevailing in keeping with how the profession requires not only male but also female characteristics:

From my perspective, I can see how this is changing. Now, I'm noticing there are more women in the fire service. And, in some situations, they even make up the majority. For example, in some situations we go to and see that there are more women than men attending an incident. (I10, man)

We [women] are proving that, with the same training and within our limits, we can make just as important or even a more important contribution than anyone else, not least because firefighters work as a team. (...) A cohesive team can work with any gender; you just must accept your strengths and weaknesses and work accordingly. (...) We're increasingly seeing how women have a different sensitivity. There's a lot of work here where women make a difference and really in a lot of things. (I11, woman)

### 3.3. Visibility of Female Firefighters

The third theme approaches the phenomenon of visibility (Kanter 1977, 1993) and includes two sub-themes: (i) the attention paid to women and their greater exposure; and (ii) the need for women to demonstrate professional competences.

The views contained within the first sub-theme propose that the focus of attention on women may not only derive from their minority status in fire brigades but also from the surveillance of their behaviors based on the norms socially attributed to women, such as demonstrating emotional skills in their interactions with sick and injured people.

The verbal expressions of men and women indicate that their presence in the fire brigade is very noticeable, for example in awareness-raising activities, parades, or activities that require physical preparation, but also in their responses to situations and functions traditionally carried out by men, such as driving heavy vehicles and directly participating in firefighting.

Seen from the outside, the focus is more on women. (...) Women are more visible.

Even now, you're starting to see women driving heavy vehicles, fire vehicles, big trucks... You're starting to see women behind the wheel, whereas in the past,

you didn't. Then, a woman turns up in a village with a heavy fire vehicle and everyone stares at her. (I8, man)

Now, I believe that women are the focus, precisely because we are different, because we are in a world that is theirs. Here, it's the women in a man's world (...) we're a minority, so it's normal. (I9, Woman)

The second sub-theme outlines men's and women's perceptions as to whether their professional performance is subject to greater scrutiny and if their competences for firefighting duties gain recognition. Simultaneously, there are also references to women's success getting judged as resulting from factors naturally inherent to their sex, i.e., that which does not depend on their commitment to developing the specific competences of the profession:

It's not usual to see a woman as a firefighter. That's why the focus is more on women, to see if they're playing the same role as firefighters. (...) I feel that they try not to fall behind the men. (...) They're like, "I'm always here, always here and why don't I do what he's doing?" (...) And when they're doing this job, they try to show that they can do just the same as the men. (I8, man)

We must, at least I notice this in myself and some of the other women there, we constantly must prove that we're as capable or more capable than the men. And it gets to the point where sometimes it's not worth it and giving up is easier. Every day, it's the same thing, it's exhausting. (...) I, for example, out of wanting to always keep improving, am constantly looking for training outside of what the house can provide, just so I don't fail, just so they don't point the finger at me. Just so I can say "I did it, because I know! Because I do train for it, because I'm not waiting for the house to pay for training, because I'm going to look for it on my own. I'm going to do it." (I14, woman)

The greater visibility of female firefighters makes it easier for participants of both genders to emphasize their faults and mistakes or what they consider shortcomings, which seem to confirm the low expectations of success they hold after having opted for a male specific context:

Yes, when they make a mistake "that's a woman, what did we expect", it's our DNA, it's our DNA. . . Now, yes, you can tell them when they fail. Well, there's more talk than if it's a man who fails. (I8, man)

Look, in accident situations, there are many comparisons. In forest fire situations, there are many comparisons. In urban fires. They compare in terms of strength, physical structure, if you're thinner or if you're fatter. . . you're not going to make it, there's always a defect for a woman. (...) And they make these kinds of comparisons. (I15, woman)

### 3.4. Polarization of the Differences between Women and Men

The fourth theme aggregates participant perspectives on the second phenomenon identified by Kanter (1977, 1993): the polarization of differences between men and women and spans two sub-themes: (i) differentiated treatment and negative discrimination against women; and (ii) sexual harassment.

The first sub-theme includes content highlighting the differential treatment of men and women in the fire service. Although some interviewees from both genders referred to this differentiation as only occasional and slight, there were plenty of reports from women describing something more frequent and systematic.

In our interpretation, many of the accounts from both genders report situations of negative discrimination against women undertaken by men, such as expressions of doubt about the physical abilities of women to cope with more demanding operational activities, as well as their leadership abilities in conjunction with their exclusion from conversations about operational matters, therefore limiting both their participation and the recognition of their contributions.

Because, it's like this: if I have a job to do where I have to get a patient off a stretcher and there are 12 or 13 steps, I usually choose to send two men and I don't send a man and a woman or I don't send two women because I still have that feeling that they're going to drop him, that they're not going to make it and I don't know what. (I7, man)

There's always a comparison, isn't there? Even if it's not on a physical level. In a situation with more effort, perhaps the man stands out. The woman perhaps needs more help, doesn't she? (I10, man)

In the firefighting profession, anything that is visible in a woman is never visible in a man. A man is always on a slightly higher level. (I16, woman)

The men interviewed recognize how women are kept away from some tasks and conversations due to their actions but deny the existence of discrimination and consider women's insecurity about their own abilities and competences also contributes to their lesser involvement:

I'm not saying they're excluded but, it's like, they're left a little to one side in the operational conversations among us. We hold a briefing and debriefing for a certain team further back, those who weren't at the incident, and yes, it has happened that they weren't included. (I3, man)

It happens [feeling excluded]. It has happened several times. I don't know, sometimes I try not to take it as discrimination. I try not to take it that way. (...) Of course, there are some [conversations] that, from time to time, I don't say anything about so as not to upset myself. (...) And I've also heard many [conversations] where it's literally putting the woman down... (I14, woman)

Furthermore, although women firefighters alluded to positive changes in this scenario, they referred to the shortcomings of the infrastructure in some fire stations for meeting their specific needs. Their narratives portray the consequences of a past in which the profession was exclusively masculine and additionally constitute a form of negative discrimination against women:

So much so we had a tiny dormitory with two beds and, when there were three or four of us coming, we had to put the beds together so we could all fit in. (...) There was a lot of this idea of "why're women here? This is a man's world". (I9, woman)

In the early days, in the old barracks, I didn't have a bathroom to change in and there was a lack of facilities; a lack of women, there were just five or six of us. There were no dormitories, we went home to sleep. (...) It was the first embarrassment, the first clash. (...) The uniform arrived slowly and in stages. (I11, woman)

The second subtheme concentrates the references by both genders to episodes of sexual harassment of women in the fire service context. The descriptions expressed particularly include disrespectful comments directed at female firefighters, inside and outside the fire station, and attempts at unwanted touching and non-consensual sexual advances. Some women stated they did not feel affected by these behaviors, either ignoring them or not attributing bad intentions, while others reported feeling afraid to report them to their superiors out of fear of suffering negative consequences. In some interviews with both genders, the attribution of responsibility to female firefighters for managing the permission or non-permission for the verbal or physical behaviors of their male colleagues was also clear:

I'm not surprised that there's someone or other who, inside the barracks, for example, (...) a man and a woman cross path, and maybe there's no one around and maybe there's an arm pass or something like this or that, regardless of the

opening, right? Of course, if the person [woman] gives an opening, it's more likely to happen. (I2, man)

We hear a lot of comments, we hear a lot of sexual jokes, but it's something that I take as a joke and I don't take as anything wrong, I don't have to try not to come home thinking about some stupid joke someone told me, I live it with very naturally. Does a woman have to be emotionally stable to be able to deal with these types of comments? Yes. (I4, woman)

[There are women] who complain because they try to grope them or because they pass their hand, they rub when they pass, they go up against them. . . And I get tired of saying "Hey, say something! Speak"; and they: "But, he is my superior". And I'm always telling them that it doesn't matter who he is, "you have to show your reality, show what you're going through because if you don't say anything, no one will be able to do anything". (I14, woman)

### 3.5. Assimilation to Stereotypical Female Roles

The fifth theme identified alludes to the phenomena around assimilating the stereotypical roles of women, as identified by Kanter (1977, 1993), and encompasses two subthemes: (i) paternalism exercised by men; and (ii) the attribution of stereotypical femininity traits to women.

The first sub-theme indicates the existence of paternalism on the part of men towards their female colleagues. The lower physical and leadership capabilities analyzed above seem to account for the basis of a tendency for men to overprotect women in some professional tasks. Women broadly consider that, when exposed to danger, for example, fighting fires or carrying out more physically demanding work, the protective behaviors of men express their concern for their well-being and safety, and they do not interpret them as discriminatory. These behaviors also receive recognition from men, alluding to their own tendencies to assign lighter or less demanding tasks to women and the assumption of responsibility for replacing them in heavier tasks.

I've heard comments like "She's a girl, look, put her on the lighter side" but I know that that's also out of concern. It's not that I feel that discrimination as "come on you're a woman", I feel that it's more "look, I'm stronger, so I'll go". (. . .) There you have it; we get a bit of protection from the men when it comes to heavier jobs and from any difficulties we might have. (I1, woman)

At the end of the day, they end up doing the same as us, but there's always that tendency, and sometimes I even say to them "hey man, you're always criticizing me and all, and I'm always saving you". (. . .) But there's always that one: because she's a woman she gets the lighter work, and if you're a man you do the heavier work. (I7, man)

The second sub-theme involves the characterization of female firefighters by the participants of both genders. These women are thereby represented according to traits that are socially considered specific to women: fragility, emotionality and the ability to look after others. Although somewhat differently, male and female firefighters emphasize the differences between the genders, deploying the stereotypical traits of each other: the pursuit of power and leadership, as well as rationality (coldness) for men, and emotional and relational skills for women:

I think it makes sense for them to be increasingly part of this structure (. . .) Firstly, because of their sensitivity to certain situations. And then, to maintain the balance and lower the levels of adrenaline and sense of power among the men, most sincerely. (I5, man)

We have a totally different way of being than men, we react differently. In some situations, perhaps more dramatic situations, we even manage to create some comfort that men often can't, because it's. . . we're different, men and women.



And men are sometimes a bit colder, they don't have that sensitivity. So, I do think we end up making a difference in that sense. (I9, woman)

### 3.6. Strategies of Women for Managing Their Token Positions

Finally, the sixth theme structures the ideas expressed by participants about women's strategies for managing their status as tokens in a numerically and symbolically masculine context. This unveiled two sub-themes: (i) adoption of masculine postures; and (ii) attempts to counter the female associated stereotypes.

The first sub-theme emphasizes how, according to participants of both genders, one strategy applied by female firefighters involves adopting postures resembling those of their male colleagues, expressing personal assertiveness, self-confidence and/or imposing their will, particularly whenever assuming leadership positions.

For women, this strategy leads to greater levels of respect and authority in the eyes of their peers and society. In addition, and according to women respondents, part of this strategy requires neither exalting nor hiding the traits associated with femininity, for example in their personal appearance. In the view of these women, this would contribute to their not getting accepted in this professional context.

According to the men interviewed, the adoption of this strategy by women is noticed, respected, and expected so that they can perform well professionally and the fire brigades' function properly. However, this perspective is combined with the view that, for teams to perform well, women should not completely abandon behaviors considered feminine whenever necessary:

We have to see ourselves more or less like them, in other words, if they're brutish, we also try to be brutish. (...) So that we can also be at that level where they are. Because if we're going to be those girls in high-heeled shoes, then it's not going to work. (...) The strategy is to try to do it. I know I won't be able to do it like them, but to try to reach a point that they've already reached. (I16, woman)

As a team leader, if there are team members who are doing something they shouldn't, I must be demanding. So, at that moment, I must be more rigid. (I9, woman)

Some of the men interviewed expressed ideas that corroborate the indistinctness of female firefighters in relation to their male colleagues but point out that this may be less common nowadays and that it is undesirable for female firefighters to neglect their femininity:

It depends on the situation but there are situations in which they are authentic men. On the spot, in the field, they have more resistance than many men. They often make us see, and that's good, because it makes some of us realize that they're women, but they work just as hard as we do, or harder. . . I don't think there's as much difference as there used to be. I think that in the past, a few years ago, there was more of a situation where they took a more masculine posture than there is now. (I18, man)

There are times when they act like men. (...) In leadership, for example, and I respect that. (...) But then there are times when, if it's not for the female part, things go off the rails. Basically, it's a mix. (I17, man)

The second sub-theme refers to women's strategies to counteract the attributed social stereotypes in their professional context. In fact, some of the women interviewed referred to demonstrating physical strength and aggressive behavior, especially in leadership positions, to gain respect and acceptance in the context and the hierarchy. In their words, there seems to be a need to demonstrate that they can fulfill demanding and challenging roles just like men, thereby rejecting the idea they are fragile and emotional.

In turn, several of the men interviewed do not seem to believe that women adopt specific strategies to deal with gender inequality, while others corroborate the existence of

strategies making recourse to assertiveness and a certain amount of imposition. However, they also mention the existence of female firefighters who deploy empathy and femininity to gain advantages or achieve their goals:

I set out to do things myself. It was like “hang on, if a man can do it, I can do it too, why not?” (. . .). If they can do it, I can do it too, it just might not look as good sometimes, because of my strength, but I find it strange, because there are men who are not as strong as me. (I9, woman)

Yes [they use strategies], to be respectful right from the start and make sure they dot all the i’s. (I17, man)

Every now and then, there are also a few eyes that blink, aren’t there? There are situations, but in general, no. (. . .) Sometimes, there are strategies that, well. . . their empathy, well. . . their mellowing. . . Of course, this sometimes influences the treatment, for example, if a girl comes in all (gestures to arm muscles) and one comes in all honeyed up and stuff, the attention falls on the honeyed one, doesn’t it? Sometimes there are those who use this as a weapon.’ (I7, man)

#### 4. Discussion

This study focused on the experiences of Portuguese female firefighters in accordance with the theoretical framework on tokenism proposed by Rosabeth M. Kanter’s (1977, 1993) while also taking into account the gender perspective and studies on masculinity. We deemed this framework particularly appropriate due to the specific nature of the firefighting profession, which is numerically and symbolically dominated by men and with women, present in very small numbers, constituting a group positioned as tokens.

The study’s main aim involved identifying eventual expressions of tokenism-associated phenomena in the experiences of women, in particular: their greater visibility, contrast, or the polarization of differences and assimilation of the stereotypical roles assigned to them. We simultaneously set out to identify any obstacles and difficulties experienced by female firefighters as well as the strategies they adopt to integrate into a numerically and symbolically masculine context. Finally, we also took into consideration the perspectives of male firefighters as regards the admission and integration of women into this professional context.

High visibility encapsulates one of the negative consequences of being a token (Kanter 1977, 1993), and our analysis conveys how female firefighters clearly stand out more than their male colleagues. This result firstly confirms Kanter’s theory and also the results of other studies on different professions and organizational contexts (e.g., Amâncio and Santos 2021; Santos and Amâncio 2019; Santos et al. 2024; Tyler et al. 2019).

In the perspective of the participants of both genders, the greater visibility of female firefighters stems from several factors: their small number in proportion to the total of firefighting professionals, the confirmation they apply relational and emotional skills towards people in situations of fragility, and also observations of their performance when undertaking actions and maneuvers traditionally attributed to men.

The arguments put forward by the participants for the emergence of this phenomenon posit that men are surprised by the presence of women in the profession, especially in those areas consistent with masculinity, an aspect also identified by other authors (e.g., Ainsworth et al. 2014; Whittaker et al. 2016) and which, we would stress, runs counter to that deemed as socially proper for women (Dinhof and Willems 2023). In the opposite direction, the surveillance of female firefighter abilities to display stereotypical feminine traits (not required of male firefighters) constitutes a constant form of scrutiny and, in essence, a strategy to situate them within a feminine universe, as was also observed by Ainsworth et al. (2014) and Gouliquer et al. (2020).

Participants of both genders recognize how the high level of female firefighter visibility makes them more vulnerable to criticism whenever making a mistake or otherwise failing. From the female firefighter perspective, understanding they have been accepted into a

male-dominated territory where masculine values prevail, coupled with the intensity of the evaluative scrutiny of the majority, pushes them to overcome low expectations of success through redoubling their efforts. These results resemble those returned by previous studies reflecting practices of more or less directly marginalizing female firefighters (Gouliquer et al. 2020; Yoder and Berendsen 2001; Yoder and Aniakudo 1997).

The second negative consequence described by Kanter (1977, 1993) as impacting on people in the token position arises from the polarization of differences between them and members of the dominant majority group, which, in our study, would be observed between the group of women and the male majority working as firefighters. The analysis results support the assertion that this phenomenon occurs as, in this professional context, different forms of treatment are instituted for men and women to emphasize the latter's distinctiveness from the male collective. As with visibility, various studies involving other professional occupations have corroborated the negative consequences for tokens due to this polarization of differences (Bryan et al. 2021; Santos et al. 2024).

The male insistence on the differences between the physical capacities of each sex, which in turn somehow relates to the strength they are able to apply in the different tasks of this profession, constitutes one of the most obvious forms of polarization. This inherently assumes that female firefighters lack the necessary physical capabilities to satisfactorily fulfill tasks requiring strength and dexterity, an argument common to other studies on the same profession (Bishu et al. 2020; Eriksen et al. 2016). In a study on the construction sector, Stéphanie Gallioz (2006) observed that physical strength is a structuring element of the identity of professions in this sector. Viewing "physical strength" as a social construct, the author fully demonstrated that it serves to legitimize the dominance of men and attempts to exclude women from this type of work. Although, from another professional sector, we consider that this phenomenon is observed in the context of firefighters.

This polarization also emerges in the discourses of male firefighters, with references to behavioral and/or psychological characteristics that distinguish the genders but are nevertheless necessary for the proper exercise of team leadership. Male attribution of stereotypical masculine traits to define leadership qualities is, we believe, a means of excluding women from this type of role where they are neither expected nor even desirable. Both interviewee genders also report that, in subtle and unjustified ways, female firefighters are excluded from certain conversations about professional matters and, according to the women, also from other conversations men engage in about their difficulties with the clear intention of denigrating and embarrassing them.

Hence, in this set of observations resulting from our analysis, we portray interactive and working organization practices that result in the negative discrimination and marginalization of the token group, female firefighters. We believe this derives from one of the negative effects of the overlap prevailing between the traits of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2000, 2006) and the traits of a profession with a numerical and symbolic predominance of men, as pointed out by Bleijenbergh et al. (2013).

Furthermore, by making recourse to the advantages of membership of the dominant group in terms of numbers and the power to determine the "gender regime" in effect (Connell 2006), male firefighters act to put up obstacles to the inclusion of women, not just because they are a minority but because they perceive a situation of incongruity between the other gender and their profession (Dinhof and Willems 2023; Gouliquer et al. 2020; MacDermid et al. 2021).

The occurrence of episodes or situations classifiable as sexual harassment or bullying targeted at female firefighters was perceived as both plausible and real by participants of both genders. In our interpretation, this particularly stems from the polarization of the differences between male and female firefighters, with women being placed by men in a dominated group (due to their number and gender), positioned in a subordinate position, and correspondingly vulnerable to more or less explicit actions of a sexual nature. These situations have emerged in other studies on both the firefighter context (e.g., Branch-Smith

and Pooley 2010; Hom et al. 2017; Griffith and Roberts 2019) and on other professions in which women are tokens (e.g., Santos et al. 2024).

According to Kanter (1977, 1993), the assimilation of stereotypical roles by minority group members produces the third negative consequence of tokenism, and this may result from direct actions by members of the dominant group or their adoption by tokens as an attempt to gain acceptance in their surrounding context.

Our findings here point to participants of both genders agreeing that men tend to protect women in certain professional activities, especially those involving greater risk, such as firefighting. Men thus assign them lighter duties from the point of view of both effort and risk and recognize how they tend not to assign roles requiring leadership skills. The women interviewed do not attribute a negative connotation to these male behaviors, assuming they are motivated out of a desire to protect them rather than to negatively discriminate against them.

Despite considering the possible and effective need to distribute higher-risk tasks to more competent professionals (considering experience and/or physical strength and dexterity, regardless of gender), in our interpretation, these narratives about the distribution of work among professionals of each gender convey how male firefighters may be driven by the exercise of paternalism reflecting in benevolent sexism (Cikara and Fiske 2009; Estevan-Reina et al. 2020).

The depiction of firefighters expressed by interviewees of both genders includes attributes such as rationality, instrumentality, leadership, and physical strength which are descriptors of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2000). Hence, this serves to reinforce the understanding of some “natural” suitability of men for the profession as their supposed attributes overlap with those describing the profession, while the opposite effect prevails regarding women, whose attributes correspondingly do not match (Bel-Latour and Granié 2022; Bleijenbergh et al. 2013; Dinhof and Willems 2023).

To portray female firefighters, participants of both genders resort to the traits of fragility, emotionality, and an ability to care for others, which replicate those defining stereotypical femininity (Donnelly and Twenge 2017). As a result, this again reinforces women’s distance from the idealized firefighter while also highlighting the incongruence between the female gender and the firefighting profession (Dinhof and Willems 2023; Gouliquer et al. 2020).

The interpretation of participant words proposes that the interdependent dynamics ongoing between the depictions of professionals from both genders (as well as men and women) influences the prevailing labor and power relations. Indeed, through this “role encapsulation” or “role entrapment” (Kanter 1993, p. 212), women firefighters are called upon to fulfill the expectations set by the dominant group. From that emerging out of our analysis, they tend to answer in the affirmative, whether out of conviction or fear that failure to fulfill expectations will either reduce or terminate their chances of joining the fire brigade.

As mentioned regarding the phenomenon of visibility, male firefighters are convinced women hold their own particular relational and emotional competences, which are appropriate to certain fields of professional action, such as assisting patients and victims. This means of representing female firefighters drives them to perform at high levels, a phenomenon identified by Hollerbach et al. (2017), who also point out that this may tempt them to request less help with heavy or difficult tasks than their male colleagues.

In real terms, the continued polarization in the perceived differences between male and female professionals may indeed frustrate the achievement of the objective of demonstrating competences and capabilities equivalent to those of men. In fact, this polarization effectively affirms the absence of any feminine traits in the definition of the ideal professional firefighter, superimposed onto the ideal of hegemonic masculinity.

As Bosson and Michniewicz (2013) have demonstrated, men’s gender identities, in relation to women’s ingroup gender identities, tend to reveal greater levels of gender-based dichotomization. In line with the study of these authors, male firefighters may resort

to the dichotomization (or, if you prefer, polarization) of differences in order to distance femininity from their group identity, allowing it to be displayed only by female firefighters.

Finally, the assimilation of stereotypical social roles by female firefighters completes and strengthens the effects of tokenism detailed above. In fact, that both genders share the traditional representations associated with each sex seems to mutually confirm that women are only partially suited to the firefighting profession while men are completely suited. In this way, there is no questioning of the supremacy of the dominant group, nor is the long-established culture oriented by the values of hegemonic masculinity subject to alteration, as demonstrated by [MacDermid et al. \(2021\)](#).

To be hired and remain in these working contexts, under the constraints mentioned above, female firefighters' resort to various strategies. Interviewees of both genders referred to women's attempts to assume positions similar to those of their male colleagues and to portray how they share the same competences and abilities to fulfill demanding and challenging tasks and functions.

Participants recognize this strategy is especially salient and necessary when female firefighters must take on leadership roles. The women justify their adoption of this strategy on the grounds that they otherwise would neither gain the recognition of the male firefighters nor be able to exercise their authority over them. This strategy seems to combine with and be complemented by toning down traits and physical appearances associated with being female, as these only contribute to their own discredit in the eyes of male firefighters.

The position of men in relation to the strategies adopted by women is, in our view, particularly significant. The men are aware of and recognize the efforts made by female firefighters to look like them, as this benefits the organization while also simultaneously arguing that they can and should show "their femininity" in those areas perceived as characterizing them as women. The demonstration of traditional feminine traits by female firefighters therefore tends to receive positive evaluations from male colleagues, a finding that aligns with the study by [Glick et al. \(2015\)](#) that demonstrates how this evaluation tends to be particularly evident in the presence of the aforementioned benevolent sexism.

Another strategy, mentioned only by female firefighters, consists of trying to distance themselves from the traits making up the stereotypes associated with women (in general). As already analyzed, female firefighters experience the phenomenon of the polarization of differences between tokens and members of the dominant group alongside becoming trapped in traditional gender roles. To counteract these constraints, female firefighters say they try to tone down anything in their appearance and behavior that might correspond to the stereotypes constructed about women and, above all, to demonstrate levels of physical endurance similar to those of their male colleagues.

Based on a study of women in a male-dominated industrial production sector, [Rydzik and Ellis-Vowles \(2019\)](#) observed how women tend to minimize their gender identity in activities of a predominantly physical nature and to accentuate their differences in areas of a "non-physical" nature corresponding to collective interests. In turn, [Denissen \(2010\)](#) demonstrates the dilemmas experienced by minority women in male-dominated contexts. This study clearly depicts how, in such situations, women are caught up in a double bind as they must manage contradictory expectations: to perform as men (or equal to men) while, simultaneously, showing they are women.

Although obtained from a very small proportion of the Portuguese fire service, the results obtained enable us to state that these occupational contexts reflect and construct gender regimes, as defined by [Connell \(2006\)](#). The alignment, across various aspects, of our results with those of studies carried out in other latitudes and under different theoretical orientations and methodological options lends support to this conclusion.

In mainland Portugal, the percentage of female firefighters has almost doubled in a decade, but they still account for an extreme minority (4.4% in 2023). The reflections and experiences shared by the participants suggest the integration of women into the firefighting profession and organizations has taken place over time. However, the results of this study call into question the meaning and effects of this integration.



Our results suggest that the integration of female firefighters into these organizations has not significantly affected the sexual division of labor or the asymmetry in the distribution of power between men and women. The condition of tokens, the experience of their effects, and the social framework in which representations, beliefs, and attitudes legitimize gender inequalities (Santos and Amâncio 2019), clearly hinder efforts to change a context guided by the supremacy of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2006).

Women who embark on a profession with many challenges and risks and are intrinsically focused on providing support to people and communities may nevertheless feel ambivalent in the context of firefighters and their own status as tokens. Hence, we find the observation by MacDermid et al. (2021) very apt: “Women firefighters experienced two sides of the coin in terms of pride in being firefighters and being part of the fire services while also experiencing gender-related hostility or doubts that made them feel less welcome by some of their colleagues, which was detrimental to their mental health” (p. 24).

Investing in the dissemination of scientific work among lay audiences can be understood as a social responsibility of academia. Therefore, we intend to present this work, in the form of a small lecture or short training, in firefighter training courses, in cooperation with the Portuguese Firefighters League and the National Firefighters School. We consider that the inclusion of this topic in initial and/or improvement curricula, together with topics of a technological nature, will represent a way of giving visibility, recognition, and desire for change on the part of the most representative institutions of Portuguese firefighters. However, the pedagogical modalities to be adopted should preferably be interrogative and participatory in order to promote the sharing of experiences, reflection, and decision-making based on solid concepts and not on mere opinions or common sense.

We can only hope that the road to gender equality in Portugal (Amâncio and Santos 2021) continues to be traveled, particularly in professional contexts, and that women firefighters are not caught up in ambivalence and the constant need to question themselves and answer questions about their career choice.

#### *Limitations and Considerations for Future Studies*

This is an inaugural study in Portugal in terms of its objectives and theoretical underpinnings and also exploratory in nature; thus, certain limitations need recognizing. The epistemological and methodological guidelines sought to respond to the objectives set, and, therefore, from an empirical perspective, this study stems from the verbalized reflections of the participants without detracting from its value and relevance. Hence, the qualitative nature of this study does not exactly amount to a limitation, as this type of study aims to gain knowledge and/or understanding of a particular social reality, accepted as inherent and, in this case, the subjectivity of that expressed orally by the people interviewed.

The relatively small number of participants, although appropriate in studies with these objectives and characteristics, does not allow for the construction of a stratified sample (based on age, years of experience, geographical location of the fire station, for example) that is representative of the national universe of firefighters. Therefore, we consciously and deliberately do not intend to extrapolate the results of the study to other national or international contexts, which we perceive as one of the limitations of this study.

Recognizing the limitations of this study does not detract from its contributions to debates and reflections on professional contexts with extreme imbalances between groups defined according to gender, in this case with women as tokens. This study contributes knowledge about the reality of Portuguese firefighters, with a special emphasis on the gender relations established in the profession, and there thus remains room for further study. Focusing on diversity and the number of participants would make it possible to stratify the findings, which, through another qualitative study, would enrich and complexify the data collected, therefore producing more solid conclusions.

The use of “methodological triangulation”, combining qualitative and quantitative data, would certainly represent one option for deepening and continuing the study we carried out. Through this epistemological and methodological framework, more com-

plex objectives might be formulated, and more in-depth and complex results about the professional context in question would be obtained and discussed.

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