

BLACK WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION: INTERSECTIONS AND CHALLENGES IN THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH OF MINAS GERAIS (BRAZIL)

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This case study employs an intersectional lens to find the mechanisms influencing black women's experiences regarding leadership positions in the executive branch of Minas Gerais. It was employed a qualitative analysis by conducting ten interviews with black women, who either formerly held or occupied leadership roles in the executive branch when interviewed. Additionally, this study is framed within the scholarship on political representation, which explores the presence of minority groups in the political sphere, connecting their participation with policy outcomes. The central argument is that these women's identity as black female leaders results in their unique political experiences and places them in specific roles in securing political representation for this group. Several mechanisms emerged: racial identity, misogynoir, family, personality traits and the presence of critical allies. This indicates that black women's political reality is unique, considering they suffer from combined oppressions and that misogynoir affects only this group. Lastly, this research adds to the existing scholarship by addressing not only this group's barriers but also mechanisms enabling this group to tackle oppression and achieve leadership positions.

Keywords: political representation; black women; executive branch; Brazil; intersectionality.

REPRESENTAÇÃO POLÍTICA DE MULHERES NEGRAS: AS INTERSECCIONALIDADES E SEUS DESAFIOS NO PODER EXECUTIVO DE MINAS GERAIS (BRASIL)

Este estudo de caso utiliza a metodologia interseccional para encontrar os mecanismos que influenciam a experiência de mulheres negras em cargos de liderança no poder executivo de Minas Gerais. Foi realizada análise qualitativa, entrevistando dez mulheres negras, que ocuparam previamente ou estavam em cargos de liderança no poder executivo no momento da entrevista. Ademais, este estudo enquadra-se no campo da representação política, o qual explora a presença de grupos minoritários na esfera política, conectando sua presença aos resultados das políticas. O argumento central é que a identidade dessas líderes negras resulta em experiências políticas únicas e as coloca em papéis específicos na garantia da representação política desse grupo. Vários mecanismos foram encontrados: identidade racial, misoginia, família, personalidade e a presença de aliados críticos. Isso indica que a realidade política das mulheres negras é única, considerando que sofrem opressões combinadas afetas apenas a esse grupo. Por fim, esta pesquisa contribui para a literatura existente ao abordar não apenas as barreiras, mas também os mecanismos que permitem a este grupo enfrentar a opressão e alcançar posições de liderança.

Palavras-chave: representação política; mulheres negras; Poder Executivo; Brasil; interseccionalidade.

LA REPRESENTACIÓN POLÍTICA DE MUJERES NEGRAS: INTERSECCIONALIDADES Y DESAFÍOS EN EL PODER EJECUTIVO DE MINAS GERAIS (BRASIL)

Este estudio de caso utiliza la metodología interseccional para encontrar los mecanismos que influyen en la experiencia de mujeres negras en cargos de liderazgo en el poder ejecutivo de Minas Gerais. Se realizó un análisis cualitativo, entrevistando a diez mujeres negras que habían ocupado previamente o estaban en cargos de liderazgo en el poder ejecutivo en el momento de la entrevista. Además, este estudio se enmarca en el campo de la representación política, el cual explora la presencia de grupos minoritarios en la esfera política, conectando su presencia a los resultados de las políticas. El argumento central es que la identidad de estas líderes negras resulta en experiencias políticas únicas y las coloca en roles específicos en la garantía de la representación política de este grupo. Se encontraron varios mecanismos: identidad racial, misoginia, familia, personalidad y la presencia de aliados críticos. Esto indica que la realidad política de las mujeres negras es única, considerando que sufren opresiones combinadas que afectan solo a este grupo. Finalmente, esta investigación contribuye a la literatura existente al abordar no solo las barreras, sino también los mecanismos que permiten a este grupo enfrentar la opresión y alcanzar posiciones de liderazgo.

Palabras clave: representación política; mujeres negras; Poder Ejecutivo; Brasil; interseccionalidad.

1. INTRODUCTION

Globally, women's access to politics is restricted either legally or structurally. While there has been progress, women still are underrepresented and far from achieving better seats at the decision-making table. Women occupy only 27% of legislative seats globally, only 23% of ministerial positions and only in 15 do women hold over 50% of seats (UN Women, 2024).

While women's political representation has gained attention lately, demonstrating the connection between the presence of female leaders and the government acting on behalf of women's interests (Celis & Childs, 2020), most studies restrict their analysis to legislative houses (Araujo et al., 2018). When studies focus on the mechanisms preventing women's political representation in executive branches, they usually research heads of states or leadership positions in national governments (Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2016). Furthermore, studies on this topic often do not consider the ways in which multiple types of identity influence an individual's access to politics; thus, most studies on political representation lack the use of intersectionality (Montoya et al., 2021).

1.1 Research puzzle

Politics have long been a men's helm in Brazil; universal suffrage was approved in 1934, yet nearly 90 years have passed without women being equally represented in the political sphere (dos Santos & Thomé, 2020). An analysis of Brazilian Lower House elected in 2022 for a four-year term shows that only 18% of elected officials are women; the Upper House is no different, women represent only 13% of politicians (TSE, 2023). Executive leaders are similar: women account for only 7% of governors and 12% of mayors (*ibid*). The country varies from the region, considering that, in Latin America, women account for 28% of the lower chambers in national legislatures on average (dos Santos & Thomé, 2020).

Additionally, Brazilian society is racially diverse, which should bring into perspective the presence of minority women in politics. While women's presence in the Brazilian political sphere is considered challenging (dos Santos & Thomé, 2020), an intersectional lens uncovers black women's precariousness to achieve political power. Even though black women represent 28% of the Brazilian population (IBGE, 2019), they occupied only 2.5% of seats in the lower house and 5% in the upper chamber in Brazil (Assis et al., 2018). Thus, the reality of groups at an intersection is neglected when studies fail to analyze multiple identities. Therefore, considering the lack of attention to black women's political reality, despite the increasing overall concern about women's political representation, this research focuses on the reasons behind black women's challenges to lead in the executive and mechanisms to tackle these issues.

The reasoning behind this case study is personal and political. As a civil servant working in the executive branch of Minas Gerais since 2015, I have witnessed black women's near-complete exclusion from leadership positions. Still, this topic cannot be reduced to personal experiences. The State government implemented a ten-year Policy Plan for Women (PPW), aiming to institutionalize gender mainstreaming (Borges et al., 2018). The policy establishes among its strategic goals the aim to achieve gender parity in leadership positions until 2028. However, in December 2020, women occupied only 30% of leadership positions.¹ Even though PPW mentions intersectionality, the racial component was neglected when establishing gender parity goals. Thus, there is a gap between policy-making, PPW's goals, and black women's reality.

Therefore, this paper explores the systematic oppression that contributes to black women's near-complete exclusion from leadership positions in the executive branch, as well as tools that positively influence this group's political success.

1.2 Research question

This research questions in which ways gender and racial oppressions affect black women's political representation in the executive branch of Minas Gerais. To reach this broader question, this paper first examines the discussion on political representation and intersectionality, framing it within this study's context. I then investigate the political sphere in Brazil and the ways in which black people, women, and black women are excluded from politics. Next, I analyze mechanisms preventing black women from being appointed to leadership positions in politics. Lastly, I consider the positive mechanisms acting to enhance their political participation.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Political representation

Political representation theorists aim to understand how individuals, elected or not, act upon other citizens' interests and make decisions, thus representing a specific population. There are four types of possible representation (Pitkin, 1967), nonetheless, discussion around the political representation of minorities usually engages with descriptive representation and substantive view. Descriptive representation refers to the representatives' identities, thus whose identity is present in politics. For Pitkin (1967), descriptive representation "depends on the representative's characteristics" (p. 61). This research mainly engages with the concept of descriptive representation, as black women's presence in cabinets is quite limited to engage with the idea of a substantive view.

¹ Own calculations based on the database sent by the Human Resources department of the executive branch of Minas Gerais on January 29, 2021 (Executive Branch of Minas Gerais, 2021).

Since Pitkin, other scholars have demonstrated the connection between lived experiences and political behavior, meaning identities shape the ways in which politicians represent people's interests (Celis & Childs, 2020; Childs & Lovenduski, 2013). An individual's identity influences their paths and experiences; thus, the participation of minorities in politics enables the development of real democracy, in which historically marginalized people can represent themselves.

The presence of marginalized groups, such as black women, in crucial political positions influences policy outcomes and counters stereotypes. For instance, an inclusive political sphere encourages younger women to increase their participation in politics and supports their political discussions (Wolbrecht & Campbell, 2007, as cited in Childs & Lovenduski, 2013, p. 491). Scanlon (2000) claims that stigmatization occurs when non-white and non-male individuals are deemed less valued within society and "will be judged to lack the relevant abilities and attainments" (p. 54). Therefore, it is crucial to challenge the misleading assumption that minorities, such as black women, are "unfit" for the political sphere.

Nonetheless, there are some critiques regarding the relevance of studying the mere presence of a particular minority in politics. However, women's presence enables a shift from "gendered norms of behavior" in politics (Celis & Childs, 2020, p. 29), thus, enhancing women's power. Scholars advocating for minorities to be represented are also concerned about the representatives' qualifications and abilities (Childs & Lovenduski, 2013). In sum, the presence of minorities enhances democracy, considering the interests of minority groups should be taken into account.

Furthermore, the concept of political representation is not limited to individuals who have been elected to a political role. For Childs and Lovenduski (2013, p. 501), women's political representation occurs also through "appointed government and other public bodies", which means it is not restricted to elected politicians.

Therefore, governments aiming to pursue gender equality and transform policymaking should ensure women's participation in political decisions. Thus, the study of political representation in the executive branch enables an analysis of gender gaps in politics, even when it comes to non-elected individuals.

2.2 Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality, coined within black feminist scholarship, shows the ways in which "feminist theory and antiracist discourse" fail to explain black women's lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). Crenshaw (1989) employs the analogy of an accident at an intersection to explain black women's unique lived experiences. She explains how it is usually not possible to define what caused an accident at an intersection and applies this as an analogy to the experiences of black women. Crenshaw argues that this group's experiences cannot be entirely described

within gender studies theories nor critical race theory; black women are subject to the combined effects of racism and misogyny.

Feminist scholars have broadened the term's definition to go beyond race and gender interactions. Any power interaction between "categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies" has since been considered within an intersectional approach (Cho et al., 2013; Collins, 2015). Therefore, a substantial analysis should consider the impacts of intermingled relations upon an individual's identity.

Applying intersectionality as a theoretical lens is fundamental to uncovering systematic and overlaying oppressions (McCall, 2005). An intersectional lens of analysis is fundamental when researching "social relations" (McCall, 2005, p. 1773). Studies focusing on specific "social groups at neglected points of intersection," deploy an "intracategorical approach," which is fundamental to uncover multiple systems of oppression (McCall, 2005, p. 1774).

When it comes to black women's experiences, Bailey (2010) coined the term "misogynoir", labeling the specific violence towards black women, which combines misogyny and anti-blackness assumptions perpetuated in hip-hop culture. Since then, the term has been used to address the specific hatred black women are subject to when combining racist and misogynist oppressions. Therefore, isolating experiences of racism and misogyny does not correctly translate black women's experiences of subjugation. It is the combination of systems of oppression, *misogynoir*, that affects their realities. In sum, the use of intersectionality uncovers the ways in which power relations within society act upon black women's lives and result in several inequalities.

2.3 Black women in politics

Existing scholarship referring to black women in politics is mainly based on the North American context, therefore, this research engages with the main findings from the United States of America (USA) to understand the experiences of black women in Brazil. This is possible considering both countries share not only a similar past of colonization and slavery but also a similar present of racism, and sexism. Still, the Brazilian unique experience is addressed later.

When studying the perceptions of descriptive representation in the USA, Montoya et al. (2021) claim that, "the presence of historically underrepresented groups in political office" influences policy outcomes and encourages these groups in joining the political sphere (p. 2). The authors highlight the importance of conducting intersectional research to understand the ways in which "overlapping identities may vary across and within groups" (p. 3). They highlight the "minority empowerment theory of politics," which connects the presence of minorities in the political sphere and this group's "democratic engagement and participation" (p. 4). Therefore, focusing on black women's political representation is crucial to understanding this group's impact in politics.

Similarly, Lemi and Brown (2019) analyze black female candidates in the USA. For them, it is evident that voters observe women candidates' phenotypes, like skin color or hair type, in order to decide their vote (p. 260). Nonetheless, voters will perceive candidates differently according to their own ethnicity. For instance, voters will negatively perceive black women candidates' natural hair and dark skin unless the voter is also a black woman (Lemi & Brown, 2019, p. 261). The authors argue, "colorism and hair texture preferences have consequences that impact Black women's lives in meaningful ways" (Lemi & Brown, 2019, p. 263); not only for candidates but also for voters who, intentionally or not, will observe a candidate's phenotype to make a decision. Furthermore, the authors claim that "black hair and black bodies have remained a site of political contestation [...], demonstrating that wearing natural hair today is a radical expression of self-acceptance, an evolution of Black political expression" (Lemi & Brown, 2019, p. 265). Thus, the color of skin, the type of hair, and other characteristics identifying the female candidate as black influence the level of discrimination these women are subject to.

The combined racial and gender oppression is also present when it comes to gender stereotypes. While every woman suffers from it, rage issues are attributed only to black women, who are not perceived as docile in opposition to their white peers (Ashley, 2013). The "dominant culture" negatively evaluates black women's behavior as "aggressive"; however, the black community relates this behavior with "strength and survival" (Ashley, 2013, p. 29). Thus, when others label black women as aggressive, it is an evident example of the unique experiences this group is subject to, which contributes to the feeling of being unfit for politics.

2.4 Brazilian politics

2.4.1 Racial oppression

To understand black women's experiences in politics, it is fundamental to explain racial oppression in Brazilian society. Aiming to frame existing race relations in Brazil, Almeida (2019) defines racism as "a **systematic** form of discrimination based on race. It manifests through conscious or unconscious practices that culminate in disadvantages or privileges for individuals, depending on the racial group to which they belong" (p. 22, emphasis added). The systemic characteristic of racism is fundamental to understanding Brazilian society, as it describes how race shapes one's lives, privileging white people.

Nonetheless, only recently has the theoretical framework of structural racism been used to describe Brazilian reality. For many years, scholars described Brazil as a "racial democracy" (Gonzalez & Hasenbalg, 1982, p. 85) and downplayed existing racial inequalities. This fallacious theory argues that Brazilian people are a product of interracial relations, favoring a peaceful coexistence of races in the country. This concept, however, fails in its core assumption of a peaceful

coexistence of races in Brazil. The so-called 'pacific coexistence of races' was built on sexual abuse and exploitation of Indigenous and black people (Silva, 2017). The violent encounter resulted in a mix of races; thus, Brazilians represent a blend of colors, skin tones, and hair types. This mixture, however, should not be perceived as a racial paradise, firstly because of its violent roots, and secondly, because it does not stop forms of racial discrimination. Finally, scholars claim that the concept of racial democracy fails to acknowledge the ways in which race relates to existing inequalities in the country (Gonzalez & Hasenbalg, 1982). Hence, systemic racial oppression can no longer be denied in Brazil, where systems of power, intentionally or not, benefit white people.

Regarding the mix of races in the country, there are two crucial concepts: colorism and racial identity. The first, colorism, is "a type of discrimination based on skin color, in which the darker a person's skin tone, the greater their chances of suffering exclusion in society" (Silva, 2017, p. 3). Therefore, people are perceived differently according to their skin tone, regardless of their racial origin. Consequently, Silva (2017) highlights that aiming to be perceived differently, black people manipulate their hair or skin tone, blindly acknowledging white supremacy. The author argues that a lack of recognition as part of a black community results in blacks' disunion (Silva, 2017). This disunion relates to the second concept, racial identity, "a person's subjective self-identification", which may be affected by several "conflicting dimensions" (Roth, 2016, p. 1310), such as ancestry, skin color, or hair type. Additionally, the fluidity of racial identity refers to how social behavior affects a person's identity over time; thus, racial identity is a social construct.

The Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) established types of racial classification: white, indigenous, Asian-Brazilian, black, and mixed-race.² Following the critics of the black movement, even though the categories of black and mixed-race continue to exist in IBGE's research, social scientists use "the sum of census blacks and mixed-race" to analyze and understand the reality of black people in the country (Loveman et al., 2012, p. 1471). Therefore, my study encompasses women who identify themselves as **mixed-race or black**, to understand their lived experiences and if skin tone affects them differently.

2.4.2 Women in Brazilian politics

The history of women's political rights in Brazil explains the country's peculiarities in feminine political representation. Even though women obtained political rights, power dynamics favoring men's political dominance remained in place (dos Santos & Thomé, 2020, p. 8). The male dominance of cabinet formation is historical; men represented 95% of cabinet members between re-democratization in 1985 and 2003 (dos Santos & Thomé, 2020). It was only with President Rousseff's election in 2011, the first female president in Brazilian history, that women broke the 15% barrier of cabinet formation. During President Lula's (2003–2010) and Rousseff's

² In Portuguese: *branco, indígena, amarelo, preto* and *pardo*.

(2011–2016) tenures, it was evident that women's appointments were considered relevant, but they were limited by "coalitional demands" (dos Santos & Jalalzai, 2021, p. 68), confirming similar findings discussed before.

In a highly debatable process, Rousseff's government was impeached in 2016 (see dos Santos & Jalalzai, 2021). Evidence shows how gender oppression influenced this episode and created the entailing political crisis and a significant gender backlash in Brazil (dos Santos & Jalalzai, 2021). Dos Santos and Jalalzai (2021) argue this episode was an attempt at "reinforcing gendered political institutions and curbing efforts to increase women's equality in a male-dominated political system" (p. 37).

Thus, it is unsurprising to acknowledge that cabinet formations since Rousseff's fall have disregarded women's participation. President Michel Temer's initial cabinet was entirely male-dominated (dos Santos & Jalalzai, 2021).³ After criticism, Temer appointed two women, one of them for "the reestablished Human Rights Ministry" (dos Santos & Jalalzai, 2021, p. 81), proving women's relegation to care-related careers and welfare.

Gender backlash only increased in 2018, when Jair Bolsonaro was elected under the standard of traditionalist gender roles (dos Santos & Jalalzai, 2021). Bolsonaro had been a "low-level representative" at the Brazilian Lower House for 27 years prior to his presidential election (dos Santos & Jalalzai, 2021, p. 131); thus, his "controversial positions on the rights of women, LGBT, *quilombola*, and indigenous communities" have long been known in the country (Vazquez, 2019, p. 601).⁴ Unsurprisingly, Bolsonaro has only appointed two women for his initial cabinet.⁵ When asked about it, he downplayed the importance of female political representation by saying, "these [two] women here are equivalent to ten men" (dos Santos & Jalalzai, 2021, p. 58). While one could mistake this statement as an appreciation of women's work, it is a notable example of his opposition to gender equality, considering the disdain he demonstrates towards women's low political representation in his government.

In 2022, President Lula was elected for a new term, appointing 11 women as ministers, representing 29% of available positions, bringing hope that gender backlash has finally begun its decreasing in the country, however, after 8 months, Lula fired two ministers, both women.

While women's situation is undoubtedly concerning, an intersectional lens is crucial to uncover the ways in which gender and racial oppression intermingle and affect black women's political careers.

³ President Temer ruled from 2016 to 2019.

⁴ *Quilombolas* are the inhabitants of African-descent rural communities in Brazil (see Bowen, 2021).

⁵ Out of 22 positions (Dos Santos & Jalalzai, 2021)

2.4.3 Black women in Brazilian politics

Racial and gender identity shape one's access to politics; still, occupying a place within the intersections of systematic oppression, black women's situation remains nearly hidden.

As previously addressed, while black women are subject to misogyny and racism, they suffer from the combination of these systems, misogynoir. Aiming to explain this implication, Anthropologist Gonzalez (2019) claims that in Brazil, society associates a black woman with being a servant. While not wishing to diminish the importance of this profession, Gonzalez demonstrates the stereotype actively hindering black women's experiences. This group is perceived as low-skilled and, thus, naturally unsuitable for the political sphere. Therefore, black women's absence in places of political power is perceived as a consequence of their unsuitability instead of the systematic barriers preventing their success.

Those women who manage to break the barriers of gender and race oppression face countless struggles to gain and maintain political power. Gomes (2018) argues that black women are belittled in the political arena and exemplifies this claim with an episode in which a Brazilian journalist said he was surprised to see Regina Souza, a black female senator, because he thought she looked like a "*mam-of-coffee*"⁶ (Gomes, 2018, p. 50). The journalist's assumption is an evident example of the expected place of black women in Brazilian society: servitude. When black women challenge their expected place within society and join the political sphere, they face the violent racist and misogynist behavior exemplified previously.

In order to challenge the violence black women face, it is fundamental to tackle the underrepresentation of this group in institutional spaces; thus, going beyond the legislative branch. In 2018, the government of Minas Gerais established a gender mainstreaming policy. As mentioned before, PPW sets among its goals the establishment of gender parity in leadership positions by 2028 (Borges et al., 2018). While PPW sets intersectionality among its values, Minas Gerais' government does not racially stratify its employees, preventing quantitative studies on this topic. This lack of data challenges policy-making, as it is impossible to act on invisible problems.

In conclusion, while addressing political representation, scholars usually disregard the ways in which different identities shape one's lived experiences. Thus, studies focusing on black women are fundamental to show the ways in which this group's political underrepresentation occurs. Additionally, granting gender and racial diversity in the political sphere is essential to establish this group's voice within agenda setting (Silva et al., 2020).

⁶ It has been common in meetings to have somebody serving coffees. A low-paid and low-skilled job.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research takes a qualitative approach through interviews to ascertain existing mechanisms influencing black women's political success. Considering that the purpose of qualitative research is to describe a trend (Walliman, 2006), the use of interviews is fundamental to mapping the existing barriers and similarities regarding black women's experiences. Additionally, this is a case study, focusing on black women in order to uncover how racialized gendered oppression acts upon them, influencing their possibilities of achieving leadership positions within the executive branch of Minas Gerais.

For this qualitative research, we conducted ten interviews with black women. Three interviewees had formerly held leadership positions within the executive branch of Minas Gerais and seven who occupied leadership roles when interviewed. Regarding the former leaders, we considered only those who had held leadership positions between 2015 and March 2021. This period encompassed two terms of office, which enabled us to understand the current mechanisms acting upon this group's issues. The interviews took place in the first half of April 2021 on Microsoft Teams, to maintain the safety of all during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Through the theoretical framework, we identified some common patterns for black women's political achievements, which we tested through the interviews covering six topics: personal life, race, education, career path, race or gender discrimination, and mentorship and network. Questions varied slightly between women who are currently in leadership positions and those who formerly occupied leadership positions. Additionally, semi-structuring interviews enabled me to cover other topics as the conversation flowed.

Furthermore, as a civil servant who has been working for Minas Gerais' executive branch since 2015, I employed the snowball sampling method to contact some possible interviewees and ask them to refer me to other potential sources. Aiming to ensure that diversity of experiences would be covered in my research, participants ranged from various areas within the government and diversified hierarchical positions

In the executive branch of Minas Gerais, hierarchical positions vary from the first level, Secretary of State, to the fourth level, usually director or coordinator. Interviewees' positions ranged from the second level to the fourth level.⁷

Interviewees identified themselves as *parda* (mixed-race) or black. My research uses the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) classification regarding race and color stratification, which means the category of black people encompasses those who identify as both black and mixed-race (Loveman et al., 2012). Additionally, as detailed later, skin tone is a relevant

⁷ We were referred to one woman who had occupied a first-level position within the time scope of this research; nonetheless, she was unavailable during my interview period.

characteristic to understanding lived experiences in Brazil; therefore, we identified interviewees' skin tones between light and dark. An equal number of interviewees were light- and dark-skinned. This attribution was not discussed through their interviews.

Interviews were conducted in Portuguese and recorded via Microsoft Teams, with durations ranging from 29 to 77 minutes, averaging 54 minutes. I employed *Sonix* software to assist me with transcription.⁸ Following this, I analyzed the interviews to (a) identify common themes and opinions, (b) identify within common topics those referring to my research question, (c) generate knowledge from participants' views, and (d) analyze these findings using existing literature.

In line with the ethics committee's agreement, participants expressed their agreement to recording, transcription and anonymity. Through this paper, their identities will remain confidential, and any references to them will be made using their initials. Only one interviewee did not have any employment relationship with the executive branch at the time of the interview; therefore, anonymity protects participants from any type of retaliation.

4. MULTIPLE MECHANISMS OF OPPRESSION

In order to explore the mechanisms influencing black women's political participation, this section presents the results and connects them with existing literature on the topic.

Through the ten interviews, several mechanisms intervening in this group's political participation were identified.

4.1 Racial identity

It became evident that white supremacist discourses negatively affect black women's racial identity, resulting in their sense of not belonging to the political sphere unless they attempt to be perceived as white, for instance, by straightening their hair. Second, when these women embrace their black identity and resist white supremacy, it positively affects this group's political success by tackling the biased assumption that black women do not belong to places of political power.

The interviewees demonstrated how they struggled with their racial identity over time. C.O., a light-skinned woman, claimed about her youth: "I would rather not identify as black; I would rather think I was white if I had to write it down on a questionnaire. You don't have a reference to tell you: darling, you're not white, you are black". Her example demonstrates the ways in which an individual's perceptions of race are not immutable; even though her features did not change over time, her perceptions of them changed, influencing her racial identity. Additionally, it demonstrates the crucial role of identity in representation. If every influential person looks the same, namely white, it is more likely that black women will deny their black heritage to fit in.

⁸ <https://sonix.ai/>

The sense of belonging comes when black women understand the importance of representing this group in the political sphere, acknowledging they also hold political power. Similarly, G.G. expressed her concerns with black women's representation in the executive branch, as she stated, "How many black women in leadership positions do you know? I ask this because I don't know anyone". The lack of this group's presence in leadership positions results in the feeling of not belonging to that place of political power; therefore, having representatives concerned and aware of their identity helps to enhance this group's representation. Their standpoint as black women in leadership positions allows them to recognize the importance of their identity. For instance, C.O. acknowledged the significance of this descriptive representation, claiming, "once in a while, there will be curly hair here and a darker skin tone there, and you will find the courage to be yourself. You have to resist". Labeling the acceptance of one's skin tone and type of hair as resistance demonstrates the struggle these women are subject to just by being themselves. Therefore, resisting white supremacy discourses by, for instance, not straightening curly hair, empower other women to embrace their natural hair without feeling that they do not belong.

4.2 Misogynoir

Interviewees acknowledged that Brazilian society is racist and misogynistic, which results in misogynoir, black women's unique experiences of racial and gender discrimination, and impacts this group's experiences in the political sphere. Nonetheless, discriminatory racial events were not always labeled in such a way. Still, even those who denied having experienced racial discrimination were aware of black women's lack of political representation in the executive branch. Misogynoir is the only mechanism that solely hinders this group's political careers.

Most interviewees acknowledged the existence of double standards when it comes to being a man or a woman in a leadership position. C.O. claimed that when women's work goes wrong, the pejorative tone is dominant; the same does not happen if the leader is a man. Women are subject to misogynistic episodes because most leaders are "white, middle-aged and male" (C.O.). Her statement highlights the importance of black women's political representation in tackling gender stereotypes in the political sphere. Nonetheless, even when women achieve leadership positions, gender stereotypes may continue to affect their careers. K.R. also illustrated the impact of gender discrimination when she claimed, "I decided to resign because the misogynistic political leaders at the Secretariat did not give me the authority to perform as I should". At the time of her resignation, K.R. occupied a third level position within the hierarchy in a secretariat considered a masculine domain.

In opposition to gender discrimination, part of the group was reluctant to label episodes of racism as such, and only two out of ten claimed to have had such experiences. Both are dark-skinned women with curly hair. Nonetheless, through most interviewees' statements, it is possible

to claim that their experiences of discrimination resulted from combined oppression of not only gender but also racial discrimination.

K.F., one of the two who affirmatively responded when asked about racism, shared the discriminatory episode she suffered, which perfectly exemplifies this group's unique oppression:

Once a mayor made an appointment to talk to another black woman from my team and me. When he got there, he looked shocked, so I asked him: Mr. Mayor, were you expecting two men? He replied: "No, I was expecting a tall, blond, and white woman. [...] where I come from, blacks are either working at farms or serving me coffee at the city hall." [...] I wasn't mad; it looked like he let it slip.

This shows the ways in which layers of oppression intersect and result in black women's unique oppression. The mayor would not be surprised if she were a white woman; his surprise came because a black woman was not occupying a servitude position. The clear example of racial and gender discrimination illustrates the **unique** barriers that exist for black women.

4.3 Family

There are two main factors to consider regarding family. First, the role of partners, who can act to support these women in achieving and maintaining leadership roles or can prevent them from doing so by being less supportive of their careers. The second factor is related to childcare and the gender stereotype of women as primary caregivers.

Most interviewees acknowledged that their experience as mothers differs from the father's experience, for instance:

I keep thinking: do men also feel like they have to give up their leadership positions once they became parents, or is this a feeling only women have? [...] Society expects women to be the best moms in the world as if we didn't have to work and, at the same time, wants us to work as if we weren't moms. (J.O.)

Through her example, it is evident that, for her, women experience a much more complex challenge in balancing a demanding job and childcare than men do. This struggle is again an impact of gender stereotypes.

Overall, it is evident that family impacts women's careers differently because gender stereotypes affect the ways in which women are perceived as the primary caregivers. Therefore, the cost of maternity is much higher than the cost of paternity, which hinders women's careers in the executive branch. Supportive partners, however, can tackle gender stereotypes and affect these women's careers positively.

4.4 Personality traits

First, there are common characteristics among interviewees, such as dedication and perseverance, supporting their political achievements. Second, there is a clear misogynistic component in these personality traits, as the interviewees argued that men and women, even when reacting similarly to events, are perceived differently, especially black women.

Interviewees highlighted the ways in which their identity affected their behavior in the executive, describing how a hostile environment could result in aggressive attitudes. There is an apparent correlation between anger and an attempt to resist a threatening environment (Bilodeau, 1992, as cited in Ashley, 2013). The dominant culture negatively evaluates black women's behavior as "aggressive"; however, the black community relates this behavior with "strength and survival" (Ashley, 2013, p. 29). Thus, when others label black women as aggressive, it is an evident example of the unique experiences this group is subject to, which contributes to the feeling of being unfit for politics.

4.5 Critical allies

Most interviewees endorsed the importance of having critical allies within the political sphere, such as an inspiring boss or mentor, or having the support of other women, in order to achieve and maintain political positions in the executive branch.

Personal relationships between the interviewees and their mentors was a consistent theme in the interviews. "My mentor guided me not only professionally, but also personally, he taught me what to observe, how to behave and make assertive decisions" (G.G.). Similarly, M.V. claimed that, "my mentor taught me that I had the power to change people's lives. That was really rewarding for me". In addition, K.R. declared: "my mentor was really inspiring; she had a crucial role in shaping my professional behavior". Their statements highlight the positive impact of mentorship on their careers, demonstrating the crucial role of mentors for their political success.

This connection between mentor and leadership position was also something that K.F. exemplified: "when I realized the importance of my position, I thought I couldn't handle, [...] she told me to trust myself because she knew I had potential". These examples demonstrate the ways in which a mentor's support is crucial to black women.

Still, most have never had a black woman as a leader, which they pointed out as an issue of representation. For G.G., not having a black woman as a boss feels challenging because "I have no reference of racial experience, and this would have been important for me". M.V. similarly highlighted the importance of having black women in leadership positions: "a white man, even when they are attentive to diversity, will never know what it is like to be a black woman". For her, the standpoint of black women needs to be present in the executive branch. Once more, the issue

of representation comes back, as there are so few black women in leadership positions that none of the interviewees had the opportunity to be led by one.

Furthermore, they highlighted the importance of supporting other women in the workplace and having their support as well. "I have always appointed other women to leadership positions, to foster our network and empower these women. I am very proud to see their transformation" (M.V.). The interviewees demonstrated that a women's network is fundamental for black women's political achievements. Lastly, they also highlight the ways in which they are personally attentive to political representation and, thus, appoint other women for leadership positions as well.

It is evident that black women's experiences sometimes are similar to white women and sometimes are similar to black men, which means that overall, this group lives a **unique** experience in the political sphere. While some mechanisms occur because of their racial identity and some because of their gender, most mechanisms influence these women in an exclusive way due to intersecting oppressions.

Therefore, black women's identity shapes their political paths. Firstly, there is an evident sense of not belonging to the political sphere due to their identity as black women. Secondly, these results show how gendered expectations influence this group's careers. While race and gender oppression are not exclusive to this group, their interaction is. Misogynoir exclusively hinders black women's political success.

4.6 The sense of not belonging

Black women are perceived as not belonging to the political sphere. In Brazilian society, black women are usually associated with servitude occupations (Gonzalez, 2019). This stereotype is constantly reinforced even towards black female politicians (see Gomes, 2018). Although my interviewees were dedicated professionals, they highlighted the exclusive discrimination black women are subject to when they hold leadership positions. Additionally, they showed perpetrators did not feel embarrassed when reinforcing biased assumptions. Therefore, misogynoir submits these women to a discriminatory experience in the political field, which means the cost of enduring such discrimination is very high and unique for this group.

The sense of not belonging is not exclusive to politics and it is explained by how race relations happen in Brazil. Although the structural racism framework has been more widely disseminated lately (Almeida, 2019), for many years, the fallacy of racial democracy was widespread in the country (Gonzalez & Hasenbalg, 1982). This concept disseminated the fallacious beliefs that races peacefully coexisted in the country, denying any hierarchy among races and defending the idea that inequalities derived from other oppression systems such as class. Unsurprisingly, even among highly educated women, episodes of racial discrimination were not recognized as such; instead, interviewees would use euphemisms to address racist oppressions. Interviewees' denial in

naming these episodes as racism relates to the ways in which Brazilian society naturalizes racist assumptions. These erroneous beliefs influence black women's perceptions of racial discrimination, constraining this group from labeling episodes of racism as such. Additionally, denying the label of racism to these episodes can also be perceived as an individual coping mechanism to racial oppression; still, it contributes to the general distress this group is subject to in the political field by preventing the problem, namely racism, from being seen and addressed.

Therefore, it is unsurprising to notice how this oppression affects black women's racial identity, resulting in their attempt to be perceived as white, for instance, by straightening their hair. In North American politics, all voters except black women (Lemi & Brown, 2019, p. 261) negatively perceive black women candidates' hair type and skin color. The same white supremacist concepts dominate Brazilian society, explaining why black women manipulate their hair or skin tone (Silva, 2017). Interviewees mentioned their hair type and skin color as characteristics influencing their own perceptions of racial identity. These perceptions are affected by self-identification, but also how others react to these individuals (Jenkins, 2008, as cited in Roth, 2006, p. 1311). When interviewees address the necessity to straighten their hair for a job interview or to go to work, these statements relate to the negative implications of being perceived as black and their attempts to avoid these ramifications. In addition, the racist context explains the apparent discrepancy between light-skinned and dark-skinned women concerning racial identity. Some interviewees use the term "*parda*"⁹ when referring to their race. Scholars indicate a correlation between the use of this term and an attempt to deny their black heritage (Loveman et al., 2012). The fact that these women try not to be perceived as black is unsurprising, considering there is systematic racial oppression that praises a white aesthetic (Silva, 2017). Thus, existing stereotypes discourage black people from embracing their black identity.

4.7 Gender stereotypes

While black women certainly endure particular conditions because of overlapping systems of oppression, this research confirmed male-centered behavior and expectations within the political field hinder this group's political achievements. The political sphere has long been male-dominated and -centered (Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2016), resulting in gendered rules of behavior in the political sphere (Celis & Childs, 2020). Episodes of gender discrimination, such as setting double standards for women's and men's work, are internalized and reproduced in politics.

Scholars have demonstrated the ways in which politicians reproduce gender stereotypes by appointing women to female-dominated fields and avoiding their presence in what are considered male-dominated spheres (Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2016; dos Santos & Jalalzai,

⁹ In English: mixed-race.

2021). This research showed similar results, as interviewees pointed to a clear difference between leading so-called feminine and masculine domains. While feminine domains might create a safe space for black women's leadership, these gender barriers also prevent women from managing non-stereotypical fields, or if they do, they might reproduce behavior deemed "masculine" in order to fit in.

Furthermore, there is a clear struggle in maintaining their political position alongside their role within the family. Society compels women to act as primary caregivers at home, impacting their ability to combine political careers and family care (Jensen, 2008). Most women carry the burden of childcare, struggling to conquer and maintain leadership positions once they become mothers; in opposition, their male partners do not experience the same impacts. Aware of that, interviewees without children highlighted how motherhood is perceived as a liability for women in the executive branch.

Throughout this research, it became evident that black women experience, in a unique way, barriers to achieving and maintaining leadership positions in the executive branch. Still, understanding how this group overcame such hurdles is fundamental in tackling issues of black women's underrepresentation.

4.8 Mechanisms to tackle black women's oppression

The strategies to tackle black women's oppression are related to role models and personal allies.

4.8.1 Role models

The presence of black women in positions of political power within the executive branch was deemed essential to tackling the sense of not belonging. There is a connection between minority groups' political representation and encouraging others within that group to join the political sphere and help tackle stigmatization (Childs & Lovenduski, 2013; Montoya et al., 2021). Scholars have also shown the ways in which wearing natural afro hair affects black women's careers in the political field (Lemi & Brown, 2019). Thus, when black women tackle the stereotyped vision, it contributes to the group's political success. Interviewees described their struggles to fit in and, later on, how they found "the courage to be [themselves]". There is a powerful connection between a sense of belonging and seeing look-alikes in positions of political power. As more black women join a "radical expression of self-acceptance" by proudly wearing their natural hair (Lemi & Brown, 2019, p. 265), they are able to influence others to do the same; thus tackling stereotypes of success, namely, the assumptions that only by whitening their features would black women be able to succeed. Therefore, the presence of black female leaders encourages debates on existing stereotypes and helps to tackle biased assumptions.

4.8.2 Personal allies

Family members, mentors, and other personal allies encouraged these women to join the political sphere. Partners have a fundamental role in tackling gender stereotypes and assumptions by supporting these women's dedication to their careers. While marriage is not associated with women's political success, to politically succeed after marriage, women need a partner who does not expect them to conform to gender stereotypes (Jensen, 2008). My research indicates this is sometimes a controversial topic, as partners deemed supportive also demonstrated a reinforcement of gender stereotypes. Although these partners might slip back into gendered expectations, it seems their overall behavior is supportive, which influences women's political success.

Similar to the role of partners, having critical allies in the political sphere can contribute to these women's political success. Research on women's journey to achieve political success has uncovered the connection between political mentors and women's accomplishments (dos Santos & Jalalzai, 2021; Jensen, 2008). Although these studies focus on female heads of state, this research indicates that even among less valued posts within the executive, the presence of a mentor positively influences women's possibilities of political success. These are not "role models" because none of my interviewees has ever had a black woman as a mentor. Therefore, further investigation could address the impact on black women's careers of having a black female boss or mentor.

Interviewees also highlighted the importance of having a women's network of solidarity in the workplace, which demonstrates the importance of nurturing female alliances to succeed in the political sphere. Women's networks assure black women are connected and able to reach leadership positions when there is an opening.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper uncovered the systematic oppression behind black women's near-complete exclusion from leadership positions in the executive branch, as well as the means to positively influence this group's political success.

The results of this research show that black women's political achievements or lack thereof were associated with series of specific mechanisms of exclusion or inclusion. These were: (1) **racial identity**, in which their unique identity as black female leaders results in the sense of not belonging to the political sphere; at the same time, when these leaders confront the biased assumptions by embracing their racial identity, this mechanism has the power to foster this group's political achievements by demonstrating their crucial role in politics. (2) **Misogynoir**, in which black women face the overlapping consequences of gender and race discrimination. While women generally face discrimination in politics, black women's burdens are particular to this group's reality, as they are the ones facing the burden of being associated with servitude

occupations. (3) **Family**, in which the gender stereotype of women as main caregivers hinders their possibilities of political success, while the support of partners can tackle this assumption, removing this barrier. (4) **Personality traits**, in which specific characteristics such as resilience and dedication were deemed fundamental for political success, still, the white male-dominated atmosphere negatively affects the overall perceptions of black women's characteristics. (5) **The presence of critical allies**, which encompasses the positive impact of an inspiring boss or mentor as well as the presence of a female network of support for black women's political success.

While black women face an evident struggle to achieve and maintain leadership positions, mainly because of misogyny, racism, and their interactions, this study also presents how mechanisms can tackle black women's oppression. There are main findings: (1) importance of role models to tackle the sense of not belonging and (2) personal allies to help the group endure the distress they face in the political sphere.

Furthermore, this intersectional approach enabled us to demonstrate systems of oppression and their interactions acting upon black women's reality. The interactions of race and gender resulted in black women's stereotype as 'servant', entailing episodes of discrimination and a sense of not belonging in politics. These systems also impact how their personality traits were perceived, for instance, when they were deemed aggressive. This combined oppression has also prevented this group from having a black female leader as a mentor, restraining their experiences to white leaders and contributing to the sense of not belonging.

While black women's realities portrayed in this research may resonate with the experiences of this group worldwide, there are crucial points adding to the scholarship on this topic: (1) unlike the North American and European reality, black people are a numerical majority in Brazil; (2) the country's unique racial relations, based on claims of racial democracy. The combination of such characteristics produces a unique environment in which racist structures discriminate against the majority of the country, while at the same time, these same rules attempt to deny the existence of a racial struggle. Therefore, this research contributes by addressing the specific context of racism in Brazil combined with the oppression that only black women are subject to. Furthermore, by analyzing leadership in the executive, it becomes evident how leadership positions in this domain are connected to political power and, thus, need to be inclusive of minority groups.

The main limitation for this study is the generalizability of the findings. This selection may not fully represent black women's diversity of age, region, education, sexual orientation, class and occupation. Additionally, this may restrict the depth of analysis and the ability to identify broader patterns. Therefore, further research could focus on: (1) Expanding the number of interviewees; (2) the ways in which class, gender, and race influence black women in politics, and (3) other executive branches, so we could compare results to understand the limitations of this study.

Thus, this research represents a unique analysis of the mechanisms behind black women's underrepresentation in the executive branch of Minas Gerais. There is no denying that having black women in leadership positions is crucial to tackling biased assumptions and influence policymaking. Thus, policies should apply intersectionality instead of only listing it as a value.

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