Tokenism and the Concrete Ceiling: Navigating Racial and Gender Disparities in the Experiences of Black Female Police Officers

Abstract

In this qualitative study, we investigate the lived experiences of 21 Black female police officers in England and Wales, with a focus on the intersectional impacts of race and gender on their professional journeys. By employing 'tokenism' as a theoretical lens, we investigate the prevalence of a 'concrete ceiling' – a set of explicit and implicit barriers that obstruct the career progression of Black female police officers. The participants' narratives illuminate a complex interplay of racial segregation, gender discrimination, and a patriarchal organisational culture. These factors collectively contribute to their feelings of isolation, marginalisation, and limited opportunities for advancement. Our study reveals that Black female police officers often face tokenistic treatment, leading to heightened visibility, increased pressure, and a sense of being constantly under scrutiny. The findings challenge the notion of an egalitarian culture within the police organisations and highlight an urgent need for systemic change. By emphasising the unique challenges faced by Black female police officers, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the barriers to diversity and inclusion within the policing profession.

Keywords: race, gender, female police officers, discrimination, concrete ceiling

Introduction

The increasing number of women in the workforce has not translated to equitable representation in leadership positions, particularly within male-dominated fields like policing (World Economic Forum, 2023). Despite significant increases in women's labour force participation since the turn of the century, gender disparities persist in upper-management and leadership roles (Hutchinson, 2021). The glass ceiling, a pervasive form of discrimination, hinders women's career advancement, limiting their opportunities for promotion and leadership positions, regardless of their qualifications and experience (Cotter et al., 2001; Lorber, 1994).

The England and Wales police services, traditionally dominated by males, has struggled to promote gender and racial equity. Despite increased recruitment of women and ethnic minorities, significant barriers persist in their advancement and retention (Hasan, 2021). Female officers face gender discrimination, obstruction, and prejudice (Bruckmüller et al., 2014). The 'heroic male' ideal marginalises women, especially those from ethnic minority backgrounds. Black female police officers face a 'concrete ceiling' resulting from the compounded effects of racial and gender biases (Hasan, 2021).

Extensive research highlights persistent gender inequality and underrepresentation in leadership roles in various sectors, including entrepreneurship and police services (Bastian et al., 2019; Hoobler et al., 2018; Boag-Munroe, 2019). This lack of parity undermines organisational effectiveness and public trust. A more gender-balanced police service, reflecting the demographics it serves, could enhance public safety and legitimacy (Boag-Munroe, 2019).

This study contributes to the understanding of gender, race, work, and organisational dynamics. While the concept of the glass ceiling (Loden, 1978) takes into account barriers facing women in male-dominated fields (Smith et al., 2023), it overlooks the compounded challenges faced by women of colour. The 'concrete ceiling' (Murrell et al., 2008; Hayes, 2006) specifically

addresses these intersectional experiences, emphasising the double burden of racial and gender discrimination (Charles, 2021; Dennissen et al., 2020; Crenshaw, 1989).

While the number of women in the England and Wales police services has increased, gender disparities persist (35.4% are female), particularly in relation to the presence of women in the leadership positions of chief inspector and higher (chief inspector 29.3%, superintendent 31.8%, chief superintendent 34.3%, and chief officer 28.6 – UK Home Office, 2024; Prenzler & Sinclair, 2013; Statista, 2023; Alexander & Charman, 2024). The number of female police officers serving in the UK's police services was 52,331 on 31 March 2024, the highest proportion of female officers since comparable records began in March 2003. Ethnic minority police officers accounted for 8.4% of all officers, reflecting the highest number and proportion of ethnic minority (excluding White minority) officers since comparable records began in March 2003. Black officers comprise 1.3% of all UK officers, Asian officers 3.8%, mixed-race officers 2.6%, and those from another ethnic group 0.7% (UK Home Office, 2024). This increase is attributable to various factors, including the Police Uplift Programme; an increased emphasis on diversity and inclusion; evolving perceptions concerning policing; and enhanced working conditions. Ethnic disparities are also evident, with Black officers, especially Black women, significantly underrepresented compared to Asian and White officers (Alexander & Charman, 2024; Ethnic Facts & Figures, 2022; Prenzler & Sinclair, 2013).

This study aims to enhance our understanding of Black female police officers' experiences in England and Wales by exploring their working lives and career progression through a qualitative research methodology. Building on previous research by Martin (1994), Cashmore (2001), Hasan (2021), Gittens (2004), and Puwar (2004), our study aims to shed light on underexplored aspects of tokenism, gendered racism, and organisational inequalities faced by Black women in the police service. The findings will inform policy and practice, in turn promoting greater equity and inclusion.

While research on White female police officers is more extensive than research on ethnic minorities (Amidon, 1986; Becke, 1973; Brown, 1998; Brown & Sargent, 1995; Holdaway & Parker, 1998; Holder et al., 2000; Martin, 1996; Atkinson et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2020; Giwa et al., 2023), the present study focuses on the unique experiences of Black female officers. It aims to examine the impacts of race and gender on their careers as well as to explore the nature of the concrete ceiling, a significant barrier to their career advancement that challenges British values of impartiality and equality of opportunity.

Our article therefore makes two key contributions. First, it reveals the nature and status of the concrete ceiling for Black women working in the England and Wales police services, contributing to scholarly understanding of gender, race, work, and organisations, advancing our understanding of this interlocking phenomenon. Second, it expands the extant literature on the glass and concrete ceilings; discrimination; and equality by examining the lived experiences of female police officers, thus informing policy and practice in order to promote greater equity and inclusion within the police service. The remainder of this article is structured as follows: In the next section, we review the extant literature on gender, the glass ceiling, and the concrete ceiling. We then discuss tokenism and Black female police officers. Thereafter, we present an outline of the research methodology. We subsequently present and discuss the study's findings. We end the study by giving our conclusions.

Gender, the Glass Ceiling and the Concrete Ceiling

Gender, a socially constructed concept, refers to the culturally and socially shaped roles, behaviours, expressions, and identities associated with being male or female (Vlassoff & Garcia, 2002). While sex is biologically determined, gender is a fluid and culturally specific construct (Hammarström, 2003; Pinn, 2003; World Health Organization, 2002). Despite this distinction, gender bias – often favouring men – persists in patriarchal societies (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012). Gender bias is often exhibited through inequitable actions (often subtle and

difficult to detect) that treat men and women differently (Sadker & Zittleman, 2005). Gender stereotyping, the generalisation of attributes based on gender – further exacerbates these inequalities, creating barriers for women in traditionally male-dominated fields (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001).

The metaphor of the 'glass ceiling' is commonly used to describe the invisible barriers that hinder women's career advancement, regardless of their qualifications, experience, or achievements (Cotter et al., 2001; Lorber, 1994; Tyler et al., 2024). However, Black women often face a more formidable barrier, the 'concrete ceiling', which reflects the compounded impact of racism and sexism (Crenshaw, 1991) as well as emphasises how overlapping social identities, such as race and gender, create a unique experience of discrimination. This intersectional perspective emphasises the unique challenges faced by Black women, who experience discrimination based on both race and gender. The theory is that Black women experience a concrete ceiling, a more rigid and impenetrable barrier to career advancement and success than their White female and Black male counterparts, because of the compounded effects of racism and sexism. For Black women, the intersectionality of racial bias and sexism leads to distinct obstacles that cannot be addressed through single-issue diversity initiatives (Crenshaw, 1991).

Black women encounter a multitude of barriers to career advancement, including limited access to mentorship, biased performance evaluations, and a lack of recognition for their contributions (Dell, 1992; Ayub et al., 2019). These challenges, exacerbated by the emotional and psychological toll of navigating a hostile work environment (Griffin et al., 2013), underscore the need for intersectional approaches to address systemic inequalities. Black female police officers encounter significant barriers to effective mentoring within traditional organisational structures. Limited access to senior female mentors and a lack of psychosocial support, exacerbated by gender bias and discrimination, hinder their professional development. The

demanding nature of police work further obstructs the formation of strong mentor-mentee relationships because of limited face-to-face interactions and a lack of opportunity to build trust with mentors from different organisations. Despite these challenges, inter-organisational mentoring can be a powerful tool for breaking down barriers and supporting female officers to advance their careers (Murrell et al., 2008). Murrell et al. (2008) add that such sharing might occur and might be more robust within the context of trust and psychosocial support, whereby a safe space is created for mentees to discuss their experiences and challenges, including those related to race and discrimination, with mentors who may have faced similar obstacles.

Black women thus encounter a complex interplay of systemic biases, societal stereotypes, and organisational barriers (the concrete ceiling) that hinder their advancement to leadership positions. These challenges include intersectionality (Weatherspoon-Robinson, 2013); underrepresentation; a lack of role models; bias in hiring and promotion procedures; pervasive microaggression and discrimination; inadequate support and resources (Otaye-Ebede & Shaffakat, 2024); and cultural adversity (Chance, 2021). Tokenism within organisational and societal structures acts as a direct counterpoint to the theoretical framework of intersectionality. While intersectionality emphasises the complex and interwoven nature of social identities, tokenism focuses on superficial inclusion. This practice isolates individuals from marginalised groups, placing them in positions of symbolic representation while ignoring the compounded disadvantages that arise from intersecting identities, such as race, gender, and class. This results in the perpetuation of systemic inequalities, as the mere presence of a ‘token’ individual creates an illusion of diversity while failing to address the underlying power structures that produce marginalisation, thereby reinforcing the very systems that intersectionality seeks to dismantle.

Furthermore, the concrete-ceiling concept highlights the role of communication styles and organisational norms in perpetuating disparities. Dell (1992) suggests that communication styles that deviate from the dominant White male norm may be perceived as incompetent.

Moreover, the glass-ceiling metaphor may not fully capture the unique challenges faced by Black women, who encounter a more rigid and impenetrable barrier to success (Ayub et al., 2019; Murrell et al., 2008; Hayes, 2006). The concrete-ceiling theory emphasises the need to recognise and address the intersectional nature of discrimination to create more equitable workplaces.

The concrete-ceiling analogy emphasises the increased difficulty of breaking through these barriers. For example, Black women are disproportionately stereotyped as being aggressive or angry, which limits their opportunities to attain leadership positions (Large & Saunders, 1995; Murrell et al., 2008). This exemplifies how racial and gender stereotypes intersect, creating a more hostile work environment for Black women and even extending beyond the workplace. Understanding intersectionality is crucial in various contexts. For instance, research undertaken by Jones and Williams (2015) demonstrates that LGBT police officers in England and Wales continue to face discrimination. This finding highlights the inadequacy of solely addressing gender inequality. We must acknowledge how intersecting identities, like sexual orientation, race, gender, age, social class, level of education, disability, and migrant status, create unique obstacles within various institutions, and these are beyond the scope of our study.

By acknowledging this intersectionality, organisations can develop targeted strategies to support Black women's success and create more inclusive workplaces. Despite progress having been made in relation to diversity and inclusion, Black individuals remain significantly underrepresented in UK leadership positions (Diversity UK, 2020; Smith & Garcia, 2020). Black women, in particular, face compounded challenges because of both gender and racial biases. While the gender gap in employment is narrowing for younger age groups, it widens during the prime childrearing years (Office of National Statistics, 2023). This suggests that systemic barriers, including patriarchal norms and unconscious biases, hinder the advancement of Black women to leadership positions (Jones et al., 2019; Shymko et al., 2023), challenging

the notion of a lack of qualified women as the primary reason for their underrepresentation in leadership positions.

Otaye-Ebede and Shaffakat (2024) contend that the persistent underrepresentation of Black and Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) women in leadership positions stems from management research's overemphasis on the manifestations and barriers of race and gender inequality, with insufficient focus on practical interventions. To address the concrete ceiling – they propose a multifaceted approach that empowers BAME women and tackles systemic barriers, necessitating a combination of individual agency and organisational change. Their recommendations at organisational and individual levels include fostering psychologically safe work environments; implementing targeted interventions; avoiding tokenistic gestures; addressing overwork and double standards; developing inclusive cultures and policies; establishing diverse mentorship programmes, practising self-promotion; and transforming challenges into opportunities for growth. By combining these strategies, they believe it is possible to create a more equitable and supportive environment for female police officers.

It is clear that BAME women in leadership roles often face the challenge of tokenism, as discussed by Otaye-Ebede and Shaffakat (2024). This phenomenon undermines their credibility and qualifications, creates a false sense of diversity, and reinforces negative stereotypes about their capabilities. Tokenised BAME women are often subjected to immense pressure to represent their entire racial or ethnic group, leading to feelings of isolation. Tokenism is, therefore, a superficial solution that fails to address the systemic issues of inequality and discrimination that prevent BAME women from reaching leadership positions. True inclusion requires dismantling the concrete ceiling and creating pathways for genuine representation based on merit and equal opportunity.

According to Glass and Cook (2020), these experiences are not isolated incidents but rather ongoing challenges that Black women face, including silence as a form of cultural assimilation, particularly in discussions about leisure time or cultural practices. They experience a covert form of racism, especially when they pass as White, and their challenges are often compounded because of their intersecting identities. The experience both gender and racial bias challenges, which contribute to the emotional labour and 'performative contortions' required to navigate predominantly White environments (Glass & Cook, 2020). However, Glass and Cook's (2020) study's sample size is limited, necessitating further research to comprehensively understand the diverse experiences of people of colour in leadership roles in various industries and organisational contexts.

While the 'gender pull' can impact women's career trajectories, Black women face additional hurdles because of racial bias and discrimination. The stark underrepresentation of Black women (occupying only 2 out of 1,099 senior roles) in leadership positions suggests that factors beyond childcare are at play (Diversity UK, 2020; Dennissen et al., 2020; Smith & Garcia, 2020). Addressing other challenges, such as unconscious bias and a lack of mentorship opportunities, is crucial for promoting the advancement of Black women. Such an undertaking, alongside potential childcare support, could be more effective in tackling the underrepresentation of Black women in leadership.

Black women in leadership positions face a unique challenge known as the concrete ceiling, as we explained above (Hofmann, 2021). This barrier, which combines racial and gender biases, hinders their career advancement more than the gender bias facing White women (Williams et al., 2024). While research on UK female police officers highlights bias and discrimination (Amidon, 1986; Becke, 1973; Brown, 1998; Holdaway & Parker, 1998), it often overlooks the specific challenges faced by Black female officers. The intersection of race, gender, and social class further exacerbates these challenges (Hecht & McArthur, 2023).

The intersection of race and gender discrimination, referred to as the 'double ceiling' or 'concrete ceiling', creates unique challenges for Black women (Essed, 1991; Puwar, 2004). Black women often experience feelings of alienation and marginalisation in predominantly White male-dominated workplaces. In a similar analogy, specific to coaching, Norman et al. (2018) use the term 'concrete ceiling' to describe an impenetrable barrier hindering women's advancement in coaching, particularly within national sports-governing bodies. They argued that the concept is characterised by a sense of being completely blocked from career advancement, with no possibility of breaking through, unlike the glass ceiling metaphor, which implies some degree of transparency and potential for progress. Other discussions of the concrete ceiling often use the term to emphasise the more severe barriers faced by women of colour or other marginalised groups compared to the glass ceiling encountered by White women. Thus, further research is needed to understand the specific impact of the concrete ceiling on Black female police officers' career progression.

Tokenism and Black Female Police Officers

Kanter's (1977a, 1977b, 1993) seminal work on tokenism provides a robust theoretical framework for understanding the experiences of underrepresented groups in organisations. Kanter posits that numerical imbalance, particularly the underrepresentation of women, can create conditions conducive to tokenism, whereby a minority group's presence is merely symbolic. This disparity fuels discrimination and marginalisation across various social identities and genders. Kanter identifies three key consequences of tokenism: 1. assimilation, 2. high visibility, and 3. contrast. Assimilation pressures token members to conform to dominant group norms, leading to stereotyping and missed opportunities. High visibility results in constant scrutiny and the need to constantly prove one's competence. Contrast, a product of both assimilation pressure and heightened visibility, can lead to feelings of isolation and alienation as token members struggle to balance conformity and authenticity (Stichman et al.,

2010). Dar (2018) further elaborates on the psychological toll of tokenism, highlighting the concept of 'code-switching'. This involves navigating between one's authentic self and the performance expected by the dominant group. Essed and Goldberg (2002) emphasise the performative nature of high visibility, arguing that token members are not simply seen more but are expected to constantly perform and prove their worthiness.

Holder et al. (2000) identify a 'triple jeopardy' for Black and Asian female police officers, according to which the intersection of race and gender results in unique 'sexual or gendered racism', exceeding the discrimination experienced by other groups. This concept, distinct from traditional tokenism (which focuses on singular identities) highlights the amplified challenges faced by these officers. Similarly, Burke (1994) highlights the conflict between police subculture and homosexuality, revealing specific challenges for gay and lesbian officers. The resultant pressure they face to conceal their identity, which leads to a 'double life', may be considered to reflect the experiences of Black female officers, who may also feel compelled to suppress aspects of their identity to mitigate the effects of tokenism within a predominantly White male environment.

Building upon the foundational work of Laws (1975) and on Kanter's (1977) theory of tokenism, we examine herein the lived experiences of Black female police officers in England and Wales. While Kanter's work focuses on women in male-dominated professions, the concept of tokenism remains highly relevant to the experiences of Black female police officers. This creates a unique situation of dual tokenism for Black female officers, as they are a numerical minority within both the racial and gender categories (Kanter, 1977a). This underrepresentation has far-reaching consequences. Black female officers, similar to other token groups, are likely to experience assimilation pressures, constant scrutiny, and feelings of isolation and marginalisation (Kanter, 1977a; Stichman et al., 2010). These factors can significantly impact their work experiences and limit their opportunities for career progression.

Methodology

We selected a qualitative research approach for the study with the aim of generating rich narrative data and of gaining an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of Black female police officers (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The methodological design of this study is interpretive – based on social constructivism. We deemed this methodology appropriate for exploring the intricate interplay of race, gender, and organisational culture that shapes Black female police officers' career trajectories and experiences with the concrete ceiling within police services. By employing a qualitative design, we aimed to uncover the often taken-for-granted assumptions and hidden barriers that Black female officers encounter (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Focusing on Black female police officers offers a unique lens through which we are able to examine the intersectional challenges of race and gender within policing. By delving into their experiences, we can illuminate the specific forms of discrimination, stereotypes, and organisational barriers they face. Such insights can inform strategies for dismantling systemic inequities and fostering a more inclusive and equitable police service.

Data Collection

We used a non-probabilistic purposive sampling approach for recruiting the participants for this study. We selected this sampling method based on the assumption that researchers of qualitative studies should have reasonable knowledge of the sample size that should be used and, as a result, target those samples that they seek (Patton, 2015). The participants of this study were 21 Black female police officers in service (or recently retired) in urban areas in England and Wales. While 17 of the participants are still serving in the police service, 4 have retired. Table 1 below presents the participants' demographic information.

Initially, we sought seven participants through our existing personal contacts. Those participants then referred us to other Black female police officers who voluntarily participated in the study. Out of the 32 participants who were contacted, 21 participated in the study on the

condition that their identities would remain anonymous. Therefore, we guaranteed the participants full anonymity, which increased their confidence in sharing their experiences. While all the participants showed a high level of interest in the study, we also informed them of their right to voluntarily withdraw from participation in the study at any stage. We used pseudonyms to represent the names of the participants in order to fulfil the research team's promise of confidentiality. Ethical approval was sought and provided by one of the authors' institutions.

Insert Table 1 about here

In terms of the study's eligibility criteria, we required the participants to be female (gender) and Black (race). All the participants were required to have had more than five years of work experience in the police service. The data collection lasted for three months, and we conducted the interviews in English. The semi-structured interviews with the participants lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, and we conducted them only after we had obtained prior consent from the participants to interview them. In the interview, we asked open-ended questions, which provided flexibility in the discussions and allowed the interviewees to fully express their experiences. We conducted online interviews (via Microsoft Teams) and in-person interviews. We recorded each interview and transcribed it immediately after it was held. It is noteworthy that 12 participants declined permission to record their interviews; therefore, we took meticulous notes in order to fully capture their narratives. Detailed handwritten notes were taken during the interviews for respondents who declined permission to record their interviews. Subsequently, these notes were read back to the participants for verification and approval. The resulting notes were then integrated with the transcribed audio recordings from other participants. No distinction was made between the two data-collection methods in the analysis and interpretation of the findings.

We, the researchers, met from time to time to compare our interview notes and ensure all the interview protocols were being covered so that our reliance on primary data would not be compromised (Corley & Giola, 2004). We framed the interview questions according to the main study inquiry. We asked the participants the same questions at different times and at different forums or locations to ensure their explanations were authentic – thereby reducing the risk of bias (Creswell, 2013). In particular, we asked the following questions: 1. What is the impact of your race (being Black) on your working life and career progression? 2. To what extent do you (as a Black policewoman) receive the same treatment and opportunities as your White colleagues? 3. What is the impact of patriarchy on your working life and career progression?

Several methodological strategies were implemented to mitigate potential biases, such as social desirability, interviewer-interviewee acquiescence, and cognitive bias. Standardised protocols and interviewer reflexivity were employed to minimise interviewer influence. To address social desirability bias, particularly given the sensitive nature of the topic, strict confidentiality was assured. Balanced questioning and varied question formats were used to mitigate acquiescence bias. Finally, clear and concise questions, pilot testing, and probing follow-up questions were employed to minimise cognitive bias. These measures collectively enhanced our interviews' robustness and the validity and reliability of the research findings.

After we had conducted 16 interviews, we felt that we had reached data saturation point, as we observed that the data that we were obtaining from the later interviews produced largely repetitive information (Bowen, 2008; Saunders et al., 2012). Nevertheless, we conducted five further confirmatory interviews to improve the reliability of the study findings and to ensure that we had not missed any important themes. However, the additional interviews merely corroborated the information that we had already gleaned from the first 16 interviews. It is important to note that our position (positionality) throughout the data collection stage was

based on the transformative paradigm, which emphasises research as emancipatory, participatory, and inclusive (Romm, 2018). The participants perceived us as agents of change who understood their plight and were trying to help stimulate the desired change process with our research.

Data Analysis

We undertook our data analysis in four stages. The initial phase involved meticulous transcription of all interviews, followed by rigorous verification against the original audio recordings. Subsequently, we carried out a thematic analysis to inductively identify, analyse, and report patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We then employed open coding to generate the initial codes, representing salient attributes of the interview extracts (Boeije, 2005). We grouped these codes into conceptual categories through a process of abstraction (Pratt et al., 2006).

The final stage involved consolidating the conceptual categories to develop theoretical explanations. Cross-comparisons and intense interrogation of categories during debriefing sessions led to our identification of key themes grounded in the data (Miles et al., 2014). These themes formed the basis of the key findings, which were reflexively critiqued to ensure an accurate representation of participants' lived experiences. Table 2 presents the key themes and associated codes.

Insert Table 2 about here.

Findings

Three major themes emerged in the study findings: 1. *racial segregation and discrimination;* 2. *gender discrimination;* and 3. *a patriarchal culture*. Each theme is characterised by the police service's institutional inequality and attendant racism, which reflect a complex and strong concrete ceiling. Black female police officers' work lives and opportunities for career progression are negatively affected by their race and gender. This challenge is compounded by

the small number of serving Black police officers and is exacerbated by tokenism. The study participants drew on their experiences to describe the nature of the concrete ceiling in the police service, which can be understood as a triple layer of disadvantageous barriers that are often not visible but still hinder their career advancement.

Racial Segregation and Discrimination

Racial segregation and discrimination characterised the majority of participants' experiences of workplace discrimination and inequality. The participant police officers, though unofficially and discreetly, tend to relate to and work with colleagues with whom they share the same race (or perceived race), thus creating racial segregation at work. The quotes below illustrate this point:

> I have been in the police service for 12 years, and I can tell you that officers prefer to work and do work with colleagues with whom they share the same race. White people often like to work with other White people, and police officers of Asian origin also do the same (Police Officer Jemila).

> Racial segregation is very pronounced in the police service, and it is very common among White officers. They are the largest group, and they discreetly use segregation to share and keep vital information among themselves. Until such information is made public, it remains unknown. For example, there is a circular that was just released in June 2023, and a White colleague told me that every White police officer knew the details of it as far back as January…That's how they use racial segregation to keep information to themselves (Police Officer Wilma).

Another participant described working as a Black policewoman in a service that is predominately White as 'lonely':

> Honestly, I feel very lonely. Altogether, I think we are about 200 officers here and I am the only Black woman. The White officers and the officers of Asian origin have their own networks. I feel alone among them, and I cannot form a network by myself…So, it is difficult to engage in racial segregation…Those who have the numbers do it, though furtively (Police Officer Mariam).

The participants also commented on how racial segregation often results in discrimination, which negatively affects their workplace experiences and career progression. The quotation below illustrates this point:

> Racial segregation is a normal thing in the service, where [White and Asian] officers roll with their White and Asian brothers and sisters. However, that behaviour breeds discrimination, because they – perhaps unknowingly – perpetrate unjust and prejudicial treatment against us (I mean, the few Black officers). For example, I asked a colleague for a particular file, which he refused to give me, but he gave it to a White colleague with whom he shared a racial background…In the same way, they share information among themselves (Police officer Amarah).

Another participant noted that racial segregation is a precursor for racial discrimination, which she described as the twin enemies of career progression:

> The members of the majority group always align well with each other and tend to keep the minorities, especially the Black officers, out of their circles. This means that they favour themselves in every way, including during promotion exercises…Although, they do this in a subtle manner. For example, I joined the police service about 14 years ago, and my White colleagues who joined at the same time have been promoted more than twice. What I am saying is that they make sure that everyone in their circle gets promoted – leaving us [Black female police officers], who are so few so as to form any meaningful circle, to suffer discrimination. I can confidently say that racial segregation and discrimination are the twin enemies that stand in the way of Black female police officers' career progression (Police officer Betty).

This finding aligns with the conclusion of Van Laer and Janssens (2011) that non-White women face more obstacles at work than their White counterparts. However, for Alexandra, being Black has greatly affected her work life and career progression:

> Just two of us are Black in this place. We are the minority group, and there is pressure to conform with the majority in every way. I strongly believe that I would have progressed more quickly if I were a White woman. The White and Asian

> officers have stronger networks that help them push their career progression. We [Black female police officers] are too small in number so as to form a network…It is sad, but that's the reality (Police Officer Alexandra).

The above findings demonstrate the dynamics associated with racial segregation and discrimination in a context marked by the underrepresentation of Black women in the police service – a predictor of tokenism. This finding aligns with Kanter's (1977b, 1993) argument that discrimination often occurs in settings in which there are variations in the numerical proportions of people of different social and racial types.

Gender Discrimination

The issue of gender discrimination is evident in the majority of the participants' accounts, and it compounds the problems of tokenism for Black women in the police service. Some participants commented that the divide between men and women and gender-based prejudices are socially constructed, overly simplistic, and affect their work lives and careers. The findings confirm the presence of hegemonic masculinity, which suggests physical strength, emotional suppression, and sexualisation are predominant. Two participants described the reality of gender discrimination in the police service and its impact on their career progression as follows:

> There is a general belief that police work is tough and is meant for men, who are considered strong, and that women are weak and cannot do certain policing duties. For example, there was an operation in my unit to arrest some drug dealers, and I was not made part of the team. When I asked my line manager why this was so, he said that the job was for men. I felt bad and discriminated against. In the end, these men will be promoted rather than women, because they are involved in many physically demanding operations (Police officer Mabel).

> I have been left out of many operations because of my gender. At one time, the excuse I was given was that the operation was a tough one that required men, and at another time, it was because I may not be around all the time because of my familial commitments. This is one reason why women, especially Black women,

> are very few in the police service…and the reason why career progression is difficult for us (Police officer Chloe).

One participant commented on the prevalence of gender discrimination in the police service and how policing tries to portray an outlook of gender equality to the public. She described the lack of career progression for Black women as a 'double-glazed ceiling':

> Everyone is equal in the police service regardless of their gender. Yes, that is what the police service says to the public. But is that what really happens in the job? I am sorry, but the answer is no. Let me focus on Black female police officers, who are extremely small in number. Generally, women are considered weak by men, and as such, we are excluded from many physically demanding operations and training. Black women are especially considered weak and less efficient…So career progression is difficult for us. Being Black and a woman is a double-glazed ceiling that is very difficult to crack (Police officer Anita).

Another participant commented on her experience of gender discrimination as follows:

> Gender discrimination is very prevalent in the British police service…But it is even worse for Black female police officers, because we are so few. A colleague once asked me how I got into the police service. He said he found me being in the job weird, because I am a woman and Black…Of course, I reported this comment, but nothing came out of it. Many times, I am left in the office…My superior officer 'jokingly' says, 'Stay in the office – women take care of the house better than men. We will be back'. I always feel bad about it, but I guess that is the price I must pay for being a Black woman (Police officer Sophie).

These findings confirm the prevalence of hegemonic masculinity, which emphasises physical strength in the police service (see Lo and Adelyn, 2023). Additionally, the study findings show that the low proportion of Black female police officers in the police service contributes to the factors that are responsible for gender and racial discrimination, whose root Cashmore (2001) identifies as being in the hiring process. Although all women, regardless of race, are confronted with gender discrimination, it is worse for Black women. They do not have enough mutual

support in their organisation – they do not have the required numbers to break the concrete ceiling or to create a meaningful support network. This finding aligns with those of existing research (e.g. Kanter, 1977a, 1977b) that demonstrates how patriarchal power structures within the police service hinder women's career advancement. Moreover, the concept of tokenism reveals a critical nuance: Black female officers experience a compounded disadvantage because of their dual minority status, leading to heightened visibility, scrutiny, stereotyping, and assimilation pressures (Kanter, 1977a, 1977b). The findings exemplify both high visibility and assimilation pressures, as Black female officers navigate stereotypes and social dynamics. These factors contribute significantly to the barriers they face in advancing within police hierarchies (Carangio, 2023).

Patriarchal Culture

The majority of the participants perceived a widespread patriarchal culture within the police service in England and Wales. Men still significantly outnumber women in the police service. While Robert Peel's male figure influence on policing is undeniable, it is not the primary driver of the enduring patriarchal culture within English and Welsh policing. Historical and cultural factors, such as societal expectations associating policing with masculine traits and the entrenched 'macho' culture within the force, have significantly contributed to this. Furthermore, informal hierarchies and discriminatory practices within policing organisations have limited women's advancement. The historical origins of the service demonstrate its challenges in relation to accepting women and people of colour into its workforce. Despite that there has been an increase in gender and racial equality in the police service, the participants believe that the White patriarchal culture is prevalent in police work and that this negatively impacts their career progression; for example, the participants commented on how they have been overwhelmed by what they described as a 'patriarchal system':

> Generally, I think the British police service operates according to a patriarchal system. Women – especially Black women, who are the minority – are negatively affected by patriarchy. For example, we have just three women here in this unit, and I am the only Black female…I often feel swallowed up and dominated by these men, who often display patriarchal attitudes, which makes career progression difficult for women, especially Black women, who are already alienated because of our gender (Police Officer Kimberly).

This finding demonstrates the prevalence of the patriarchal system, which reinforces the concrete ceiling in the police service. Another participant elaborated as follows:

> It is a gendered organisation or, I should say, a gendered institution. As a woman, my fate is decided by men. Coming into the organisation, I was interviewed by men, assessed by men, managed by men, and appraised by men…Even the promotion process is primarily overseen by men. So, effectively, men decide whether I am promoted or not. During the last promotion exercise, 12 men were promoted and not a single woman was promoted…That speaks volumes about how patriarchal and gendered the organisation is (Police Officer Meridith).

The minority group of Black women in the police service represents what Kanter (1977a) describes as a 'skewed group', and men represent the 'dominant group', which prevails over the 'skewed group'. However, in this case, the skewed group is less than 15% – what Kanter (1977a, 1993) terms the tipping point of a 'token' or 'solo'. Another participant commented:

> Men run the show. They decide who is hired, promoted, and fired. How many White women (let alone Black women) can you find in leadership positions in the police service? The truth is that White women have a slim chance of getting to the top (and some do manage this), while Black women's chances are like that of winning the lottery – almost impossible (Police Officer Ruth).

Other researchers have described this masculine ethic and patriarchal behaviour as an excluding mechanism (Acker, 1990; Kanter, 1977a), which creates and strengthens the unequal power relations between men and women (Crittenden & Wright, 2013). Our participants' views appear to echo those findings.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study embarked on a crucial exploration by means of the theoretical lens of tokenism to dissect the complex interplay of race and gender within the professional lives and career trajectories of Black female police officers in England and Wales. This demographic, often relegated to the margins of scholarly discourse on human resource management and organisational studies within the UK context, represents a vital yet underexamined segment of the police service. Our study aimed to fill this significant research gap by delving into the nature of the 'concrete ceiling' and assessing the extent to which Black female officers have achieved genuine parity with their White and male counterparts.

By utilising an exploratory qualitative research approach, we have unearthed the widespread tendency towards racial segregation and discrimination that continues to permeate the police services of England and Wales. Our findings reveal a troubling pattern: Police officers tend to form racial networks, wherein they cultivate working relationships, share crucial information, and extend favours (particularly in the realm of promotions) with those who share their racial or ethnic background. This phenomenon, while seemingly innocuous on the surface, reinforces existing power structures and marginalises those outside the dominant group.

The demographic statistics underscore the inherent disadvantages faced by Black female police officers in the UK. With White police officers constituting the majority, mirroring the broader UK population (wherein 91.9% identify as White, 3.7% as Asian, and 1.3% as Black – Office for National Statistics, 2023), the 'numbers game' creates a formidable obstacle. Black female officers, representing less than 1% of the police force, are doubly disadvantaged by their race and gender. Their numerical scarcity within both society and the police service make it exceedingly difficult to establish meaningful networks within a predominantly White environment. This numerical minority amplifies the experience of tokenism, whereby their

presence becomes symbolic rather than substantive, as evidenced in existing studies (Essed, 2007; Gittens, 2004; Gustafson, 2008; Stichman et al., 2010). These studies collectively highlight the police service's notoriety for tokenism, wherein women and minorities encounter discrimination and isolation.

We posit herein that racial segregation and discrimination serve as precursors to tokenism, which, in turn, solidifies the 'concrete ceiling' within the police service. Our study affirms that the police service in England and Wales remains a gendered institution, a finding that resonates with Cassey's (2023) report on institutional racism and sexism within the Metropolitan Police. This report underscores the persistent disparity in career advancement opportunities between men and women. The participants in our study echoed these sentiments, reflecting on experiences of gender oppression, whereby they were excluded from specific operational tasks because of their gender, leading them to develop feelings of profound isolation. This isolation, in turn, has had a detrimental impact on their career progression, as the limited representation of Black female officers prevents them from forming robust networks and peer groups that could serve as a foundation for advancement into leadership and management roles. This issue may lead to what Kanter (1977a) terms 'role encapsulation', according to which tokens are unable to freely express themselves and are confined to narrow, predefined roles. Miller et al. (2003) reinforce this notion by suggesting that the police profession remains highly gendered and racialised, which creates significant barriers for minority groups seeking career progression.

While gender discrimination impacts nearly all women within the police service, our study participants consistently asserted that its effects are significantly more pronounced for Black female officers. Building upon Kanter's (1977a, 1993) theoretical framework, we observe that the low representation of tokens often results in their polarisation within an organisation,

leading to social isolation. Our findings resonate strongly with Kanter's (1977a, 1993) seminal work on tokenism, as they reveal how its three core components – assimilation, high visibility, and contrast – manifest in the experiences of Black female police officers in the UK. Assimilation is evident in the pressure to conform to the dominant White and male culture of the police service, which often requires Black female officers to suppress aspects of their racial and gender identities to fit in. This can lead to a sense of 'double life', whereby they feel compelled to downplay their true selves in order to navigate the workplace. High visibility, another key element of tokenism, is acutely felt by Black female officers because of their underrepresentation. Their actions are magnified and scrutinised, which creates for them a sense of being constantly 'on display' and this can lead to them developing feelings of isolation. Finally, contrast emerges as Black female officers are often perceived as fundamentally different from the 'ideal' officer, typically envisioned as White and male. This perceived difference can lead to their marginalisation, their exclusion from key networks, and the reinforcement of the 'concrete ceiling' that hinders their career advancement. Our findings suggest that for Black female officers, these three components of tokenism are exacerbated by the intersectionality of their race and gender, which creates a particularly significant and challenging experience.

Furthermore, our study reveals the enduring prevalence of the 'ideal' police officer as male within the police service of England and Wales. Although societal attitudes have evolved, gender-based and racial biases continue to persist. Our exploration of Black female police officers' lived experiences through the lens of tokenism unveils a deeply entrenched patriarchal system and culture wherein men dominate decision-making in relation to recruitment, operations, and promotions. Despite ongoing efforts to increase female representation, policing in the UK remains largely the preserve of White men.

Our findings evidence the 'concrete ceiling' orchestrated by a patriarchal culture, or 'cult of masculinity', in alignment with Loftus's (2008) description of 21st-century policing culture as an 'impervious white, heterosexist, male culture' (p. 756). We specifically characterise the Black female police officers' experience as a 'concrete ceiling', distinct from the barriers faced by their White and Asian female colleagues. This 'concrete ceiling' encompasses both overt and covert barriers that negatively impact Black female police officers' working lives and impede their career progression.

Our research makes two pivotal contributions to the existing literature on Black female police officers in the UK and to organisational studies more broadly. First, we advance a nuanced theoretical understanding of the intersectionality between token groups, race, gender, and patriarchy by highlighting the lived experiences of the most marginalised group within the police service of England and Wales. While Kanter (1977a, 1993) and other scholars (e.g. King et al., 2010; Lafuente & Vaillant, 2019) primarily define 'tokens' or 'solos' in terms of gender, we extend this definition to encompass race, gender, and patriarchy, revealing the compounded challenges that Black female officers face. We do not seek to discredit previous research but rather emphasise that tokenism that is rooted in race, gender, and patriarchy creates a unique 'concrete ceiling' characterised by structural inequality and discrimination.

Second, our findings provide a deeper understanding of minority groups, particularly Black women, within the police service and expand the existing literature on tokenism, inequality, race, gender, and racism. Most significantly, our research sheds light on the systemic barriers that hinder Black women's advancement to senior leadership positions. It raises critical questions about whether their eventual attainment of high-ranking roles, if achieved, represents genuine organisational change or mere tokenistic gestures.

In summary, our study provides nuanced insights into the racial, gender-based, and patriarchal barriers that negatively affect Black female police officers' working lives and career opportunities. These challenges are real and complex and require a holistic approach if the police service intends to uphold the British egalitarian principle of equality of opportunity.

While our study makes significant theoretical and empirical contributions to the field, our findings should be interpreted with caution. Given the focus on Black female police officers, our findings on privilege may not be universally applicable to other minority groups within the police service. The phenomenon of tokenism (especially relating to the intersectionality of race, gender, and patriarchy) warrants further investigation in order to understand the variations in experiences among different minority groups. The unique characteristics of different minority groups, including their distinct cultural traits and relational positions, necessitate care when generalising our findings. Future research should examine the intersectionality of race, gender, LGBTQ+ identities, and patriarchy across diverse minority groups within the police service.

Furthermore, our study does not explore the strategies and coping mechanisms employed by Black female police officers to navigate their roles and overcome barriers to career advancement, representing a valuable avenue for future research. We also encourage future studies to amplify the voices of minority groups within UK police services. Exploratory studies suggest that 'colourism', the preference for lighter skin tones, may influence the treatment of Black women in some jurisdictions. This phenomenon, often manifested in practices like skin bleaching or hair processing, requires further investigation in order for us to fully understand its impacts on the experiences of Black women in policing. Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) focuses on the interconnectedness of social identities, suggesting that examining the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation can provide a more nuanced understanding of women's experiences in policing than an emphasis on rank. While this study

does not delve into the specific impacts of rank, future research could explore how rank intersects with other identities to shape the experiences of Black female police officers. Finally, future research could employ quantitative methods in the UK and other European contexts to examine the impacts of race, gender, and patriarchy on Black female police officers' working lives and career progression.

Implications for Theory, Research, and Practice

Implications for theory: Our findings have significant implications for expanding theoretical understandings of tokenism. By examining the experiences of Black female police officers, we move beyond traditional conceptualisations of tokenism, which often focus solely on gender. Our study demonstrates how the intersection of race, gender, and patriarchy creates a unique and complex form of tokenism. This 'triple jeopardy' faced by Black female officers highlights the limitations of existing frameworks and calls for a more nuanced understanding of tokenism within diverse organisational contexts. Future research should explore these intersections in more detail, incorporating other dimensions like social class, sexual orientation, and disability, as suggested by studies on intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991).

Implications for research: This study underscores the need for further research to deepen our understanding of the experiences of minority groups within the police service. Future research should employ a multi-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies, to comprehensively examine the impact of race, gender, and other intersecting identities on the careers of police officers from diverse backgrounds. Additionally, future research should explore the strategies and coping mechanisms employed by Black female officers to navigate the challenges and overcome the barriers they face in this regard. Future work should also consider how rank interplays with other identities. Furthermore, the potential influence of factors like 'colourism' and the intersectionality of identities beyond race and

gender, such as social class, sexual orientation, and disability, should be investigated to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of diverse minority groups within the police service.

Implications for practice: The findings of this study have significant implications for police service reform. Addressing the 'concrete ceiling' requires a multi-pronged approach that tackles systemic issues, including dismantling patriarchal structures, promoting inclusive leadership, and fostering a more equitable and inclusive organisational culture. This includes implementing transparent promotion processes, fostering inclusive networks, and providing targeted support for Black female police officers. Training and education programmes should be developed to address unconscious biases and promote cultural competence among all police officers. Furthermore, the police service must actively work towards increasing the representation of Black female officers in leadership positions, ensuring that these appointments reflect genuine organisational change rather than tokenistic gestures. By acknowledging the intersectional challenges faced by Black female officers and implementing meaningful reforms, the police service can strive to create a more equitable and inclusive environment for all officers. The findings require that police services in England and Wales adhere to the British egalitarian principle of equality of opportunities.

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Table 1. Participants' Profile

Participants' Name	Length of service	Age	Origin	Participants stations	Nature of service
Jemila	12 years	44	Africa	England	In service
Amarah	6 years	34	Africa	England	In service
Mariam	10 years	42	Caribbean	England	In service
Betty	5 years	36	Africa	Wales	In service
Alexandra	7 years	30	Indigenous Australian	England	In service
Mabel	9 years	34	Africa	Wales	In service
Chloe	5 years	29	Caribbean	England	In service
Anita	8 years	34	Caribbean	Wales	In service
Sophie	11 years	30	Africa	England	In service
Kimberly	14 years	45	Africa	Wales	In service
Paula	6 years	38	Caribbean	England	In service
Kaffy	9 years	42	Caribbean	England	In service
Nancy	22 years	60	Indigenous Australian	England	Retired
Hannah	9 years	39	Caribbean	Wales	In service
Caroline	7 years	33	Caribbean	Wales	In service
Deborah	13 years	40	Africa	England	In service
Joy	15 years	56	Africa	England	Retired
Wilma	10 years	43	Africa	Wales	In service
Emmanuela	15 years	58	Africa	Wales	Retired
Ruth	6 years	37	Caribbean	England	In service
Meridith	13 years	55	Caribbean	England	Retired

Table 2. Key Themes and Associated Open Codes Derived during the Data Analysis Process

Core themes	Open Codes	Aggregate Theoretical Dimension
Racial segregation and discrimination.	'Officers form [a] network of colleagues of the same racial origin', 'We [Black female police officers] are too few to form any network', 'I feel alone being the only Black woman in my unit', 'Officers tend to favour colleagues [with whom] they share the same racial origin, including during promotion exercise[s]', 'I am sure that being black has negatively affected my career progression', 'Other race[s], especially White people, [outnumber] us [Black women], and they use this against us'.	Tokenism/discrimination/ hard glass ceiling
Gender discrimination	'I am confined to doing an administrative role, because I'm a woman', 'I was told I was not strong and tough enough to be involved in some cases and missions', 'Men and women are not treated equally here. More men get promoted and very few women are promoted, especially Black women', 'No woman was promoted in the last promotion exercise, even though we are qualified', '[I was told:] "Policing is for strong men…You should be a teacher or something"'.	Tokenism/discrimination/ hard glass ceiling
Patriarchal culture	'Men overwhelm me with their numbers and patriarchal behaviour…sometimes without them knowing', 'Men do and determine everything, including who to hire, promote, and retain…Women have no say at all in this process', 'My opinion rarely counts amid [the] gamut of men who, sometimes, even forget to ask for my opinion', 'The police service is gendered, and that gender is men and not women…Women, especially, Black women struggle to excel here'.	Tokenism/patriarchal imperialism/discrimination/ hard glass ceiling