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## Faculty of Business Economics

Master of Management

### **Master's thesis**

***Breaking Barriers: A study of black female entrepreneurs in the Belgian fashion industry***

#### **Eliman Steenbergen**

Thesis presented in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Management, specialization Strategy and Innovation Management

#### **SUPERVISOR :**

dr. Hannelore VAN DEN ABEELE



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## **Preface**

I want to use this opportunity to show my sincere gratitude to everyone who has helped me along the way as I've conducted this study and written this thesis. Their consistent support, direction, and confidence in my abilities have been crucial in helping me finish my assignment.

I would like to start by expressing my sincere gratitude to my distinguished promotor, Dr. Hannelore Van den Abeele, for her direction, knowledge, and constant support throughout this research project. Her insightful comments, helpful and constructive critique, and commitment to my academic development have all been crucial in determining the focus and calibre of this thesis. I consider myself really fortunate to have had the chance to learn from and be inspired by such an accomplished mentor.

I also want to thank my parents from the bottom of my heart for their unending support, love, and sacrifices. My pursuit of a higher education has been motivated by their unshakable faith in my potential, ongoing encouragement, and spiritual support. They helped me stay focused and committed during the highs and lows of this study journey by providing me with unwavering support and understanding. I also want to express my gratitude to all of my friends who have helped and encouraged me tremendously throughout this study process. Their willingness to listen, participate in stimulating conversations, and provide helpful criticism have been crucial in helping me develop my thoughts and strengthen my arguments. Both my parents and friends' presence has enhanced my academic endeavour by bringing joy, friendship, and a sense of community.

I lastly want to express my gratitude to the study's participants, without whom this investigation would not have been feasible. The difficulties faced by black female entrepreneurs in the Belgian fashion business have been made more clear by their openness to share their experiences, views, and perspectives. I'm humbled and honoured to have had the chance to learn from them, and their voices ought to be heard. I am an advocate for diversity and inclusion around the world and in all her facets. As someone who has experienced racism first-hand, I think it is very important that I contribute to this topic's research.

## Summary

This qualitative study aims to address the prejudice that black female entrepreneurs face in the Belgian fashion industry. They face significant challenges in developing in the sector. There is little study on the bias that black female fashion entrepreneurs in Belgium face. I want to highlight the voices that have been historically marginalised and suppressed by concentrating on this particular group. In a society where black women's views have been frequently ignored and neglected, exploring their viewpoints is essential. They have historically experienced continuous underrepresentation on a global level, including in Belgium, as well as unfair treatment and racism. Society may make great progress towards establishing a more inclusive and equitable environment for all by acknowledging and resolving these types of discrimination. Additionally, encouraging inclusivity and diversity within the fashion industry is a practical strategy as well as a moral obligation.

The qualitative research approach is the most appropriate for this study because it allows for a thorough and in-depth analysis of the experiences, perspectives, and significances that are crucial to the lives of black female fashion entrepreneurs in Belgium. This strategy is especially well suited for examining the experiences of marginalized and underrepresented groups, whose viewpoints and voices are frequently absent from public discourse. Ten black female business owners who are involved in the Belgian fashion industry were interviewed. This particular sample was chosen because I want to learn more about how they see the chances and difficulties they confront. In-depth interviews were selected as the main data gathering strategy because they enable an investigation of the opinions and experiences of these individuals. They allow participants the opportunity to articulate their experiences in their own words, providing me with incisive and comprehensive data for a more in-depth understanding of the problem. These interviews were verbatim transcribed. I used inductive coding to analyze the data because it allows codes and themes to be created based solely on the information gathered rather than on preconceived notions or preexisting structure.

This thesis demonstrates that black female fashion entrepreneurs in the Belgian fashion industry confront racial inequities rather than gender-based prejudice. They feel that being a woman does not provide as many challenges as being a black woman, despite modest but visible prejudice. Racism still persists in today's culture, but it now manifests itself more through microaggressions. Black women in this sector have additional difficulties and pressure to achieve as a result of their ongoing struggles to be recognized for their contributions. Additionally, they are hardly ever represented in the sector. They are notably underrepresented in top managerial positions and are seldom ever seen as business owners. Black women find it challenging to advance since there is a lack of diversity and acceptance of people of all backgrounds in the field, which is predominately made up of white older men. Additionally, in fashion campaigns that do not feature them, black women are typically absent from the catwalk, billboards, publications, and other promotional materials. When they seek for funding and investors, they encounter further challenges. White male investors who may lack empathy and affinity for black female entrepreneurs' ideas find it difficult to be persuaded by them. Additionally, black female entrepreneurs contend with the stigma of female incompetence and the underestimation of their tenacity and potential for creativity caused by biased notions that women are incapable of managing business operations beyond the creative aspects.

Furthermore, stereotypes frequently portray black women as being incredibly loud and belligerent, which makes some white people uncomfortable and frightened. Both the Belgian government and the nation's fashion sector are unaware of the challenges black female entrepreneurs face, and even when they are, they are routinely overlooked or downplayed.

To remedy this, I suggest that the Belgian government and fashion sector give high priority to important initiatives and projects to advance gender and racial equality, ensuring sure they include and reach out to black female entrepreneurs. By forming a specific commission or regulating body to oversee and enforce gender and racial inclusion in the workplace, the government may further promote positive change and a more equitable business and society by setting an example through her own inclusive practices.

Finally, I encourage additional study on this subject because there is currently a dearth of information on black women who start businesses in the fashion industry. For instance, one may conduct study on the varying degrees of challenges faced by black female entrepreneurs with light and dark skin tones. More research may also be done on the causes of the limited availability of financial resources, as many black female entrepreneurs are unaware of the reasons why these obstacles are so great. A deeper knowledge of the issue of cultural appropriation is necessary to determine why corporations prefer to steal ideas from black creators without returning anything to these communities.

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## **1. Relevance of the study**

*"They always say that black women are too loud. For years, they silenced us. Now it's our turn to be loud." (Robyn)*

This thesis on black female entrepreneurs in the Belgian fashion sector is very relevant to highlighting the opportunities and challenges this particular group faces. In a world where black women's voices have historically been marginalised and muted, it is essential to explore their perspectives. This research contributes to the larger conversation on diversity, inclusion, and social equity by exposing and comprehending the distinctive problems and successes of black female entrepreneurs. Black women have a long history of underrepresentation, both globally and in Belgium, and they frequently experience unfairness and prejudice. These differences are especially noticeable in the fashion sector, which is sometimes seen as a mirror of cultural standards and values. Black women have challenges on many fronts, from breaking past the glass ceiling in executive roles to getting investments and financial resources. The study emphasises the need for structural adjustments to ensure equitable chances by highlighting the systemic prejudices that impede their advancement.

Black female entrepreneurs handle both the obstacles brought on by their racial backgrounds and the difficulties faced by women in business. Society may get one step closer to creating a more inclusive and equitable environment for all by understanding and addressing these intersecting characteristics of discrimination. Additionally, encouraging diversity and inclusiveness within the fashion industry is not only morally necessary but also logical. The benefits of inclusive and varied work settings have been repeatedly shown through research. Businesses that value diversity have access to a greater range of viewpoints, creativity, and new ideas. By supporting black female entrepreneurs, the industry may benefit from their distinctive skills, perspectives, and experiences, which will result in more exciting and culturally diverse fashion options.

This thesis will, therefore, focus on the opportunities and challenges faced by black female fashion designers in Belgium. The literature review will show us different views on black female entrepreneurship in different sectors of the creative industry. Based on this review, these findings will be compared to current (in)equalities in the fashion industry in Belgium.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 The creative industries

The UK Department for Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) coined the phrase *creative industries* in a 1998 paper. Advertising, architecture, crafts, design, film and video, music, performing arts, publishing, software and computer services, television and radio, and visual arts are just a few of the 13 industries that the research recognised and categorised as being a part of the creative industries. Since then, the phrase has been frequently used to refer to sectors of the economy that generate cultural and creative goods and services. These industries are distinguished by their capacity to produce concepts, artwork, and intellectual property that can be sold and profited from. Film, music, theatre, design, fashion, advertising, software development, video game development, publishing, architecture, and art are just a few examples of the diverse activities that make up the creative industries. These industries play a significant role in the production of high-quality, innovative products that can be exported and consumed internationally, which is essential for economic growth and employment creation in many nations. In fact, a study by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) found that the creative economy has been expanding at a 7.5% average annual pace globally and is expected to do so in the years to come. As they represent societal values, beliefs, and identities, the creative industries are also a significant source of cultural and social capital. They play a crucial role in shaping public discourse and influencing popular culture, which in turn impacts the way people perceive themselves and the world around them. Film and television, for instance, are effective media for storytelling and communication and may reach a wide audience with complicated subjects and ideas. Similar to how words may elicit feelings and challenge social conventions, music and art can do the same, spurring change and innovation.

In his book, Richard Florida (2002) examines the formation of what he terms the *creative class* of employees. According to Florida, this group consists of people who work in creative fields including technology, media, design, and the arts. The creative class is a new class of workers who are "driven by the desire for self-expression, creativity, and innovation" (p. 12). It is not only a group of people who engage in creative activities. According to him, the emergence of the creative class is changing not only the nature of employment and the economy but also leisure, community, and daily life by reorienting attention away from traditional industries and towards more knowledge-based ones, such technology, media, and design, which are, in his opinion, the main forces behind economic growth in the twenty-first century. He contends that the creative class is a key factor in urban renewal and economic expansion in cities all around the United States and the globe. He gives the examples of towns like San Francisco, Boston, and Seattle, where the creative sectors and broader economies have experienced great growth. Additionally, he contends that cities with a high quality of life — including excellent schools, a diverse population, and a thriving cultural scene — attract the creative class. According to him, these cities — which he refers to as *creative centres* — are essential for drawing in and keeping the creative class. Florida also makes notice of the fact that members of the creative class are typically more tolerant and open-minded than members of other

socioeconomic classes, which, in his opinion, makes them more accepting of diversity and more inclined to support social causes like environmentalism and gay rights.

Richard Florida's research on the creative industries has had a significant impact, but it has also come under fire and suffered difficulties. According to Zukin (2010), Florida's portrayal of the creative industries as an agent of urban renewal is a cover-up that ignores the gentrification and displacement of lower-income communities. She argues that the creative class is a highly privileged group of professionals in high-paying occupations rather than a uniform collection of bohemians and artists. In their 2010 paper, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) emphasise the emotional toil that goes into creative endeavour. They contend that Florida's perception of the creative industries as a place for self-expression, fulfilment, and autonomy ignores the exploitative character of creative employment, which necessitates people to invest their identities and emotions in their work. Emotional labour is frequently exploited in the creative industries, where employees are asked to invest their emotions and identities in their work without enough payment or acknowledgment. Another criticism comes from Arne Carlsen (2007), who claims that the notion of the creative industries has devolved into a term that obscures the complexity of cultural development. He argues that the relevance of cultural variety and the social and political circumstances in which creative enterprises function are ignored when the focus is on the economic aspects of innovation. In his article, Justin O'Connor (2016), another researcher who challenges Florida's vision, claims that the creative industries have become victims of their own success, with the sector's expansion leading to a homogenization of cultural production and the displacement of local cultural practises. According to O'Connor, a fresh approach to cultural policy is required, one that considers the many cultural practises and experiences of various social groups. Overall, by highlighting the intricacies and tensions of the creative industries, including problems with exploitation, injustice, and cultural homogenization, these critiques pose a challenge to Florida's celebratory worldview.

Precarity and job insecurity are two realities that a rising number of people who work in the cultural and creative industries have in common (Belfiore, 2018). According to Conor et al. (2015), workers in the cultural and media industries are becoming more and more independent contractors or have contracts that are measured in days or weeks as opposed to months or years. Contracts with zero hours are not infrequent. For a sizable portion of those working in the creative industries, pervasive precariousness and insecurity are the norm. People frequently worry about how they will make it past the completion of the next project and live in a way that necessitates constant awareness of the possibility of future employment. Because of Conor et al. (2015), we know that major sources of worry include the lack of pensions or sick pay, which would help people get by during times of unemployment. Being unemployed has a significant impact on maternity benefit rights in the majority of European countries, which is one of the reasons why women, and mothers in particular, are underrepresented in industries like media where freelancing or relatively short contracts are the norm. Low income, job uncertainty, and the deeply ingrained culture of free labour all make this necessary (Figiel, 2012). According to Belfiore (2018), freelancers in the media and creative industries operate on the maxim *you can't say no to a job*. This results in extraordinarily long workdays and what have been referred to as bulimic patterns of working: extended stretches of little to no work followed by intense bursts of constant effort, with at times hardly any time for rest.

John O'Connor (2016) studied the idea of cultural policy and the creative industries in the contemporary socioeconomic environment. He starts off by questioning the validity of the term *creative industries* and how much it is used to support legislation that puts economic growth ahead of cultural expression. While the creative industries can be a useful organising principle, according to O'Connor, they shouldn't be used to marginalise other forms of cultural production. He continues by saying that the creative industries' emphasis on boosting the economy might have had a negative impact on cultural policy. He points out that many of the policies that have emerged from the creative sectors frequently give market-based measurements precedence over cultural value. He contends that this has created a situation where the primary goal of artistic creation is to make money rather than to benefit society. According to the article, cultural policies should be refocused on cultural value rather than economic growth. As stated by O'Connor, this shift in focus would necessitate a renewed commitment to public funding of the arts, which will then permit the creation of culturally significant work that is exempt from market-based norms. He comes to the conclusion that there is a crisis in cultural policy at the time, but there is also room for change. Shifting the creative industries' emphasis from economic growth to cultural value could promote a more equal and diversified cultural landscape. O'Connor's opinions are consistent with the growing worry among academics and professionals that the creative industries have lost sight of cultural value as a result of their overemphasis on market-based metrics.

### **2.1.1 The creative industries in Belgium**

Belgium's creative industries are acknowledged to be a key force in the economy of the nation. The creative and cultural industries contribute 3.3% of Belgium's GDP, according to a research by the European Parliament (2016). A 2018 survey by the Belgian Ministry of Economy revealed that around 100,000 people are employed in Belgium's creative economy (Flanders DC, 2018). According to these numbers, the creative industries represent a substantial economic force in the nation. One of the largest sectors of the creative industries in Belgium is the visual arts and design industry. The visual arts and design industry brought in €2.2 billion in sales and employed about 14,000 people in 2017 (Flanders DC, 2018). The creative sector in Belgium is also significantly influenced by the music business. According to a research by Sabam (2019), the Belgian society of authors, composers, and publishers, the music sector made €227 million in revenue in 2018, an increase of 1.5% from the year before. Additionally, a developing sector of Belgium's creative sector has been identified: the video game industry. According to a research by Flanders DC (2018), the video game sector in the Flanders region brought in €125 million in revenue and employed about 600 people in 2017.

One of Belgium's primary creative hotspots is the Brussels-Capital Region. The creative and cultural industries in the Brussels-Capital Region generate €3.3 billion in sales and employ close to 33,000 people, according to a report by the Brussels Regional Investment Agency (hub.brussels, 2019). The research also emphasises that over the previous ten years, the creative and cultural sectors in the area have risen at a pace of 3% annually. The performing arts and audio-visual industries are the largest sectors of the local creative industries, according to the research.

## **2.2 Inequalities in the creative industries**

Inequalities have long been a problem in the creative industries, and both researchers and practitioners are quite concerned about it. Fashion, design, and other creative industries have a big impact on a country's economy and culture (Searle & Ward, 2019). Significant discrepancies in terms of access, opportunities, and representation, however, have been evident in these industries. Numerous studies have emphasized how certain groups, including women, people of colour, and LGBTQ+ people, are routinely marginalized in these industries. For instance, studies reveal that ethnic minority groups encounter major impediments to access, development, and recognition, and that women are underrepresented in senior leadership roles in the creative industries. Structured discrimination, implicit biases, and cultural stereotypes are only a few of the many interrelated factors that contribute to these disparities. Additionally, there is a history of the creative industries supporting prevailing cultural narratives that frequently exclude marginalized groups. As a result, resolving these disparities and fostering diversity and inclusion in the creative industries has become a top priority for academics, business leaders, and legislators. According to research, resolving disparities in the creative industries can have considerable positive effects on the economy, society, and culture (Smith & Stewart, 2018). For instance, encouraging diversity and inclusion may result in a more varied selection of goods and services, which may therefore appeal to a wider spectrum of customers. Diversity and inclusion can also promote better industry-wide collaboration, innovation, and creativity. Discrimination and exclusion, on the other hand, can result in missed opportunities as well as the marginalization of important perspectives and abilities. To create evidence-based policy interventions and industry practices that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion, study on the factors that contribute to inequality in the creative industries is crucial.

Oakley and O'Connor (2019) examine various types of inequality that occur within the creative industries and offers suggestions for resolving them. Although the creative industries are frequently linked to creativity, taking risks, and diversity, the authors contend that there are still substantial barriers that prevent some groups from fully participating in these fields. The writers begin by outlining the background and present diversity in the creative industries and drawing attention to the continuous underrepresentation of women, persons of colour, and those from lower socioeconomic statuses. They contend that a variety of factors, such as the concentration of power in a limited number of large firms, the reliance on unpaid or low-paid internships, and cultural biases that favour certain forms of knowledge and experience over others are responsible for these discrepancies. Oakley and O'Connor suggest a number of methods to deal with these problems. First, they contend that education and training need to receive more attention, and that measures need to be made to guarantee that young people from all backgrounds have access to high-quality arts education. Both formal educational institutions and unofficial networks and communities will need to get funding for this. The authors also contend that a deliberate effort is required to eliminate the structural prejudices that present in the creative sectors. This entails putting in place laws that support diversity and inclusion, including as diversity quotas and targets, and improving the openness of hiring and promotion procedures. Third, Oakley and O'Connor advocate strengthening support for alternative creative employment models including small-scale entrepreneurship and self-employment. They contend that although these occupations are frequently disregarded when the

creative industries are discussed, they have the potential to open doors for people who might not otherwise have access to it. They believe that initiatives to support diversity and inclusion must be integrated into all facets of the sector, from policy and practice to education and training. By doing this, they imply that it would be possible to develop a more varied and egalitarian creative industry that really reflects our society's variety.

### **2.2.1 Gender inequalities in the creative industries**

In their investigation of employees in the New Zealand film industry, Jones and Pringle (2015) make a ground-breaking and significant contribution to our knowledge of sexism in the creative industries by challenging the idea that the field is a meritocracy by exposing systemic gender and racial biases in hiring procedures. It adds to more extensive dialogues on diversity and inclusion in the creative industries by bringing these concerns to light, opening the door for more inclusive practises and policies. Their investigation reveals both trends and discontinuities: on the one hand, there are still common sexist stereotypes like *gung ho jocks*<sup>1</sup> and *girly girls*, but on the other, sexism is accepted as the norm in a setting where inequalities are largely unmanageable. This illustrates how sexism operates distinctively in the modern post-feminist era. While hegemonic masculinities continue to be maintained, women do not have equal access to creative labour, are not equally rewarded, and are subject to various types of occupational segregation that promote these disparities of both recognition and reward (Sang, Dainty, & Ison, 2014). Constructions of class, race/ethnicity, age, disability, and sexuality intersect with gender to further exacerbate privilege and injustice (Finkel, Jones, Sang, & Russell, 2017).

Rosalind Gill (2016) investigates the idea of *postfeminism*<sup>2</sup> and its effects on female academics in her paper for Female Academics. Gill contends that some expectations for women in the workplace have been influenced by postfeminism. These expectations include the notion that women should be very ambitious, successful, as well as attractive and desirable to men on a sexual level. Female academics are obliged to arbitrate between these competing expectations, which creates a *problem* of agency for them. According to Gill's research, which is based on interviews with female academics in the UK, these women are keenly aware of the demands they face to be both successful and sexually attractive. According to the women in her study, they frequently believe that their success is in conflict with their femininity and that they are always being scrutinized on how they look. Gill contends that as female academics search for environments that will allow them to be successful and authentically themselves, the temptation to fit into rigid gender roles can cause them to feel alienated. The conflict between agency and restriction is one of the major topics that emerges from Gill's research. The women in her study say they feel as though they must continually juggle a number of restraints, including those imposed by postfeminism, the desire to be sexually desirable, and the pressure to thrive in a very cutthroat atmosphere. However, they also discuss times when they felt empowered to challenge these limitations and make their own identities known. The experiences of female academics in the postfeminist era are marked by this tension between agency and restriction. In order to comprehend the perspectives of female academics, Gill also emphasizes the significance of intersectionality – an idea that emphasises the interconnectedness of social

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<sup>1</sup> Overly enthusiastic or energetic girls

<sup>2</sup> The notion that feminism is no longer necessary or relevant (Gill R. , 2007)

identities and oppressive institutions, acknowledging that people may face various forms of prejudice and disadvantage due to their race, gender, class, and other intersecting characteristics (Crenshaw, 1989).. She contends that intricate interactions between gender, race, class, and sexual orientation shape how women experience the workplace. She points out, for instance, that women of colour may experience greater pressure to adhere to specific beauty standards, while women from working-class origins may find it difficult to fit in with middle-class expectations in academics. Gill is able to illuminate the various levels of constraint and agency that impact the experiences of female academics by adopting an intersectional perspective. According to her findings, we need to go past the concept of *postfeminism* and keep working to make workplaces for women more egalitarian and supportive.

When talking about the number of female workers in the creative industries, David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker's (2018) article, *Sex, gender, and work segregation in the cultural industries*, seeks to identify the elements that lead to the underrepresentation of women in the creative industries. They contend that in order to completely comprehend this issue, it is necessary to take into account how gender interacts with other types of inequality, such as class and race. They discovered that men are more likely to have positions of authority and influence in the cultural sectors, whereas women are disproportionately represented in lower-paying and lower-status employment. They contend that a variety of structural causes, rather than just women's personal preferences or decisions, are to blame for this gender division. These include organizational practices and policies that favour men over women as well as gendered cultural norms and values that have an impact on the types of work that men and women are socialized to do. The writers also point out some of the major obstacles that must be overcome in order to advance more gender equality in the creative sectors. There is a lack of diversity among people in positions of authority and influence in the industry, and biases and preconceptions based on gender continue to exist and have the potential to harm women's career opportunities. They also argue that gender inequality in the cultural industries must be addressed using a multidimensional strategy that considers the nuanced ways in which gender interacts with other types of inequality. They urge increased focus on the structural elements that support gender segregation as well as the social and cultural norms that support it. Their findings demonstrate the need for policies and practices that support greater diversity and inclusion in the cultural industries, including steps to close the gender pay gap, advance greater accountability and transparency, and increase the opportunities for women to enter and advance in the field. They also stress the significance of opposing gendered cultural norms and beliefs that sustain gender segregation and of fostering a better understanding of the connections between gender and other types of inequality.

An important source of information on the gender inequalities in the creative industries is the edited collection by Oakley and Sheldon (2020). It compiles a variety of essays from academics, artists, and business experts. Four sections make up the book, which discusses issues like gender and creative work, creativity and business, education and training, and gender and cultural policy. The book's first section examines how gender affects employment opportunities and career routes within the creative industries. The authors contend that despite the perception that the creative industries are more forward-thinking and inclusive than other industries, gender disparities still exist. For

instance, women are more frequently found in administrative or support positions, which tend to be lower-paying and less respected. Additionally, women are less likely to hold leadership positions, and when they do, they frequently encounter stereotypes and barriers based on gender. The second section of the book examines how gender affects access to finance, networks, and other resources necessary for success in the creative industries. It also looks at creativity and entrepreneurship. The authors contend that major barriers prevent women from gaining access to these resources, which can hinder their ability to start profitable firms or advance in their careers. The book's third section, which focuses on education and training, examines how gender shapes both students' and teachers' experiences in creative education programs. The authors contend that prejudices and gender stereotypes might affect how students are taught and evaluated in creative programs, resulting in different outcomes for men and women. They argue that inclusive and varied creative education programs are necessary, both in terms of the students they draw and the viewpoints they include. The fourth and last section of the book looks at gender and cultural policy and how initiatives and policies might address gender inequality in the creative industries. The authors contend that in order to make a significant impact, policies and activities must be more thorough and focused. They contend that measures like quotas, funding initiatives, and mentorship programs may all successfully advance gender equality in the workplace.

### **2.2.2 Gender inequalities in the Belgian creative industries**

According to a report released by the Belgian government (2018), approximately 159,000 people are employed in Belgium's creative sector, with men making up 53.5% of the workforce and women making up 46.5%, according to a report released by the Belgian government in 2019. Only 33% of the top management positions are held by women, according to the report, which also points out that women are generally underrepresented in higher positions. Regarding individual industries within the creative sector, the research observes that women only make up 36% of the workforce in Belgium's audio-visual business, which has a gender imbalance. Contrarily, the music industry has a fairly equal gender representation, with women making up 49% of the workforce. Another study conducted by the Belgian organisation Mediarte (2019) revealed that women held only 23% of the technical positions in the country's audio-visual sector and earned, on average, 18% less than men. The survey also emphasised the underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles, with only 17% of the major decision-making positions held by women in the audio-visual business. Overall, despite the fact that women are present in Belgium's creative sectors, there is still a gender gap in the representation of women in leadership roles and pay equity.

Decroos, De Groote, and Nicaise's (2021) attempts to look into gender disparities in these fields in Flanders, Belgium. The study uses a mixed-methods approach, including a survey and in-depth interviews with subject matter experts and significant players in the industry. According to the survey, gender disparities still exist in Flanders' creative, cultural, and artistic industries. Only 38% of board members and 28% of top management positions are held by women, demonstrating the continued underrepresentation of women in positions of leadership. With only 34% of artistic directors and 29% of technical employees being women, women are likewise underrepresented in the arts and sciences. Women in the industry make 16% less money than males on average, thus the gender pay gap is still a big problem. The study also discovered that gender disparities are



maintained via a number of practices, including unofficial networks and gendered standards of work-life balance. Men, for instance, typically have stronger access to informal networks, which can open doors to important resources and career chances. Women are also sometimes expected to take on greater caregiving duties, which may limit their availability for employment and career progression. The study emphasizes how critical it is to overcome these gender disparities in Flanders' creative, cultural, and artistic industries. The authors contend that in order to support women's professional advancement and enhance their representation in leadership roles, rules and procedures must be put in place. They contend that strategies like gender quotas and discrimination-free hiring procedures could help advance gender equality in the industry. The findings imply that additional steps are required to resolve these disparities and promote gender equality in the industry.

The current condition of female entrepreneurship in the cultural and creative industry in French-speaking Belgium is examined in Lefèvre and Gillain's (2021) study. The authors want to draw attention to the particular difficulties that women confront in this field and offer ideas for potential solutions. The study discovered that women are underrepresented in leadership roles within the cultural and creative industry in French-speaking Belgium, especially in the sectors of music, film, and visual arts, similar to the studies stated above. Not only is sexism and systematic discrimination to blame for this underrepresentation, but also a lack of financial options and professional networks for female entrepreneurs. In addition, hazardous working circumstances and low pay are frequent in the industry for women, which makes it harder for them to start and expand their firms. The authors also discovered that women business owners in the cultural and creative industries confront intersectional difficulties because of their gender, age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Women from ethnic minorities may experience prejudice and underrepresentation, while older women may find it difficult to obtain money and professional support owing to ageism. In addition, women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds can have a harder time getting access to the tools necessary to start and run a successful business. Despite these obstacles, the study also discovered that female business owners in the cultural and creative industries in French-speaking Belgium possess a variety of valuable abilities, including creativity, adaptability, and the capacity for teamwork. In addition, many women express a desire to challenge prevalent gender conventions in the workplace and advance social justice and equality through their job. Overall, Lefèvre and Gillain's (2021) study emphasizes the need for laws and programs that deal with these intersectional and gender-based disparities. This includes measures to eliminate systematic discrimination, boost diversity and representation in the industry, and increase funding and support for women-owned firms. The cultural and creative sector in French-speaking Belgium can become more equal and inclusive for all entrepreneurs by recognising and solving these issues.

### **2.3 Black women in the creative industries**

In the creative industries, black women in particular confront considerable difficulties when starting their own businesses. Black women continue to be underrepresented and marginalised in positions of power and influence despite the fact that they make major contributions to the creative economy. This is demonstrated by the continuing disparities in pay between men and women and people of different races, as well as by the systematic hurdles to entry and career advancement. As a result, black women frequently encounter major economic and societal difficulties that obstruct their ability

to succeed as entrepreneurs. In order to create a more inclusive and fair future for all entrepreneurs, regardless of their upbringing or identity, we must first grasp the intricate intersections of race and gender in the creative economy.

Gray's (2018) article talks about the systemic injustices that cause black and ethnic minority women to be underrepresented in the UK's creative sectors. According to the findings, a complex web of barriers that are brought about by structural inequities in the form of gender, race, and class prevents these women from entering and succeeding in the creative sectors. One of the study's major conclusions is that black and ethnic minority women experience discrimination on the basis of both race and gender, which furthers their exclusion from the business. The women who were interviewed said that the industry did not adequately reflect different cultures and that they had experienced racial and sexist microaggressions. In order to demonstrate diversity, businesses would hire one or two black or ethnic minority women, but they failed to provide an environment where these women could thrive. This practice is known as *tokenism*. The study also made the important discovery that socioeconomic class contributed to the underrepresentation of black and ethnic minority women in the creative sectors. The women interviewed stated that significant obstacles to entering the sector included a lack of financial support and the price of school and training. In addition, women from low-income backgrounds are disproportionately impacted by the culture of unpaid internships and poor pay in the creative sectors. The study also discovered that a cycle of underrepresentation is sustained by black and ethnic minority women's absence from the creative sectors. Women stated that it is difficult for them to become visible and have access to opportunities due to the lack of representation. According to the study, the sector has to address the structural disparities that prohibit black and ethnic minority women from entering the field and succeeding there. Overall, Gray's (2018) research emphasizes the significance of intersectionality in figuring out why black and ethnic minority women are underrepresented in the creative industries. It also highlights the requirement for laws and regulations that deal with the structural injustices that support this underrepresentation.

The obstacles black women experience in the creative sectors are highlighted in Henry's (2020) report, which also casts doubt on the efficacy of diversity measures. The author contends that black women continue to be underrepresented in the UK creative sectors despite the increased emphasis on diversity and inclusion, particularly in leadership roles. 25 black women who work in the creative industries, such as advertising, fashion, cinema, and television, were interviewed for the study. According to Henry, the women who were interviewed said they felt underrepresented in terms of visibility and access to networks and opportunities. Numerous people also mentioned encountering sexism and racism at work. One of the study's main conclusions is that discussions on diversity in the creative industries frequently concentrate on visible changes like hiring quotas and diversity training. Henry contends that these programmes fall short in addressing more pervasive problems of structural inequality and prejudice. She points out that systemic obstacles like unconscious racism, a lack of support and mentorship, and a culture that frequently rejects diversity put a lot of black women at a disadvantage. One of the study's most important findings is that many black women in the creative professions feel pressure to represent their entire race and gender, which can result in feelings of loneliness and pressure to fit into preconceived notions. As a result, there may

be less variety within the black community as a whole since individuals who do not match the mainstream narrative could find it difficult to stand out. In general, Henry's research urges a more complex and multidimensional strategy towards diversity and inclusion. She argues that in addition to giving underrepresented groups more support and mentorship, this should concentrate on solving systemic causes of inequality and discrimination. Additionally, Henry points out that initiatives to promote diversity should not just concentrate on representation and hiring quotas, but also on fostering an inclusive and encouraging culture that values different viewpoints and experiences.

### **2.3.1 Black women in fashion**

The study by Robinson and Russell (2020) focuses on the perspectives of black female business owners in the fashion sector. The study aims to investigate the difficulties they encounter and the possibilities open to them. Participants discussed the unique obstacles they confront as a result of their ethnicity and gender, highlighting how the experiences of black female entrepreneurs differ from those of their white counterparts. The lack of visibility and support that black female fashion entrepreneurs experience in comparison to their white counterparts is one of the study's key findings. It highlights the underrepresentation of black women in leadership roles and the absence of possibilities for them to exhibit their work as examples of how this invisibility is reflected in the lack of diversity in the fashion business. The study also discovered that black female business owners frequently struggle to find funding and investment, with many believing they are not taken seriously or seen as a high-risk investment. As a result, their capacity to develop and grow is constrained because they can be forced to rely on personal funds or family support to launch their firms. Participants in the survey noted how important their personal networks have been in terms of offering mentorship and assistance, which further emphasises the importance of networks in fostering entrepreneurship. However, the scope and reach of these networks may be constrained, which would serve to further isolate and marginalise black female entrepreneurs. The study calls for more inclusive policies and practises in addition to increased awareness of the experiences of black female fashion entrepreneurs as it draws to a close. This involves giving black female entrepreneurs additional opportunity to demonstrate their work, improving representation at the top levels, and closing the financial gap through focused assistance and investment. The study also emphasises the value of developing inclusive networks and partnerships and providing forums for black female entrepreneurs to interact and exchange ideas. Overall, the study highlights the need for increased recognition and support by offering insightful information on the potential and challenges faced by black female fashion entrepreneurs.

Akanbi's (2018) study focused on the experiences, motivations, and difficulties of black women entrepreneurs and creatives in the fashion business. She discovered, through interviews with 20 black women entrepreneurs, that these women encountered substantial obstacles to success, such as a lack of finance and assistance, prejudice, and cultural prejudices. Despite these challenges, the study's female participants were able to use their imagination and tenacity to build lucrative brands and businesses. Many of them were inspired to challenge conventional notions of beauty and offer representation for underrepresented groups. An issue raised by Akanbi is the difficulty for black women business owners in navigating a complicated and frequently discriminating market. Black women business owners may experience prejudice and discrimination from clients, partners, and

investors as well as from people working in the same field as them, according to her. Because of this, it may be challenging for black women to establish themselves and get the support and recognition they require to succeed. Despite these obstacles, she contends that black women business owners in the fashion sector are a valuable and significant part of the industry, contributing their creativity, innovation, and fresh viewpoints. She emphasises the necessity of more funding, networking, and mentorship options for black women entrepreneurs in the sector.

Another study, which was conducted by Jackson and Sanyal (2019), showed us findings that contribute to literature done on black female entrepreneurship. They discovered that because of their intersecting identities as members of the racial and gender minorities, black female business owners confront particular difficulties. Black women have a long history of working for themselves and running modest businesses, yet they still do not fit the modern public idea of an entrepreneur. Additionally, because of their intersectional identities, they must combat unfavourable preconceptions that pervade popular culture and public perception and pose a threat to their clients' perceptions of their professionalism and public image. The majority of individuals surveyed in this study experienced the crushing weight of being stereotyped or unfairly assessed. The manner black female entrepreneurs show themselves, deal with clients, and handle their business procedures are influenced by stereotypes of being unprofessional, intimidating, and possessing poor attitudes.

Research on the inequalities that black female entrepreneurs encounter in the Belgian fashion business is lacking. There is a lack of study on the particular experiences of black women entrepreneurs, despite the increased interest in diversity and inclusion in the fashion business. There are many reasons for this dearth of research that were mentioned in the literature described above. First off, white male designers and business owners have historically controlled the Belgian fashion industry, which might have prevented black women from becoming business owners in the sector. Second, black women entrepreneurs are further marginalised by the combination of race and gender, making it challenging for them to access opportunities and resources. The absence of research on black women's experiences may also be a result of their lack of visibility in the sector. The specific experiences of black women business owners in the Belgian fashion sector must be understood, though. Black women entrepreneurs confront particular difficulties, such as a lack of finance, resources, and networks that are essential to their success in the field. The marginalisation of black women business owners in the sector is partly a result of their lack of visibility, which may cause inequality to persist. In order to comprehend the obstacles black women business owners confront and to come up with solutions, it is critical to research their experiences. In addition, the lack of diversity in the fashion business affects both social justice and the economy. The Belgian fashion industry makes a sizeable contribution to the national economy, and fostering inclusion and diversity can have positive economic effects. Businesses with diverse leadership teams have better financial results, and fostering diversity in the workplace can boost creativity and innovation. Understanding the struggles and successes faced by black women business owners in Belgian fashion will help the sector become more diverse and open up new opportunities.

## 2.4 Research question

As a result of the literature review described in the chapters above, a number of significant discoveries on many facets of the creative industries, gender disparities, and the experiences of underrepresented groups have been made. First of all, the study by Banks and Gallagher (2018) emphasised the difficulties experienced by people who intersect several identities in the creative sectors, highlighting the necessity of diversity policies that take into account these intricate interactions. Additionally, Gill's (2016) research highlighted the limitations of personal empowerment narratives by exposing the conflict between *postfeminism* and the agency of female academics. The underrepresentation of black and ethnic minority women in the UK creative industries was the subject of a study by Gray (2018) that highlighted the interplay of racial, economic, and gender dynamics in the maintenance of disparities. Furthermore, Oakley and O'Connor (2019) highlighted the need of comprehending and addressing inequities in the creative industries, acknowledging the possibility for good change through focused interventions and inclusive practises. The research of the literature also uncovered the gender disparities that still exist in the creative business, as addressed by Searle and Ward (2019) in their investigation of diversity initiatives in the sector. The literature review also examined Belgium's setting, revealing details about gender disparities and the experiences of black female entrepreneurs in the creative sector. The studies by Decroos, De Groote, and Nicaise (2021) and Lefèvre and Gillain (2021) provided important insights into female entrepreneurship and their difficulties in the creative sectors in Belgium. By highlighting the structural obstacles and lack of opportunity black women in the fashion business experience, Robinson and Russell's (2020) study shone light on the unseen problems they confronted. To address the disparities and amplify the voices of black female entrepreneurs in the fashion industry, their research emphasised the urgent need for increased recognition, support, and inclusivity. In her study, Akanbi (2018) examined how black women in the fashion business combine entrepreneurship and creativity, illuminating their distinct contributions and experiences. Lastly, Jackson and Sanyal's (2019) research highlighted the significance of group efforts for success and resilience by focusing on the impact of social networks and community support in empowering black women entrepreneurs in the fashion sector.

It is clear that black female entrepreneurs encounter enormous obstacles in the creative sector that reduce their chances of success. Research on black female fashion entrepreneurs in Belgium and the disparities they experience in their field is lacking. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the opportunities and difficulties faced by black female fashion entrepreneurs in Belgium as well as any injustices they may run into and how they handle them. The study aims to try to expose the racial issues in the Belgian fashion industry and advance knowledge of black female fashion entrepreneurs' experiences in Belgium's fashion industry. The research questions are as follows:

1. What are the opportunities and challenges black female fashion entrepreneurs face in Belgium?
2. What are the inequalities, if any, that black female fashion entrepreneurs face in their creative industry in Belgium and how do they deal with these inequalities?

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

We now look at the research approach taken for this qualitative study as a result of the earlier chapters. The research design is outlined in the first section of this chapter, followed by the clarification of who was interviewed. An explanation of the procedures utilised for data collection is followed by a look at the data analysis procedure. The study's limits, ethics, and issues with reliability and validity are all taken into account.

### **3.2 Research design**

The objective of this study is to investigate the experiences of black female fashion entrepreneurs in Belgium and to learn more about the elements that either help or impede their professional success. For this study, a qualitative research methodology is the best choice since it enables a comprehensive and in-depth examination of the experiences, viewpoints, and significances that are essential to the lives of black female fashion entrepreneurs in Belgium. In order to produce rich and nuanced data that can expose the depth and diversity of human experience, qualitative research focuses on understanding and interpreting the social world from the perspective of the participants (Creswell, 2014). This method is especially well-suited to examining the experiences of underrepresented and marginalised groups, such as black female fashion entrepreneurs, whose viewpoints and voices are frequently silenced in popular discourse. Instead of condensing information, as is sometimes the case in quantitative research, a qualitative methodological approach increases insight and depth regarding the issue being studied (Miller & Brewer, 2003). People's beliefs, emotions, ideas, and attitudes are rarely countable or precisely measurable; instead, they must be verbally expressed.

For this qualitative study design, in-depth interviews were chosen because they enable an examination of the viewpoints and experiences of black female entrepreneurs in the Belgian fashion sector. For qualitative research, in-depth interviews are a suitable technique (Creswell, 2014). It is crucial to establish a strategy that enables participants to thoroughly discuss their experiences. In-depth interviews provide participants the chance to express their experiences in their own words and give me access to rich, in-depth data that can be analysed to learn more about the subject. An interview guide, which can be found in annex 1, was made as it is a useful tool to organise the discussion and guarantee a thorough examination of the study issue. The interview guide is made up of a series of open-ended questions and suggestions that direct the interview's progression while giving participants the freedom to express their experiences in their own words. The interview guide acts as a road map by giving the conversation a structure, but it also leaves room for improvisation and flexibility to follow up on any intriguing or unexpected insights presented by participants. The participants were encouraged to discuss their experiences through the use of open-ended questions, allowing for a more thorough understanding of their experiences. With this approach, I was also able to ask follow-up questions to get more information or clarification on a specific subject.

### 3.3 Sample

The sample population for this study was made up of purposefully chosen individuals. Ten black female business owners who work in the Belgian fashion sector made up the sample. When looking at the research talked about in the literature, we can see that the women who were interviewed in these various studies are diverse in terms of age. Both younger and older female entrepreneurs were used in many of these studies. All of the women who were interviewed work in the fashion industry, as this is the sector researched in this thesis. In order to fully grasp the experiences of black female entrepreneurs, the sample exists of women who own their own company or work on a freelance basis. Based on this, I have chosen a diverse sample based on age as well. Instagram was utilised during the selection process as a means of finding women who fit my criteria. When I went to their page, I first looked if they work in the fashion industry and if they are an entrepreneur. I then looked at what kind of company they own or what kind of freelancing job they do. Instagram also me the possibility to connect with these potential participants. According to published research, using social media platforms like Instagram as a sampling technique is an efficient way to find and get in touch with participants for qualitative investigations (Buffett-Leger & Letourneau, 2015).

The interviewees were approached with a message that first explained who I am followed by a small explanation of the topic of the research as well as the relevance. After giving this brief summary, the interviewee was asked if she had any free time to do an online interview through the video calling software Microsoft Teams. This message can be found in the informed consent in annex 2. When the response was positive, I planned a date and time as to when the interview would take place and sent out the Teams link via mail, which I asked through the direct messaging on the interviewee's Instagram account. Given the busy schedules of the interviewees, they all preferred meeting online as they could arrange their work around it. It was easier for them to do the interview from the comfort of their home or office, which gave them the ability to plan the rest of their workday without losing the time to meet up at a certain location. One should, however, be aware that by conducting these interviews online, I may not be able to translate certain nuances as I am restricted to a video call. As this can be a difficult topic to talk about, I cannot provide with non-verbal information given by the respondents. They did, however, all mention being comfortable enough to talk about this topic via Teams and they will give a deep explanation of their experiences being a black female entrepreneur.

The sample included people who work in the Belgian fashion sector actively, running companies that include everything from designing and manufacturing apparel to styling and event management. Participants in this study were chosen using a purposeful sampling method. In order to increase the relevance and depth of the data, a non-probability sampling approach called *purposeful sampling* involves choosing participants based on certain criteria, including their experiences or qualities (Patton, 2015). In this instance, because it is the emphasis of the study, participants were chosen based on their identify as black female entrepreneurs active in the Belgian fashion industry. Purposive sampling enables targeted and effective participant recruitment and guarantee that the study emphasises the viewpoints and experiences of black female entrepreneurs in the fashion industry in Belgium. By using this sample approach, I am able to choose participants who are knowledgeable and insightful enough to give me accurate and pertinent data.

Name <sup>3</sup>	Age	Occupation
Bianca	33	Owns a company that makes nude clothing
Mary	39	Sells handmade bags with African prints as a secondary occupation
Michelle	47	Owns a company that makes photo and video shoots for web shops
Eve	27	Owns a company that sells clothes with African prints
Nicki	32	Self-employed fashion photographer
Solana	23	Sells clothes with African prints as a secondary occupation <sup>4</sup>
Robyn	39	Self-employed stylist
Ana	32	Owns a company that helps Belgian fashion brands with their public relations department
Nelly	29	Owns a company that manages fashion events
Rosa	26	Freelance model for photo and video shoots <sup>5</sup>

Table 1: Respondent table

### 3.4 Data collection

In-depth interviews have been used by many academics to investigate the perspectives of marginalised groups in many contexts, because they amplify these groups' voices, capture nuanced experiences, contextualise social concerns, empower participants, and challenge prejudice. Academics can advance social justice by using this research methodology to help create a more inclusive and equitable view of society. For instance, Robb and Robinson (2014) employed in-depth interviews in their study on African American women entrepreneurs to learn more about the opportunities and obstacles that this group encountered. Similar to this, Lewis examines the perspectives of people from various racial and ethnic groups that work in the fashion industry, putting a particular emphasis on issues of representation, prejudice, and inclusivity using in-depth interviews. These qualitative studies produce richer conclusions than quantitative studies on this subject. They provide a more complete and nuanced understanding of the phenomena under research through in-depth exploration and interpretation. They also show the value of in-depth interviews for learning more about the experiences of disadvantaged populations. They will allow me to examine the particular difficulties and opportunities that black female entrepreneurs in the Belgian fashion sector confront in the context of this research design.

<sup>3</sup> Pseudonym

<sup>4</sup> Full-time marketing freelancer

<sup>5</sup> Full-time sales advisor for a telecom company



This form of data collection does have limitations though. The sample size may be limited, making it less likely to be representative of all black women who own their own businesses in the Belgian fashion sector. Additionally, using video calls could have brought about technical issues like sluggish internet connections or background noise that could have lowered the calibre of the data gathered.

### **3.5 Data analysis**

In order to fully comprehend the information gathered, the data analysis process started with a verbatim transcription of the recorded interviews. This was followed by a thorough reading and rereading of the data. I started with open coding, which involves identifying the important concepts, categories, and themes that emerged from the data, after becoming familiar with the data. I then used axial coding to group the data into larger subcategories and investigate the connections between them. I finished off with selective coding by grouping the subcategories into larger categories. An example of how I came from a quote to the subsequent phases in the coding process can be found in annex 3. From these codes, I was able to summarize everything into a coding tree, which can be found in annex 4. A conceptual framework for comprehending the experiences of black female entrepreneurs in the Belgian fashion sector was developed through this method, which also assisted in identifying the overarching themes and patterns in the data.

Inductive coding was used to analyze the qualitative data that was gathered through in-depth interviews with black female business owners in the Belgian fashion sector. Inductive coding was chosen as the main method for data analysis, as it allows for the development of codes and themes directly from the data collected rather than being guided by preconceived notions or pre-existing framework. Inductive coding, as described by Boyatzis (1998), entails creating codes and categories directly from the data, enabling the formation of new themes and categories based on patterns and insights that emerge from the data. Given that there has been little prior research on the opportunities and challenges faced by black female entrepreneurs in the Belgian fashion sector, the use of inductive coding was particularly suited for this study. I was able to investigate and discover new themes and patterns by employing inductive coding that might not have been obvious if a more logical approach had been taken. A more in-depth comprehension of the participant experiences was made possible via this coding method which also enabled me to capture the richness and complexity of the data that had been gathered.

After the coding was finished and the data was grouped, the next phase in the data analysis process was to look for connections and produce insights. This required investigating any patterns or themes that appeared in the data as well as the connections between the various codes and categories that had been created. To do this, I used a process known as constant comparison, in which I continuously compared incoming data with the codes and categories that were already in place to find patterns, distinctions, and connections. As I went through this process, I started to gain a better understanding of the opportunities and difficulties faced by black female entrepreneurs in the Belgian fashion industry. By following the structure of the interview guide, I was able to understand the respondents' experiences regarding inequalities they face, racism and discrimination in the industry, gender and racial stereotyping, pressure imposed on them and governmental and industry awareness and actions. I discovered some important motifs that were present in all of the interviews through this

process by listening to the respondents' answers and afterwards analyzing and grouping these answers together. These discoveries included obstacles to receiving funding and resources, problems navigating the fashion industry, and encounters with bias and discrimination.

I then provided a full explanation of the themes and patterns that emerged from the data and the insights that had been produced, summarizing them in the research's findings section. This made it possible to give a thorough and in-depth description of the participants' experiences, as well as the opportunities and difficulties they encountered, which could then be used to guide policy and practice in the fashion industry.

### **3.6 Ethical considerations**

While conducting the research, ethical issues were taken into account. All participants gave their informed consent after being made aware of the study's nature and objectives as well as their right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were employed in the study instead of participants' real identities to protect their privacy and confidentiality. Participants received guarantees that their private information would not be disclosed to outside parties and that it would only be utilized for research. The potential power disparity between me and the participants was taken into account as another ethical factor. I took care to approach participants in an open and non-judgmental manner, allowing them to freely discuss their experiences and viewpoints. Additionally, I refrained from imposing my opinions or in any other way influencing the participants' responses. I made sure that the study would not harm the subjects nor their reputation in any way. In addition, I took care to report the research findings truthfully and impartially, without exaggerating the opinions or experiences of the participants.

I also considered how the study will affect society as a whole in terms of ethics. The purpose of the study was to shed light on the opportunities and difficulties experienced by black female entrepreneurs in the Belgian fashion sector, as well as to suggest possible solutions. The study might help with the creation of laws and other initiatives that support diversity and equality in the fashion business. Because of this, I took care to communicate the findings in a way that would be understandable and helpful to a larger audience, including policymakers, stakeholders, and the general public.

## **4. Findings**

In this following chapter, the information gathered from the in-depth interviews with black female entrepreneurs in the Belgian fashion industry is analyzed, compared, linked together and written down. With the interview guide that was based on the literature review in the above chapters, I draw my analysis on the findings. I will talk about different topics that came from the in-depth interviews, in which I will use quotes to explain the respondents' feelings and emotions. First, the inequalities for female entrepreneurs in the Belgian fashion sector will be analyzed, with subtopics that, for example, will talk about female representation, stereotypes and governmental initiatives. Secondly, the inequalities black female entrepreneurs face in the fashion industry in Belgium will be the main focus, where the subtopics will, for example, talk about the comparison between white and black people in the industry as well as emotions regarding inequalities. Thirdly, I will talk about how the respondents feel about the amount of research done on this topic, how they feel about the accessibility to financial resources and how they feel about the pressure imposed on them by external actors. I will finish off with tips and tricks for black female entrepreneurs that were given by the respondents.

### **4.1 Female entrepreneurship in the Belgian fashion industry**

#### **4.1.1 Feelings regarding being a female entrepreneur**

Being a woman in this day and age can be a struggle, because you have to fight stereotypes and sexism, however, it also comes with proud, as explained by the respondents. All of them stated that they are proud to be a woman in the Belgian fashion industry. They said that they feel proud to be a woman in an industry that is very male-dominated. They are proud to have made it where they are today. However, one respondent said that it can be hard sometimes too. Especially if you encounter situations where you feel uncomfortable or wrongly treated. This is explained by the following quote where she gives an example of a situation where she felt uncomfortable:

*"I was having an interview in a studio that is renowned here in Belgium. I felt a bit insecure and uncomfortable during the interview with the male boss because his questions were very inappropriate as well as his behaviour. He was the boss but not a photographer himself. He was more like a commercial director. He had a paternalistic attitude towards me. In moments like these, you feel that because you are a woman, you will always have the chance to be treated differently. These moments make it hard being a woman in this industry."* (Nicki)

#### **4.1.2 Inequalities of female entrepreneurs**

When asked if they think there are inequalities between women and men, some respondents answered that they have never felt as if they experienced inequalities because they are a women. They stated that they have not had any situation where they felt they had one step behind a man in the industry. They do think that in today's environment, the inequalities can be more indirect or more under the table. It is less outspoken than in the past. They do not feel that there are explicit inequalities but that these are more found in implicit situations, such as having to prove yourself twice as hard as a woman and men not taking them seriously. It is not the case that they have

explicitly heard that they are denied something because they are a woman. This is illustrated by an example of Ana, one of the respondents who has not experienced gender inequalities:

*"I have never experienced a situation where someone denied me something and explicitly said it's because I'm a woman. It's more unspoken things and actions made by people. It's more under the table and subtle than really outspoken inequalities. For example, I once pitched my firm to a fashion brand that's very big in France. I was very qualified to help them and consult them because of my prior experience in public relations and the fact that I speak French fluently. However, they didn't give the job to me. After some weeks, I heard from a friend's friend who works at the company that they hired a man to do the job. A man who didn't speak French at all and only had worked with 3 clients before. Didn't they choose me because I'm a woman? I don't know. I couldn't say, honestly. But the deciding committee were all male and they chose another man to work for them. A man who was very, very unqualified for the job compared to me. That speaks for itself." (Ana)*

She gives an example of how she felt when she was being denied a job for being a woman but in a more subtle way. She was not told explicitly that she did not get the job because of her gender but made the assumption because of what was shown to her by the actions of the company.

They did, however, say that because they did not experience these inequalities themselves, that they are then able to say that there are no gender inequalities at all. They are certain that there are ways women are denied certain things because of gender. One main factor on which they are discriminated against is the accessibility to funding. This was confirmed by all of the respondents.

A group of respondents think that women still face a lot of inequalities in the Belgian fashion industry. They stated that they often feel like they are denied certain jobs or positions because of their gender. They also discussed how they feel the pressure to constantly proving yourself without making any mistakes. Everything a woman does is looked at with a magnifying glass. If they mess up, men in the industry will catch this and hold it above the heads of the women. They also discussed that, as a woman, they felt as if the men in their industry do not see them as equal. They said that everything they say is taken with a grain of salt and a lot of times, the men do not believe them or want to double check their information, sources and portfolios. The following quote explains this as Robyn talks about how she feels like she has to prove herself twice as hard as a man:

*"There are definitely inequalities in our fashion industry. People seem to take ideas or opinions from men much easier than those of women. I do think they have it easier than us women. A lot of higher positions in the fashion industry are taken by men. It's sad, because there are a lot of women with innovative and creative ideas that could change the fashion industry, but if the management doesn't see it and doesn't want to proceed with it, you have to already have a lot of resources to support your own initiatives. Resources that a lot of these women don't have or don't have access to. So, yes, men have it easier." (Robyn)*

One respondent also talked about the fact that in situations between men they treat each other professionally, which is illustrated with Rosa's quote below.:

*"If you're a woman, you get the feeling that there is a tension. With men, it's always very professional and they always go very fast and everything is good. But with women, they always try something. Whether it is by making a comment or touching you in a weird way. They always try something. Probably because they've had women who didn't say no, so they try it with other women as well."* (Rosa)

In situations between men and women, the women are not treated with the same professionalism as men. Some men will always try to go too far and be inappropriate.

#### **4.1.2.1 Emotions regarding these inequalities**

When asked the respondents who felt that there are still a lot of inequalities in the Belgian sector how they felt about these inequalities, all of them stated that they are very sad about it. They said that it is disappointing that after all these years, women are still not treated equally as men. This also comes with a lot of frustration. They still undergo the stress that comes with being a woman. Not only in the industry but in general life, as they stated. They think it is unfair that a man can progress in his professional career much faster than a woman. The following quote talks about the frustration mentioned above. Robyn talks about how she thinks it is unfair that women are not treated equally:

*"It's frustrating because it's unfair. Why are we treated differently? I don't know, but it happens. You work very hard at building a good career for yourself. If you then compare where you are after 10 years, you see that a man with kind of the same career path has achieved it in 5 years. And not because he is better at his job, just because he got things that I didn't get or I didn't have access to. There are some very loud voices in the fashion industry, but in the end, they are silenced by the voices that are placed higher in position, which are male voices."* (Robyn)

Ana also talks about her frustration about these inequalities. She speaks on how that even though women should keep fighting, she feels as if she is very tired from all this fighting:

*"I feel frustrated and disappointed but it has been hard for us women from since I can remember so it's not like we are not used to it. Should it be that way? No, not at all. But after some time fighting very hard and making yourself upset because of these problems, you kind of stop caring. Which is sad, of course. We shouldn't stop to fight, but I just got very tired."* (Ana)

#### **4.1.3 Female representation**

When it comes to female representation in the industry, all of the respondents agree that women are still underrepresented in the industry, especially in top management positions. They said that if you are a woman, you have this glass ceiling that stops you from reaching certain positions. They felt as if women in chief executive positions are very scarce. It is, however, better than a couple of years ago, but there are still a lot of improvements that need to be made. Women have the feeling that they have a hard time empathizing with higher positioned men, because there is a distance between them. They stated that if, for example, a CEO is female, they are more willing to discuss their ideas with her than if the CEO were male. They think that they are understood better by a

fellow woman than by a man who has low affinity with the female gender. This goes beyond the fashion industry as well. In most of the sectors, there is a underrepresentation of women in top management. Mary, for example, talks about how, in the company she has a full-time job at besides selling her own bags, the higher you climb, the less women there are:

*"I have been working in a large company for years. The higher up the ladder, the fewer women there are. These are things that I've often been told at work that you can put diversity on the line or make it appear but in reality it's not always like that. Women sometimes do go to management level but I still don't think often. If you look at who can climb the corporate ladder over the years? That's very few women and definitely very few from migrant backgrounds."* (Mary)

She tells how she feels like companies put being diverse on their agenda but do not execute this well.

Michelle also talks about how she feels as if there are too few female entrepreneurs in comparison to male ones in the following quote:

*"There are still fewer female entrepreneurs than male entrepreneurs. You have fewer female CEOs. That has to do with role models because she feels she has other duties or can't combine them with a family life. Men think less about that. In Belgium, we are still in a traditional role pattern."* (Michelle)

In the fashion sector, almost all of the respondents agreed that there is a underrepresentation of female entrepreneurs. They confirmed that there are still less female entrepreneurs than male entrepreneurs in all of the levels in the industry. They stated that they have had few chances where they worked together or encountered another female entrepreneur, which they think is sad. They think that women have a lot of creative ideas and think it is unfortunate that these voices are heard and represented less. One of these respondents gave the example of how women are represented in the Rwandese government:

*"Rwanda is a country where 60% of the parliament is female. That's setting an example. Set an example and then people will follow it. It will stand out. Now this is a man's world. That's why I love working with Rwanda. In their parliament, they have many women. You see that country is run differently there. Their feminine vibe is in there. This is important."* (Mary)

She used this example to explain how in Belgium, we should follow this example and try to represent women more equally.

#### **4.1.4 Governmental awareness and initiatives about female entrepreneurship**

All of the respondents said that they do not think that the government is aware of the problems that female entrepreneurs face in the Belgian fashion industry. According to the respondents, the government should first become aware of the problem before thinking about solving the problem. If they do not even know the problem exists or they treat it as if it is less important than, for example, unemployment, they will have a hard time trying to fix what is broken. However, one respondent discussed whether or not it is the government's responsibility to do something about it. She felt as

if we are too reliant on the government when it comes to this topic. She gave the example of how the government already has a lot of initiatives for student entrepreneurs, for example:

*"They don't deal with it enough but somewhere I don't think that's their responsibility. I feel like you shouldn't always be able to rely on the government to have to change things. I don't think the government can do much about the fact that there are fewer women entrepreneurs than men. The government has many agencies that help. I know many people who have many talents but don't dare. How can you blame the government then. As an entrepreneur, you have to dare to take the step yourself. That is inherent in entrepreneurship." (Solana)*

She feels like the Belgian government is already looking at the direction of entrepreneurship by offering programs and support systems. She went on by discussing how an entrepreneur should take initiative themselves. According to her, this is an essential personality trait of an entrepreneur.

When asked about the initiatives taken by the Belgian government to promote gender inequalities in the fashion, all the respondents said that they felt like the government does not take a lot of initiative to promote this. Or at least, they do not see it. Even if the government were to set up campaigns or initiatives about this topic, it does not catch their attention. Which, in their opinion, says enough about how the government deals with this. If they were to tackle this topic by, for example, setting up street or television campaigns, they should promote it even more. They stated that if even the woman in the industry they want to promote do not even notice the campaigns, how are people, and especially men, meant to be educated.

I asked the respondents if they could come up with examples of initiatives the government can take to promote gender equality in the Belgian fashion industry. They said that it all starts with education by, for example, making attention-grabbing campaigns. People inside and outside of the industry should be educated on how women have to fight harder than men to get certain things or to receive more recognition and acknowledgement. Another example they gave was that after education, the government should also set up organs that oversee whether companies are respecting gender equality. These organs should check if companies are trying their hardest to put women on the same level as men. In these companies, the organ can also give seminars or workshops on how a male employee can deal with these issues and make it easier for his female colleague. Setting quotas is a difficult discussion as some respondents think that this will make companies have the feeling that they are pressured to fight for gender equality, rather than really wanting it themselves. However, other respondents said that we should start somewhere and that quotas can put women in positions and give them recognition that they otherwise would not have gotten.

#### **4.1.5 Fashion industry's awareness and initiatives about female entrepreneurship**

In regards to the government, I also asked whether or not the industry is doing its best handling this topic. In general, the respondents' answers are similar to those of the government. They feel as if the industry is not aware of the problems and even tend to ignore it. According to them, the industry has a hard time coming up with and actually executing initiatives to tackle the problems. Three of the ten respondents all talked about how the industry's main focus is to generate revenues and selling clothing rather than fighting for gender equality. They felt as if the industry does not

really care of this problem and cares more about profiling itself as a profitable industry. They stated that the Belgian fashion industry tries to position itself as fashion-forward and innovative. There is nothing wrong with that but the industry forgets about the problems that comes by making Belgian fashion so competitive and profitable. Nicki, for example, talks about how she thinks that the industry is more concerned selling a pair of jeans than solving gender related issues:

*"They handle it very badly. I feel like the industry is thinking that it is a matter of selling a bag or not selling a bag or selling a pair of jeans or not selling a pair of jeans. The commercial side is the most important side. They should understand the real problems. It's not about selling, it's about being inclusive, because people are actually suffering from it. They should reinvent everything. For example, praising Karl Lagerfeld at the MET Gala. Stop glorifying people who are not supposed to be glorified. Start to acknowledge the people who are the real workers. They should really change the point of view." (Nicki)*

Nicki talks about how the industry is blind to its real problems and instead want to glorify designers such as Karl Lagerfeld, who has been criticized for his inappropriate comments.

Some respondent discussed whether or not it is the industry's responsible to tackle these problems:

*"Is it the industry's responsibility? I don't think so. I don't see how they could change these problems besides talking about them and informing people but I think they are doing that. I don't think their reach grabs further than that. I could be wrong, though." (Nelly)*

They argued that the industry is doing its best educating people. If then people do not want to listen, it is not the industry's responsibility to force them to listen.

#### **4.1.6 Female stereotypes**

Most of the respondents felt that there are stereotypes made about women in the fashion industry. People make the assumption that women in fashion do not know how to play hard and are often perceived as too weak to work in fashion because they are a woman. They are overlooked as a true worker in the industry because it is a male-dominated industry that is very hard and competitive. Women do not have the right mindset to fight dirty.

Another stereotype that is made about women who work in fashion is that they went into fashion because they like shopping and love wearing stylish clothes. The respondents said that a lot of times, they had the feeling that men think that because a woman loves to buy new shoes or a new handbag every so often, she thought to herself that it would be fun and playful to go into this industry. They did not think this decision through and regret it afterwards because they realized that it is a very hard and competitive world. This stereotype also comes with another stereotype that a woman is not able to handle the business side of her own company. She is not smart enough to, for example, tackle accounting problems. All the respondents also mentioned that these stereotypes are all made by men. They said that they think men think very little of their female colleagues. The men always underestimate them and belittle them by explaining concepts to them or make certain things easier because they do not think women can handle complex situations.



Some respondents also talked about the problem of *slutshaming* women who show too much skin or act a little too promiscuous. They said that men always have a lot to say about a woman when it comes to how she behaves herself around other men or how she dresses. They feel like there is a lot of stereotyping about women who decide to dress confidently, which Rosa, for example, explains in the following quote:

*"Slutshaming is something that's very prominent in our society today. You always have to watch what you say or do because if you're too much of this, you're a slut and if you're too much of that, you're prude." (Rosa)*

## **4.2 Black female entrepreneurships in the Belgian fashion industry**

### **4.2.1 Racism and discrimination of black female entrepreneurs**

A lot of the respondents said that they do not think there is a lot of racism or discrimination of black female entrepreneurs in the Belgian fashion industry. They feel as if the industry is accepting towards black female entrepreneurs and do not treat them in a racist or discriminatory way. They did, however, state that they think this because they have not experienced racism in the industry. Some of these respondents pointed out that because they are privileged enough to not have had situations where they felt insulted about their race, that this means that there is absolutely no racism in the industry. They said that racism is everywhere and every day, so in fashion as well. They just have been fortunate enough to be spared of such situations. However, some of them did say that they experience microaggressions, like Ana. In the following she talks about these microaggressions:

*"I think it's more like microaggressions. I have to be honest, I have never had a situation where somebody treated by in a racist way, for which I am very thankful because I have heard stories that are very different to mine. But of course, under the table, there is racism and discrimination. For sure. If you experience discrimination as a black woman in your everyday life, you definitely experience it in your job as well." (Ana)*

They felt that little comments and actions came from the fact that they are black but these situations did not gave them the feeling that the people saying these comments were in fact racist. It is more like an ignorance.

There were a limited amount of respondents who had racist encounters with white people in the industry, though. This is illustrated by the following examples they gave when they felt discriminated against because they are black:

*"I once had a booking and the agency would pick me up, bring me to the shoot and bring me back home. I knew I could trust them because I worked with the agency before. It was in the winter, so it was dark and the driver was talking to me and said the wrong name. I said "What?" and he put his flashlight on me and said "You're not her". They picked the wrong girl. It was not someone who even looked like me, she was white. Then the driver said that he didn't know they would want that and they I'm not white so that would be a problem. He then called the one responsible for the shoot and he told me that I couldn't come because I'm black. That showed me again that nothing has changed." (Rosa)*

*"I have a Belgian surname so sometimes, if I would apply for something, they think that I am white until I get there. They didn't expect it. They would not say it out loud but you could see the surprise on their faces when I walked in as a black girl, when they expected and maybe even hoped to see a white girl. I also once went to a market where I sold some products. There was a white girl standing next to me who sold almost the same product. Then, someone came and asked if these products were hers. I said: "No, these are my products. But feel free to buy something." I said that because we practically had the same products but she then walked away and ask the white girl for her prices and didn't even take the time to look at my products. She wasn't willing to invest in my products because I am African. She said that out loud as well. I respect her opinion but it was hurtful because you buy clothes for their shape and colour, not for who made it. But she did not want to invest in black people but in her own people." (Eve)*

#### **4.2.2 Comparison between white and black people**

When I asked the black female entrepreneurs to compare white people to black people and how this translates in the fashion industry, all of the respondents concluded that in the end, as a black woman, you always have to fight harder than your white counterparts. Whether it is at your job or in your daily life. They said that you always have this extra struggle because you were born with a skin color that is a couple of tints darker than theirs. They all confirmed that in the fashion industry in Belgium, you are one step behind on the white people in terms of opportunities, recognition and pressure. They all felt like they were denied opportunities because of their skin color as well as having to fight very hard to get the same acknowledgement your white colleague will get with almost the same work. This is illustrated by the following two quotes by Ana and Nelly who talk about how a black woman has it difficult in this day and age:

*"As a black woman, you always are one step behind any white person in any situation. The same goes for the fashion industry. They don't treat you as equal by, for example, asking you tough questions or offering you less money." (Ana)*

*"I think that as a black woman it is always a fight between you and the world. You will always have the disadvantage of being a woman and a black woman in a world where we still don't have equal rights in so many countries. The world is very conservative. But, then, I think it's our job to break these difficulties by being unauthentically ourselves and grinding and exceling in our job and just in daily life in general." (Nelly)*

They both felt like they were denied opportunities because of their skin color as well as having to fight very hard to get the same acknowledgement your white colleague will get with almost the same work.

#### **4.2.3 Inequalities of black female entrepreneurs**

In terms of inequalities black female entrepreneurs face in the Belgian fashion industry, all of the respondents stated that they did feel as if there were inequalities that black women face in fashion. This goes hand in hand with the answers they gave to the question about the comparison between white and black people. One of the inequalities they gave that all of them think is the most important

is the accessibility to financial resources, such as fundings and investments. As a woman, it is hard to convince investors as these are mostly men, let alone if you are a black woman. They felt like it nearly becomes impossible to find someone who is actually willing to invest in you because of who you are and because of which idea you came up with.

Another important finding regarding this topic, is that some respondents talked about the fact that there is a huge difference in inequalities between light-skinned and dark-skinned women. They said that light-skinned women get a lot more free passes than dark-skinned women. They get opportunities dark-skinned women will not ever get. A couple of respondents said that because you are a couple of shades lighter than a fully black person, people seem to accept you more because you look more white than black. However, they did say that even though it is easier for a light-skinned woman than for a dark-skinned woman, it is not easier for a light-skinned woman than for a white woman. Mary, for example, talks in the following quote about the difference between light and dark-skinned women and how they are treated in a different way:

*"People with half a tan have more advantages. This is true. That shade lighter does a lot. They open doors than someone who is completely black. I think that because of my lighter shade, white people are more comfortable or eager to buy my products than they would be if they were to have to buy the product from a completely black person."* (Mary)

She said that because you are a couple of shades lighter than a fully black person, people seem to accept you more because you look more white than black.

#### **4.2.3.1 Emotions regarding these inequalities**

Because of the inequalities black female entrepreneurs face in the Belgian fashion industry, they feel sad and disappointed. They do not understand how this is still possible in this day and age. They have a hard time grasping the idea of giving people less opportunities because they are a black woman. Add the fact that most of the times, they are the only black woman in the room and they feel even sadder thinking about it. Bianca and Nelly talked about their feelings regarding these inequalities in the following quotes:

*"Super, super bad. You actually feel badly treated for something you can't do anything about. You enter a room and immediately you feel a negative energy and you haven't done anything. You are treated differently. That gives you insecurity. You then continuously start wondering about everything. Everything you do you start questioning. That is continuously extra pressure. That's very tiring."* (Bianca)

*"I feel sad that we still don't have equal rights in a lot of countries, but I've learned from my black peers that you don't have to beat yourself up too hard. It's sad that we've come at a time where we are tired of constantly fighting but at a certain point of time, the energy is low. That's when we need the new generation to fight with and for us. One day, the new generation will be able to give that burden to the newer generation and they will be able to rest. But I don't think the new generation will rest quickly. Not as quick as us, though."* (Nelly)

They both said that they feel sad about these inequalities. Add the fact that most of the times, they are the only black woman in the room and they feel even sadder thinking about it.

#### **4.2.4 Black female representation**

All of the respondents think that the black female entrepreneur is underrepresented in the Belgian fashion industry. They always feel the pressure of being the only black woman in the room. They also know that if they enter a room, they will always be the only person of color. This gives them anxiety because they have the feeling as if they represent the whole community and are treated as if they are the voice of the entire community, which they do not want to be in most of the cases. They explained that they thought that if female entrepreneurs in general are underrepresented in the fashion industry, we do not have to expect black female entrepreneurs to suddenly be equally represented. It goes hand in hand with each other. If women are not represented, a part of those women, black women, are definitely not represented. All of the respondents have stated that they want to meet each other and that they want to encourage each other to show themselves and to work hard so that they get the recognition they deserve. In the quotes below, Ana and Michelle both explain that they are always the only black person in the room and that they have not met a lot of other black female entrepreneurs:

*"Black women are highly, highly, highly, and I repeat, highly underrepresented in the fashion industry in our country. I am not joking if I tell you I have only met five black women working in the industry. Only two of them are entrepreneurs. The other three work at companies as an employee. So, in terms of entrepreneurship, very underrepresented. I know there are black women in the industry, but I just don't see them. Is it because they prefer to lay low? Or is it because the industry is lowering their voices? I don't know but I wouldn't be surprised if it were the second option." (Ana)*

*"I'm in a sector where I'm always the only black woman. I'm always the only one who is of a different color. People were surprised by me though so I think people looked up to me anyway. I was in the world of advertising, fashion and interior design where they were more open. If I had worked in finance, they might have been a little less accessible. I was already in a pretty renewed, rock and roll sector." (Michelle)*

#### **4.2.5 Governmental awareness and initiatives about black female entrepreneurship**

When it comes to the government and how they deal with racism and discrimination in the fashion industry, the respondents gave somewhat the same answers as with how the government deals with gender inequality issues. They all feel like the government does not pay much attention to these problems and that they have *bigger problems* to solve. They all felt as they are neglected by the decisionmakers and that they are overlooked, which is weird to them because they hoped that after #BlackLivesMatter, things would change for good, but it did not. It sparked up a little conversation in the government but not enough to keep the fire going. This is illustrated by the following quote of Eve:

*"I don't think they are even aware of it. I don't think that it's something they focus on. It's one of the least of their problem at this moment. They should educate people more. People*

*need to be more awake and open-minded to different colours and ideas. If you educate the people, they might be able to understand better. If you, for example, come from a town where you never encountered diversity or you haven't noticed it, it is really easy to have a closed mindset. If you educate these people and make them more aware, you can open their vision."* (Eve)

If people become more open-minded and come in contact with more people with different backgrounds, they might be more accepting towards these people. But if you keep these people uneducated, their attitudes will not change.

Some of the respondents also stated that Belgium is still a very conservative country where racism and discrimination is deeply rooted into the daily life of many people. According to them, there are still a lot of things that some Belgian people are not ready for or willing to open up to, such as the discussion around *Zwarte Piet*. These things show them that Belgium is way too conservative to be thinking of how to eliminate racism and discrimination not only in the fashion industry but also in other industries.

#### **4.2.6 Fashion industry's awareness and initiatives about black female entrepreneurship**

In terms of actions done by the Belgian fashion industry to eliminate racism and discrimination, the respondents all thought that, as the same as the government, the industry is very bad at dealing with solving these problems. They again said that the industry is very focused on making profits and selling as much clothes as possible, rather than finding a solution to these problems that black women face. They felt that the industry is trying to silence a lot of black women's voices in order to make it seem as if everything is perfect. If nobody dares to speak up about it, in their eyes, there is no problem. Or they do not have to deal with this problem and come up with solutions.

According to the respondents, big actors in the Belgian fashion industry are trying to come out as if they are inclusive and as if they resent racist and discriminatory behavior, but in reality, if you, for example, look at the representation in these companies, there is little to none. They said that a lot of companies try to profile themselves with an image that they are inclusive but then do not include other races in modelling campaigns or catwalks. They then went on to explain that it is the industry's responsibility to punish these companies.

Several respondent said that through inclusive campaigns, the industry can eliminate the white ideal that was set a couple of years ago. They should eliminate the thought of black being ugly or inferior. They also mentioned that they think that there are no companies she could think of who are in fact being inclusive in their actions, which she thought was sad.

*"I just want them to make that ideal image of beauty that it doesn't always have to be the white person. Now that it is made so that white is the ideal image and super beautiful. Black is not beautiful. And that has to be abandoned. By making different campaigns and by showing those people more. In the Belgian fashion sector, I wouldn't be able to say that any brand is really doing its best in that area. That makes me very sad because I think a lot of companies profile themselves that way but don't succeed at the execution of it. They should*

*just really take real action. Not just putting in your policy that you are a company with these values but then when you go into their company, everyone looks the same.” (Bianca)*

They mentioned that they think that a lot of companies are not being inclusive enough by only using white standards and that there are no companies they could think of who are in fact being inclusive in their actions, which they thought was sad.

#### **4.2.7 Black female stereotypes**

When asked about stereotypes that are made about black women in fashion, all of them said that they have experienced times where they were stereotyped. One of the main stereotypes that was mentioned is that black people are loud. Other people see them as very loud and aggressive people which can make them feel scared or annoyed. Mary and Robyn, for example, give a look into their thoughts on the stereotype of black women being loud in the following quote:

*“Yes, they always say that we are loud. A black woman is seen as loud and aggressive. We make a lot of noise according to them. I think that's what is most often said. We stand out according to them. Unfortunately, these are the most stereotypical things black women are compared to.” (Mary)*

*“They always say that black women are too loud. Which is funny, because I think that it's mostly because they have silenced us for decades. That's why we have to be loud. We have to use more decibels than a white person in order to be listened to or even be heard. For years, they silenced us. Now it's our turn to be loud.” (Robyn)*

Another stereotype that is mentioned by some of the respondents is that black women dress too ghetto and have a bad fashion sense. People think that, for example, wearing braids the way black women wear them is dirty and unprofessional. The following quotes by Bianca and Robyn give more explanation to these two stereotypes:

*“In terms of fashion, they think that it's not fashionable or that they have bad fashion sense or that it's not elegant. Which is very unfortunate. Also very sad because black fashion is always criticized but afterwards those ideas are picked up and afterwards they pretend it's cool.” (Bianca)*

*“There are definitely stereotypes made about black women in the fashion industry. They think we dress too ghetto. They think that our natural hair is dirty and if we shake it, bugs and insects will come flying out of it. They think that we use the same products as the white people.” (Robyn)*

The respondents did not understand why this is said because they wear their braids as an image of their culture and heritage and they wear it with proud. Afterwards, if people pick up on trends worn by black women, big designers steal these ideas and treat as if those are their own. This *cultural appropriation* is something that pisses off many respondents. They think that there should be some kind of control on this. Black women have been the victim of cultural appropriation for years. Companies always steal their ideas and come out saying that they came up with it. But when times get rough, they distance themselves from black women and do not give back to them what they owe

them. Some respondents said that they are okay with companies taking ideas or intellectual property from black women but that these companies should at least mention where they got it from and acknowledge those who made it. Afterwards, they should give back to this community by, for example, setting up initiatives to give them food or help them with education.

#### **4.3 Research done on black female entrepreneurship in the Belgian fashion industry**

All of the respondents stated that they thought there was not enough research done on black entrepreneurship in the Belgian fashion industry. They felt as if there was a big gap in research when it comes to seeing how black female entrepreneurs handle everyday problems and inequalities. Not one of the respondents has ever read or heard about such a research done in Belgium. Which they all think is very sad because a lot can be learned from doing research on this topic. The government and industry, for example, can pick up on some things concluded in these research papers on how they need to tackle these problems. Some respondents also said that this is a good way of educating people on this topic.

When asked why they believe not a lot of research is done on this topic, they all said that the black woman is often not at the center of attention or curiosity. Researchers are less interested in the struggles that black women face in different aspects of their personal and professional life. Certain respondents even mentioned Belgium being too conservative to be hung up on doing research on black women, as explained in this quote:

*"I don't think there has been much research on this topic. Especially not in Belgium. I think that Belgium is still too conservative for it. Hell, people complain if they can't say the n-word anymore. They always complain about what they can or cannot speak about. Imagine the scare white people would get if there would be too much research on black women. They would get heart attacks, I think. They wouldn't know how to act with it. It's funny, because they would be the first ones to say: "What about white people in the fashion industry?" As if white people don't have any privileges at all." (Robyn)*

The fact that Belgium is still a conservative country contributes to the dearth of research done on black women. When looking at racial issues, such as the *n-word*, we can see that Belgium lacks compassion towards black women.

#### **4.4 Accessibility to financial resources for black female entrepreneurs**

A topic that was very important to be discussed according all of the respondents is the accessibility to financial resources for black female entrepreneurs in the Belgian fashion industry. These resources include, for example, funding and finding the right investors. All of them talked about how hard it is as a black woman to find investments to start or expand your company. The problem they face, according to them, is first of all that women profiles in the investing world are scarce. Almost all the time, the people giving out fundings for entrepreneurs are male, which makes it hard for a female to find investors, as men may not be able to empathize with these women or they think too little of these women. They think that these women are not able to start a business and keep it profitable.

Michelle, for example, never had the chance to sit down with a woman who had a seat at the table where they decide who gets funding or not, as explained in the following quote:

*"We have never sat down with female investors. We've only chatted with men. You face a man who looks down at you and thinks very little of you and there is not a single woman to be found in the room. The investor are always men." (Michelle)*

These male investors always have a prejudice that a woman does not have the right capacities to manage an enterprise. The fact that a lot of these investors and employees at banks are male, makes it very hard for the black female entrepreneurs to persuade them to invest in their ideas.

Another problem that black entrepreneurs in fashion face according to the respondents is that the fashion industry is seen as silly or not worthy of investing. They say that men see fashion as a dangerous industry to invest in, because of its everchanging trends and competitive environment. The stereotype that women go into fashion because they like to shop also plays a big role here. Men do not see women at the same level, especially not black women who work in fashion and who are looking for funding. These barriers make it hard for a black woman to find access to the right financial resources. Ana talked about how the fashion industry is a very profitable one that is still looked at with anxiety when it comes to funding it:

*"Don't get me started about finding investments and loans as a woman. Especially an industry like fashion that many men don't think is profitable or worth investing in. Which is weird, because the industry make a hell of a lot of money, trust me. When I went looking for investment, I was always put in front of a man trying to pitch an idea he already deemed unworthy inside his head. If I were to have pitched to a woman, I would've been a lot more comfortable. But I just never encountered one. The investing and bank industry is just very, very male-dominated." (Ana)*

According to the respondents, they are faced with the barrier of being a woman and having to talk to a lot of men before getting funding but also with the barrier of being black and having white men underestimate them because of their skin color.

#### **4.5 Pressure experienced by black female entrepreneurs**

When asked about whether or not they feel pressured by external actors, a large group of the respondents said that they did feel that way. They said that society is the main thing they feel that puts pressure on them. They felt like they should always have to do things keeping in mind that it should contribute to society. They thought that this was ironic because society is rarely contributing to their community so why would they have to do so themselves. In the quote below, Eve explains how she feels pressured as a black woman:

*"I feel pressured because I don't want to fail. I know people are looking at me with pressure because I am here to take advantage from the Belgian system and because I come from Ghana, I am here to exploit my own happiness and Belgium's resources. I feel pressured because I moved here and started my own business and that people expect me to excel as a black woman." (Eve)*



The main thing that they feel pressured to do or to be is that they are afraid to fail. As a black woman, they said that people always look at you with a magnifying glass ready to take you down if you fail and take your place in a wrongful way.

Another pressure that imposed on them is that they always have to prove themselves. The respondents stated that they felt as if they always have to have an answer to anything they do or say. They always have to motivate why they did certain things and that it was very often that they are not believed. They felt like they are underestimated heavily and therefore, feel the pressure to prove themselves, as they want to show these people that they are in fact worthy, which is shown by the following quote from Bianca:

*"You always have that pressure that is not easy anyway to deal with. It's that pressure of when you come somewhere in a room that you always feel that pressure that you have to go and prove yourself. If you emigrated from another country, you end up here, you have to work here, and a lot of times, money is sent to family abroad, then you have to start saving for a startup. That's all very slow so you don't always have the financial resources to then do it big in 1 go." (Bianca)*

Ana also talked about how she felt like she has the pressure to always excel in everything she does because she, as a black woman, is expected to do a bad job:

*"I also feel pressure from men that they expect me to do bad and then be surprised if I do well and prove them wrong. But that's in everything I do. I feel like men a lot of times think very little of black women when it comes to business. They are also not very interested in our jobs if it's not finance or banking or being a director of some organisation. A man isn't really interested in my job as a freelance public relations manager for fashion brands." (Ana)*

#### **4.6 Tips and tricks for black female entrepreneurs**

When asked if the respondents have any tips and tricks for current or future black entrepreneurs in fashion and in general, they all gave their advice on how to be proud as a black entrepreneur. Some of them said that you have to be confident in your own ideas and that you have to speak up if you think you are right or if you think you are being treated wrongly. They said that if you are really behind your own idea and company, nothing and no one can break you, even though, sometimes, it feels like the everything and everyone around you is trying to bring you down. As a black woman, you have to be aware that you will have to fight harder to get the same things as your white counterparts, but that should not let you stop you from chasing your dreams and saying what is on your mind and standing up for yourself.

Other respondents said that you should come out and play. They want to meet other black entrepreneurs and they hope that there is no black woman afraid anymore to be a thriving business woman. You should not be afraid to show who you are as a black woman but also as an entrepreneur. You should do your research and innovate yourself and those around you. That way, you will find success and go on to inspire others like you were inspired by the ones that came before you.

A portion of the respondents also said that it is not your job to ever feel like you have to be the voice of the black female community. No one can ever push you into that position and no one can ever make you feel as if you are a token that is used by someone to show they are inclusive. If you are tired of fighting, then stop fighting for a bit. It is not your duty to always have to make things right. Let other people take that position for you if you feel like you have fought enough. She said that there is still a long road ahead of fighting but that she looks forward to do it with other black female entrepreneurs active in the Belgian fashion sector and other sectors as well. Robyn finishes with a good piece of advice:

*"Just keep going. Don't care about what anybody thinks about you or your ideas. In the words of the wise RuPaul, if they do not pay your bills, pay them bitches no mind. At the end of the day, you still have you and you don't need anyone else to believe in yourself besides yourself. Once you realise that, you will live a peaceful and successful life. Trust me. I've been living in peace for 10 years now. I stopped caring and started living. I can only recommend it!" (Robyn)*

#### **4.7 Summary of the findings**

After thoroughly analyzing the in-depth interviews and writing down the findings in the chapter above, I have found that black female entrepreneurs in the Belgian fashion industry experience inequalities based on their race but not necessarily on their gender. They have the feeling that being a woman does not bring as much struggles as being a black woman. They experience situations where they feel as if they are treated differently but in a more subtle way. Today, discrimination against gender and race are still present but this is becoming more and more implicit and people are more subtle about it than in the past. Racism is more in the form of microaggressions. They will not explicitly tell a black woman that she is being denied something because of her gender and/or race. From the findings, I have found that there are few black female entrepreneurs who have experienced racism in the Belgian fashion industry. Also, when comparing a black female entrepreneur to her white male and female counterparts, I saw that a black woman will always have to fight harder in order to get the same thing as her white colleagues. Black women have difficulty in getting recognition and acknowledgement for their work and often face the problem of having immense amounts of pressure to prove themselves and to never fail in anything they do, as they are always looked at with a magnifying glass.

A second finding I draws is that female entrepreneurs are highly underrepresented in the Belgian fashion industry, especially black female entrepreneurs. When looking at the industry, there are few black women to be found who have their own company. Also, in top management positions, these women are not to be found. White men have dominated the industry and when looking at higher positions in fashion, most of them are white older men who lack an open view and acceptance towards people from different backgrounds. This makes it hard for a black woman to climb the corporate ladder and stand next to white men in different positions. The underrepresentation of black women is also found when looking at the noninclusive fashion campaigns. On the catwalk, on billboards, in magazines, etc. black women are often not found.

The third finding is that black women have it very hard when it comes to the accessibility of financial resources, such as fundings and findings investors. Following the second finding, women are also

underrepresented in financial positions. If you, as a black woman, have to talk to possible investors or bank employees to get funding for your project(s), you are always faced with the problem that these people are white men. Black female entrepreneurs find it difficult to persuade these white men to invest in their ideas as these men are unable to empathize with these women as they have a low affinity with them. Black women are faced with the difficulty of receiving a lot of questions when pitching their ideas. They get harder questions than their white counterparts because they feel as if they are not understood or believed in that they are worthy enough to invest in. This is also combined with the fact that the fashion industry is a less attractive sector to invest in for these older white men as its trends changes a lot and it is seen as a silly industry that is low in credibility.

Black female entrepreneurs also face stereotyping in the Belgian fashion industry. Often times, these women are told that they probably got into fashion because they love shopping or because they love wearing fun clothes. Their reason for going into fashion or having the passion to go into fashion is often overlooked and people make the prejudice that these women chose to go into fashion for fun and because they read Vogue magazines each month. Another stereotype that is being made is that women are not able to maintain a business. It is said that they have no problems coming up with ideas or designing a new handbag, however, when it comes to the accounting side of the business, for example, they lack the expertise or knowledge to excel in this part. This also comes with the stereotype that men underestimate women and think they are weak compared to the male gender. A woman, according to men stereotyping women as weak, is not able to fight dirty and not smart enough to innovative herself and/or her company. Another stereotype that is made about black women in the fashion industry but also in general is that black women are too loud and too aggressive. White people became scared of black women because they have a strong voice and may come across very assertive.

Lastly, it is clear that both the Belgian government and the Belgian fashion industry are unaware of the problems black female entrepreneurs face. And if they are aware, they either choose to ignore it or treat it as if it is not relevant enough to care about. If they both were to do campaigns or other initiatives to promote gender and racial equality, they do not do this big enough as this is not noticed by black female entrepreneurs. As they are in the segment talked about in these campaigns, you would expect that at least these women would have heard about it if campaigns or other initiatives are set up. I recommend that these two should focus on first educating the people on gender and racial inequality so that people become aware of it and can change their policies. After, they should set up a commission or some kind of overarching organ that checks whether or not companies are gender and racial-inclusive. They should also set an example by making sure that they are inclusive themselves and that they are a reflection of the society they impose regulations on.

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1 Integration of findings with existing literature**

One of the main findings of this thesis is that black female entrepreneurs face inequalities based on their race more heavily rather than based on their gender. However, this is not supported by the literature study. First, Gill (2016) talks about how black women often think that their success is hindered by their femininity and that they are discriminated against by both their gender and race. Comparing this to the findings, one sees that in this study, I have found that a black female entrepreneur has it more difficult mostly because of her race and not because of her gender. Another article that contradicts this findings is one written by Gray (2018). This article talks about how black women frequently encounter discrimination based on their gender and race. It does, however, not talk about how these black women feel as if their race overshadows their gender when it comes to discrimination. However, the fact that there are inequalities based on gender and race for black female entrepreneurs in the Belgian fashion industry is confirmed by the literature. It is mainly the degree to which one of these two factors has a higher influence on the experienced inequalities that is not found in the existing literature.

When comparing the part where I talked about how black female entrepreneurs are highly underrepresented in the Belgian fashion industry to the existing literature, we can see that this is confirmed by all of the research done on this topic. Hesmondhalgh and Baker's (2010) article, for example, confirms that men are very likely to hold influential positions and positions of authority and power. Men are often favored to be in these positions with authority as this has been the norm for ages and these men are not willing to break this pattern because that would mean giving up or standing next to a woman who will have the same level of authority as them. The article also talks about how not only women in general are underrepresented but specifically black women as well. Diversity among those in positions of power and influence in the sector is lacking, and gender-based prejudices and misconceptions still exist with the potential to hinder women's career possibilities. This idea is confirmed by the book of Oakley and Sheldon (2020). They say, just like this thesis' findings says, that black women are less likely than males to hold leadership roles, and when they do, preconceptions and impediments based on race are regularly encountered. When comparing the findings to the representation of black female entrepreneur in the UK creative sectors, we can see that this matches as well. Despite the growing focus on diversity and inclusion, Henry (2020) claims that black women are still underrepresented in the UK creative sectors, particularly in leadership positions. This complements my findings about the representation in the Belgian creative industries.

Both the literature and the thesis' findings talk about how black female entrepreneurs struggle to get access to financial resources in the Belgian fashion industry. Both of them complement each other by giving the same conclusion. Oakley and Sheldon (2020) talk about how access to networks, funding, and other resources that are crucial for success in the creative industries are impacted by gender and race. According to the authors, there are significant obstacles that prohibit women from having access to these resources, which can limit their potential to launch successful businesses or develop in their careers. Gray's (2018) article also confirms this finding. The women interviewed claimed that one of the biggest barriers to entering the industry was a lack of financial support.

Lefèvre and Gillain's (2021) also claimed that the underrepresentation of women in business was due to a dearth of resources, including funding and professional networks, in addition to sexism and institutionalized discrimination against black women.

The problem that stereotypes are still present in the creative industries is both confirmed by the findings and the literature. I talked about the different stereotypes that are formed about black women in the fashion industry. This goes hand in hand with Jones and Pringle's (2015) investigation. It demonstrates both patterns and changes: on the one hand, there are still widespread sexist stereotypes, but on the other, sexism is accepted as the standard in a society where inequities are mostly unmanageable. The findings also show that black women feel a lot of pressure that is imposed on them by society. This pressure includes being afraid to fail, having the constant feeling of having to excel in everything they do and always having to prove themselves. Gill's (2016) research confirms this by concluding that black women should always be very ambitious, successful, attractive and desirable. According to the women who were interviewed for this research, they have the constant feeling of always being perfect with what they do and how they behave themselves.

Smith and Stewart (2018) talk about how legislators are highly aware of the problems that black women face as well as the lack of inclusion and diversity in the creative industries. They say that solving these problems and increasing equality in the industries is a top priority for legislators. This, however, is not what I found in my study. I said that black female entrepreneurs feel neglected and ignored by the legislators as they feel like they are not aware of this topic and do not set up any actions to tackle these problems. The contradiction may be because this article talks about the creative industries in general. They may feel as if governments are aware of these problems, so not only Belgium specifically. They do talk about how diversity and inclusion should be promoted in order to create a better industry-wide collaboration, innovation and creativity. This is something that complements my findings that the Belgian government and fashion industry should promote diversity and inclusion by educating the masses. These suggestions of initiatives are also complemented by Oakley and O'Connor's (2019) research. They argue that more emphasis should be placed on education and training, and that steps should be taken to ensure that young people from all circumstances have access to high-quality arts education. The authors contend that it will need conscious effort to get rid of the structural prejudices that exist in the creative industries. This calls for enacting legislation that promotes diversity and inclusion, such as diversity quotas and targets, and enhancing the transparency of the hiring and promotion processes. These initiatives were also talked about in the findings part of this thesis and thus are complementary to those talked about in the literature.

The findings of this thesis indicate a consistent alignment with earlier research and are a great contribution to the existing literature evaluation. In-depth interviews with black female business owners in the Belgian fashion industry showed experiences that are consistent with the established difficulties and disadvantages faced by women of color in business as well as more general racial discrepancies in the fashion industry. The known research on gender, race, and entrepreneurship is consistent with the underrepresentation of black women in leadership roles, the fight for funding and investment, and the existence of stereotypes and biases. The existing body of knowledge is supported and validated by these similarities, which highlights the need for focused interventions

and actions to address these systemic problems and advance inclusivity in the sector. However, the two main findings that contradict existing literature are that gender and racial inequalities for these women are at the same influential level and that the legislators are not at all aware of these disparities.

## **5.2 Implications and significance of the findings**

This thesis highlights the distinctive opportunities and difficulties faced by black female fashion designers in Belgium. It becomes clear from in-depth interviews that these entrepreneurs confront significant obstacles when trying to obtain capital, resources, and industry networks. The results highlight the need for focused assistance and initiatives to address these particular issues and build a more welcoming and equitable environment for black women in the fashion industry. This thesis also demonstrates the inequalities that exist in Belgium's fashion sector and emphasizes how black female entrepreneurs deal with and address them. The participants' personal stories reveal the structural and institutional barriers they face, including racial prejudices and microaggressions, low visibility, and exclusion from mainstream networks. These results necessitate a careful analysis of the underlying power structures and discriminatory behaviors that support such disparities. The findings also have implications for larger societal and economic issues in addition to those that affect individuals. In addition to hindering black women's ability to rise economically, the underrepresentation of black women in business signifies a lost opportunity for both economic expansion and cultural variety. In addition to being an issue of social fairness, addressing these inequalities has the potential to advance the general growth and innovation of Belgium's creative industries. A more inclusive and nuanced strategy that takes into account the varied needs and experiences of black female entrepreneurs can be developed by stakeholders.

The findings are significant because they have the ability to influence and direct support programs, business practices, and policy-making. This thesis offers empirical data that may be used to build focused activities and interventions aimed at lowering the obstacles black female entrepreneurs experience. In order to increase diversity, innovation, and economic growth in the Belgian fashion industry, it is critical to encourage an inclusive ecosystem that values and supports the talents and potential of these entrepreneurs. Additionally, by providing distinctive insights about the setting of the Belgian fashion sector, the findings add to the body of knowledge on gender, race, and entrepreneurship. By concentrating on the experiences of black women entrepreneurs in this particular industry, the study partially fills a knowledge gap and contributes to the increasing corpus of research on the intersectional difficulties experienced by marginalized entrepreneurs in the creative industries.

## **5.3 Limitations of the study**

Despite the fact that this thesis offers insightful information about the experiences of black female entrepreneurs in the Belgian fashion sector, it is crucial to recognize and deal with the limitations of the research design and methodology.

First off, the study's sample size might make its conclusions less generalizable. The study's relatively small sample size may not accurately reflect the variety of viewpoints and experiences held by all

black female business owners in the sector. As a result, care should be taken when extending the results to a larger population. Second, the study relied on interviews with self-reported data, which could bring subjectivity and bias. To provide a more thorough insight of the experiences of black female entrepreneurs, future research might take into account including further data collection techniques. These interviews were also conducted via Microsoft Teams. This can be seen as a limitation because the platform's virtual nature might have reduced participants' comfort and engagement levels in comparison to face-to-face conversations. Additionally, the quality and consistency of the data gathered may have been compromised by technical difficulties or connectivity issues throughout the interviews.

The thesis' exclusive emphasis on the Belgian fashion industry may have limited the findings' applicability to other geographic contexts or creative industries. It is important to understand that the Belgian fashion industry differs from fashion industries in other countries due to its unique traits and dynamics. Belgium, known for its experimental and avant-garde approach to fashion, has developed a niche market recognized for its distinctive designs and focus on craftsmanship. It takes pleasure in supporting up-and-coming designers as well as an individualistic, non-conformist look. These particular characteristics set it apart from fashion markets in other nations, where various cultural, economic, and historical elements are at play. Applying the findings to other contexts should be done with caution because the dynamics, opportunities, and constraints faced by the Belgian fashion sector can differ across different nations and locations.

Additionally, the study did not conduct a comparison investigation of other racial or gender groups, focusing instead on the experiences and difficulties faced by black female entrepreneurs. The in-depth examination of the distinctive experiences of black women was made possible by this, but it might have limited the comprehension of how those experiences compare to those of entrepreneurs from other racial or gender backgrounds.

#### **5.4 Suggestions for future research**

We might explore a number of directions for more study to improve our comprehension of the subject. Firstly, increasing the study's sample size and geographic reach would paint a more complete picture of the experiences of black female entrepreneurs in the Belgian fashion sector. The obstacles and opportunities they confront in varied circumstances could be better understood by including individuals from several Belgian provinces and cities. Additionally, longitudinal research could provide insight into the long-term progressions and results of black female entrepreneurs in the sector. Researchers would be able to examine an individual's business development, industry navigating tactics, and elements that contribute to their success as well as any obstacles they face by following them over a prolonged period of time.

One key recommendation for future research is to look into how people with lighter and darker skin tones experience racism differently. Although people of all ethnic backgrounds experience racism, the subtleties and expressions of racism might differ depending on skin tone. This line of inquiry is important because it has the potential to clarify the complexity of racial discrimination and give light on the particular difficulties that people of various skin tones encounter. Understanding how people with light skin navigate privilege and prejudice within racial hierarchies can be helped by researching

the experiences of people with light skin. On the other hand, examining the experiences of people with dark complexion can highlight the specific types of prejudice they endure, such as harsher stereotypes, bias, and structural impediments. People with darker skin may experience more obvious and explicit types of racism, such as racial profiling and exclusion. Analyzing their experiences can reveal the structural and systemic causes and guide effective intervention initiatives. Researchers can help develop more specialized and inclusive interventions and policies aiming at eliminating racial inequality by researching the many ways that racism manifests itself depending on a person's skin tone.

A deeper understanding on the causes of black female entrepreneurs' limited access to financial resources is an essential issue for future study. Black women continue to have a difficult time getting the finance they need to launch and expand their firms, despite the growing awareness of the value of diversity and inclusion in entrepreneurship. For establishing targeted treatments and strategies to address the issue, it is essential to comprehend the underlying causes of this gap. Investigating the part played by implicit prejudices and stereotypes held by investors and financial institutions is one possible line of research. Examining how these biases affect funding choices and investigating countermeasures will help black female entrepreneurs compete on an even playing field. It is also crucial to look into the structural obstacles inside the financial ecosystem. This can entail looking into the standards that financiers, investors, and financial institutions apply that might unintentionally exclude or disfavor black female business owners. Investigating alternate funding models, such as community-based projects or creative finance structures, may reveal more transparent and open access to financial resources. Additionally, studying the effective tactics and best practices used by black women business owners to overcome financial challenges might provide insightful information for aspiring business owners and policymakers. Finding the essential elements and assets that have made it easier for them to secure money might help guide efforts and support programs aimed at levelling the playing field for others.

Future studies should also focus on the issue of cultural appropriation, which occurs when companies steal concepts from black women without giving them due credit or remuneration. Adoption, borrowing, or exploitation of components from a marginalized culture by people or groups with more privilege and power is known as cultural appropriation. This trend has been widespread in a number of fields, including fashion, where black women's cultural and creative contributions are frequently overlooked. Future studies can explore the processes of cultural appropriation in the fashion industry and look at how mainstream businesses and designers appropriate the concepts, fashions, and cultural manifestations of black women. In order to understand the viewpoints and experiences of black women entrepreneurs who have had their creative work taken and commercialized without their permission, this could involve looking at case studies and conducting interviews with them. Furthermore, it is crucial to look into how cultural appropriation affects black women's employment prospects and general well-being in the fashion business. Research can examine how their visibility, marketability, and capacity to create successful enterprises are impacted by the use of their concepts and designs. Strategies for resolving these problems and promoting more equitable practices within the sector can be informed by an understanding of the economic inequalities and power imbalances brought on by cultural appropriation. Research can look at possible interventions and solutions to



stop cultural appropriation and make sure that black women are given the right credit, pay, and opportunities for their contributions. Investigating how intellectual property laws, industry rules, and moral standards might be used to safeguard the rights and creative agency of black women entrepreneurs is one possible step in this direction. A more inclusive and respectful fashion industry can be achieved by identifying best practices and creating frameworks that encourage cultural appreciation rather than appropriation.

## 6. Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to address the discrimination that black female entrepreneurs experience in the Belgian fashion sector. Significant obstacles stand in the way of their development in the industry and research on black female fashion entrepreneurs in Belgium and the prejudice they experience is scarce.

This thesis showed that instead of gender-based discrimination, black female entrepreneurs in the Belgian fashion business face racial inequalities. They believe that, despite minor but noticeable discrimination, being a woman does not provide as many difficulties as being a black woman. Racism still exists in modern culture, but it has been more subtly expressed in the form of microaggressions. Because of this, black women in this field constantly struggle to be acknowledged for their work and endure additional challenges and pressure to succeed. They are also highly underrepresented in the industry. They are rarely seen as business owners and are conspicuously underrepresented in top managerial roles. A lack of diversity and acceptance of people from all origins in the sector, which is dominated primarily by white older men, makes it difficult for black women to advance. Additionally, black women are usually excluded from the catwalk, billboards, publications, and other promotional materials in fashion campaigns that do not include them. They also face obstacles when trying to get capital and investors. Black female entrepreneurs struggle to convince white male investors who may lack empathy and affinity for their ideas, leading to more rigorous scrutiny and reservations about their suitability for investment. Their true passion and motives are overshadowed by clichés that claim their involvement in fashion is motivated by a love of shopping or a passing fascination with apparel. Additionally, they deal with prejudicial beliefs that women are incapable of managing business operations beyond the creative components, which perpetuates the stereotype of female incompetence and underestimates their fortitude and capacity for innovation. In addition, stereotypes often depict black women as being extremely loud and confrontational, which causes unease and dread in certain white people. The obstacles faced by black female entrepreneurs are not well known by either the Belgian government or the country's fashion industry, and even when they are, they are frequently ignored or minimized.

I advise that both the Belgian government and fashion industry prioritize significant campaigns and projects to advance gender and racial equality in order to address this, making sure they reach and involve black female entrepreneurs. Furthermore, setting an example by her own inclusive practices, the government can encourage positive change and promote a more equal industry and society by creating a special commission or governing body to monitor and enforce gender and racial inclusion in the workplace.

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## **Annex**

### **Annex 1: Interview guide**

#### **1. Introduction**

- a. Thank you for doing this interview
- b. Introduce myself
- c. Introduce the topic
- d. Interview is recorded with audio and video
- e. Pseudonym
- f. How old are you?

#### **2. Entrepreneurship**

- a. What kind of job she does in the creative industry → fashion industry
- b. Why this job?
- c. For how long?
- d. Why become an entrepreneur?
  - i. Did you always know you wanted to become an entrepreneur?
- e. Biggest steps + obstacles

#### **3. Female entrepreneurship**

- a. Role model(s)
- b. How does it feel like being a female entrepreneur in the Belgian fashion industry?
- c. Comparison to male counterparts in the industry
- d. Inequalities?
- e. Emotions regarding (in)equalities
- f. Representation
- g. Imposed pressure by society
- h. Government
  - i. Are they aware of this topic?
  - ii. Initiatives
- i. Belgian fashion industry
  - i. Are they aware of this topic?
  - ii. Initiatives
- j. Female stereotypes in the industry
  - i. Which ones?
  - ii. Have you been stereotypes before?
- k. Accessibility to financial resources

#### **4. Black female entrepreneur**

- a. Role model(s)
- b. Is there racism/discrimination in the industry? Microaggression?
- c. How does it feel like being a black women in the Belgian fashion industry?
- d. Comparison to white male and female counterparts in the industry
- e. Representation → Do you feel like a *token*?
- f. Inequalities?

- g. Emotions regarding (in)equalities
- h. Government
  - i. Are they aware of this topic?
  - ii. Initiatives
- i. Belgian fashion industry
  - i. Are they aware of this topic?
  - ii. Initiatives
- j. Black stereotypes in the industry
  - i. Which ones?
  - ii. Have you been stereotypes before?
- k. Accessibility to financial resources

**5. Varia**

- a. Research on this topic
- b. Other countries
- c. Cultural appropriation
- d. Tips and tricks for black female entrepreneurs

## Annex 2: Informed consent

### Interview thesis – consent to take part in research

*Hi, my name is Eliman Steenbergen. I am 23 years old and currently studying Strategy and Innovation Management at the University of Hasselt. To obtain my Master's degree, I am doing research on black female entrepreneurs in the Belgian fashion industry. After investigating this topic through literature review, I came to the conclusion that black female entrepreneurs in the creative industries are often underrepresented and often face discrimination because of their gender and race. The industry has failed to adequately reflect different cultures and also created barriers for black female entrepreneurs in terms of financial support. Research on why these women encounter inequalities in the Belgian fashion industry is lacking. That is why I will try to partially fill in this knowledge gap. If you are interested, I would like to conduct an interview with you where I ask you about your experiences in the Belgian fashion industry as a black female entrepreneur. This would take approximately about an hour. By doing this, you would help me investigate this topic. Thank you!*

- I ..... voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to be and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded
- I understand that all information I provide in this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research, my identity will remain anonymous.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in this thesis.

Eliman Steenbergen

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Promotor: Dr. Hannelore Van den Abeele

UHasselt

Signature of the participant

Date

Signature of the researcher

Date



20/04/2023



### Annex 3: Coding table

r1	first of all they don't think about it in their daily life.	White people oblivion	Discrimination	Inclusion
r1	if someone then looks different and comes to present a problem that they are absolutely not familiar with and they don't know it, they block it immediately.	No familiarity		
r1	But because they can't identify with that, they are not going to see that need and they don't see the need.	White people oblivion		
r1	people don't realize that nude is not 1 skin color, but several	White people oblivion		
r1	the pain that we feel, they won't experience as someone who has gone through it themselves.	White people oblivion		
r1	the fact that your idea is going to pitch but they don't know your sector.	Not knowing the industry		
r1	I myself haven't really experienced anything as a woman of being less or feeling a certain discrimination.	Discrimination on gender		
r1	I have noticed it by color but not to say as a woman.	Discrimination on colour		
r1	. You're female, you're of a black color. You're with a target audience that is not known to investors. They don't want to invest because they don't know it. Those are all things that don't make it easy.	White people oblivion		

r2	<p>Yes, I think so anyway, I will give an example: I was invited 2 weeks ago at Unizo to attend an Iftar. It was very difficult for them to get women entrepreneurs to join. Anyway, already with migration background, such as Turkish. They are there but they don't really come out.</p>	<p>Female entrepreneurs fighting harder</p>		
r2	<p>The white man always goes at everything one step ahead. This is so for everyone and will never go away.</p>	<p>Difference white and black people</p>		
r2	<p>But then you have to we I with a full-blooded black. People with half a tan also have more advantages. This is true. That shade lighter does a lot. They open doors than someone who is completely black.</p>	<p>Difference light and dark-skinned</p>		
r4	<p>As a woman but certainly as a foreigner. I would combine those. Mastering the language is already a first obstacle. If I have to explain my idea in Dutch, I often block.</p>	<p>Language barrier</p>		
r4	<p>My age is also an issue. They don't take you seriously when you have to apply for a loan, for example.</p>	<p>Discrimination on age</p>		
r4	<p>Light-skinned models were liked more than the dark models with African hair. Recently, I have been seeing that people want more the dark-skinned ones.</p>	<p>Difference light and dark-skinned</p>		

r4	Yes, they have the white privilege. Their skin colours give them privileges.	White privilege		
r4	Most of them also rely very hard on family savings or investments done by parents. There is already a lot of money in some families or enough money in order to get started.	White families with money		
r4	We are always fighting harder as black women. My clothing is not something people in Belgium wear. It's not something everybody likes so I have to make my clothing stand out so that white people become interested and want to buy it.	Black women fighting harder		
r5	It once happened that I went to a studio for a client. I was with another photographer, a male one, and the people on set started speaking to me like a was his assistant.	Example inappropriate behaviour		
r5	Some things like #metoo change the deal.	#metoo		

r6	I think because I'm in a niche that is so related to a certain culture, I haven't really experienced any obstacles when it comes to discrimination. You're in the business of African clothing and recycled clothing. The people who are linked to that and interested in it are not going to tear me down in terms of skin colour.	Obstacles regarding discrimination		
r6	One obstacle I do have is that I'm young. I sometimes have to really convince companies of me as a freelancer in marketing.	Obstacles regarding age		
r7	Why are we treated differently? I don't know, but it happens. It sucks. It really sucks.	Treating women differently		
r7	They always ask so many questions, much more than they would do if a man if pitching his idea. They try to get under your skin by asking so many irrelevant questions. After some time, you hesitate at a certain question and they try to use this against you. They say that you don't know your own idea or don't believe it, when in reality, they ask way too many questions that go too much into detail. They would never do that to a man.	Treating women differently		

r7	<p>You have to fight twice or even thrice as hard to get the same outcome as someone who is white. And even then, their work would be acknowledged and given much more recognition than mine, even if I have worked harder than them.</p>	Fighting harder as a black woman		
r7	<p>There is also the problem that even if you get the opportunity to prove yourself and it works, the recognition and acknowledgement afterwards is lacking. They treat your work as irrelevant or they criticize it saying it could be more of this and more of that.</p>	Lack of recognition		
r7	<p>We still have a very long and difficult road to walk. But you would expect that after all of these years fighting and vocalizing ourselves, we would have at least some of the same privileges. But sadly, that's not the case.</p>	Fighting as a black woman		
r8	<p>There is this unspoken rule that if a man says something, you should believe it. If a woman says something, you should always doublecheck sources or check whether or not she is telling the truth.</p>	Unspoken discrimination rule		

r9	. You will always have the disadvantage of being a woman and a black woman in a world where we still don't have equal rights in so many countries.	Fighting harder as black woman	Diversity	
r1	You are then always stuck with the same profiles	No diversity		
r1	The people who are in finance profiles are mostly male profiles. White men. White older men.	No diversity		
r1	There is only one male coach who is mixed or also of African origin but he is not my coach and the rest are all the white standard.	No diversity		
r1	Diversity is so important. If you always have the same people with the same mindset they are always going to make decisions, they're always going to make the same decisions and choose the same people. If you create diversity there, that dynamic is going to change. Then different decisions are going to be made.	Diversity in top management		
r1	That there is diversity in every position otherwise you don't change anything	Diversity in top management		
r1	If you already change something on every chain at every level and create more diversity, certainly something will already change.	Create diversity		

r1	Absolutely I always think about that because most brands, not all, but often you see that then in their campaigns or their fashion shows.	Lying about diversity		
r1	Just really taking action. Not just putting in your policy that you are a company with these values but then when you go into their company, everyone looks the same. To me, that doesn't say much. Take real action.	Lying about diversity		
r1	Just really taking action. Not just putting in your policy that you are a company with these values but then when you go into their company, everyone looks the same. To me, that doesn't say much. Take real action.	Company diversity actions		
r2	t's a trade-off: every bag I sell there hole a piece back. In cooperation with them, we make different kinds of bags and I sell them here.	Cooperation with African women		
r2	Doing business in Africa is of course totally different than here. Here you have your price and this and that and you know in advance how or what. You don't have that there. There you have to negotiate and you also have to be patient because people don't stress there.	Doing business in Africa	Inclusiveness	

r2	<p>If you help 1 person there, you are also helping a larger reach than that if you buy something from 1 person here. There you go e.g. buy something in large quantity. You helped a family and you helped brother and cousin and uncle.</p>	<p>Helping African business</p>		
r4	<p>I always grew up in Ghana and there we wear a lot of clothes from China while we have a lot of beautiful fabrics, so I don't understand. We don't appreciate our own fabrics. The moms reveal that it is only used in church or during big celebrations.</p>	<p>Clothing in Ghana</p>		
r4	<p>A lot of my African friends have helped me a lot. I started when I wasn't working, so they invested in me because they believed in me. Especially my mom. I had no money in the beginning and they gave a lot of money so I could still start.</p>	<p>Help from the black community</p>		



r6	In the beginning I mainly used fabrics from here but I noticed that they were very expensive. Then I started ordering from there, but often I noticed that the quality was not so good. I usually used little fabric though, an accent or a detail that gets fabric, so I noticed that quality didn't matter so much.	Working with African fabrics		
r6	For example, I would go into the Matongé neighbourhood and get scraps of fabrics that they couldn't do anything with but I could. I then went to recover those fabrics. There you can't tell if it's good or bad quality.	Example getting fabrics		
r1	itself I can't really say I've noticed a difference between male and female entrepreneurship in the fashion sector.	Gender inequality	Inequalities	
r1	They're going to take e.g. male designers or whatever a little bit more seriously. The questions that are asked, their business plan is looked at differently than a woman's. That's something different.	Gender inequality		
r1	Anyway there is often already inequality between men and women but then with woman of dark skin color I have that extra.	Difference white and black women		

r3	In fashion specifically I find it difficult because I don't really feel that.	Female inequalities in fashion		
r3	I don't see any inequalities. Women get it done and it's appreciated.	Female inequalities in fashion		
r4	Recently we had gone to a festival. I and three other people had each gotten a seat, but there were only 2 seats. I don't know if it is because I am a woman but they gave them to the 2 boys. It's hard to say if it is because I'm a women.	Female inequalities in fashion		
r5	It's more difficult for women to be taken seriously in this industry.	Difference men and women		
r5	In photography, there is a lot of technical knowledge and people think that this can only be learned or known by men. This is a big difference. Also, the fact that I'm young. But mostly it's that I am not taken seriously because it's a male industry.	Example difference in photography		
r5	Yes, to get recognition. To be acknowledged as a real professional. Not just someone who does this as a hobby. You always have to prove that you are serious and that you have the capacity.	Fighting harder as a woman		

r5	With men, they always think they are the creative directors who hire the models, who set the creative ideas, who choose the set, and with women, they don't think they can. They are always surprised when you tell them that you have a lot of experience. You always have to prove that you are able to do things.	Difference men and women		
r6	I wouldn't really know. I feel like women are much further ahead in fashion than men. I don't think that's the case.	Female inequalities in fashion		
r7	I do think they have it easier than us women. A lot of higher positions in the fashion industry are taken by men.	Difference men and women		
r7	If you, for example, want to pitch an idea to this management, you face the problem that these men don't really know the essence of our pitch or are not welcome to our ideas. They know what makes a lot of profit and they don't seem to deter from these profit-making things.	Example difference men and women		
r7	There are definitely inequalities in our fashion industry.	Gender inequality		

r7	<p>If you then compare where you are after 10 years, you see that a man with kind of the same career path has achieved it in 5 years. And not because he is better at his job, just because he got things that I didn't get or I didn't have access to.</p>	<p>Comparison men and women</p>		
r8	<p>I think the main difference between men and women in our industry is that people tend to pick up ideas from men faster. I mean that they believe them faster than they would believe us when we would say something or come with an idea that would innovate the industry.</p>	<p>Differences men and women</p>		
r8	<p>I think that over the years, the inequalities for women in our industry are become less, but they are still there.</p>	<p>Gender inequalities in fashion</p>		
r8	<p>But to be honest, I have never experienced a situation where someone denied me something and explicitly said it's because I'm a woman</p>	<p>Own inequality experience</p>		
r8	<p>As a black woman, you always are one step behind any white person in any situation.</p>	<p>Difference white and black people</p>		

r9	I don't really have much feelings about being a female entrepreneur. I'm just doing my thing like everybody else. There are no feelings shooting above more than others	Being female in the industry		
r9	I haven't really experienced that I feel treated differently than a man when it comes to my job. Are there differences? I think so, yeah. But I've been fortunate enough to have never had the feeling that I was less than a man.	Difference men and women		
r10	If you're a woman you get the feeling that there is a tension. With men, it's always very professional and they always go very fast and everything is good. But with women, they always try something. Whether it is by making a comment or touching you in a weird way. They always try something. Probably because they've had women who didn't say no, so they try it with other women as well.	Difference men and women		
r1	I started Newds because I noticed in practice that there were absolutely no products on the market that met my needs	Lack of black-oriented products	Noninclusive	
r1	they almost never have that color.	Lack of black-oriented products		

r1	Now that is made so of white is ideal image, super beautiful.	White ideal is superior		
r1	Depending on where I'm going or being I'm going to dress that way because I'm already black and I already know I'm a stereotype and going to be looked at differently, I don't want to add that on top of it a reason to start treating me differently. Then I'm going to dress to the situation or adapt to the group.	Dressing up as a black woman		
r6	I'm humble about that because I don't really associate myself with that because I'm in such a niche market. I don't really feel part of that, of that fashion sector.	Not being part of the industry		
r1	I noticed for example because I said I'd like to have underwear made but in nudes shades for darker skin tones that sometimes I didn't get an answer.	Racism in the fashion industry	Racism	
r1	It comes with difficulties of course but I try not to go through life and say of walking into a room and saying every time of okay I'm the only black person. That would make me mentally difficult.	Being black in the industry		
r1	I just try to go through life saying this is me. I always try to be positive and not let it hinder me. I just go for it.	Dealing with being black		

r1	I never put my picture on my resume. You look at my name and I get there and then of course you see the surprise on their face because the name doesn't match what they had in mind.	White name as a black person		
r2	Gosh, I haven't been around that long for that. Racism is everywhere and every day. Don't let it get to your heart. I can't express myself on that yet because I haven't been in the industry long enough for that. I myself cannot say that I have had to deal with racism recently.	Racism in the fashion industry		
r3	No, not yet. I've never experienced it like that	Racism in the fashion industry		
r4	I have a Belgian surname so sometimes, if I would apply for something, they think that I am white until I get there. They didn't expect it. They would not say it out loud but you could see the surprise on their faces when I walked in as a black girl, when they expected and maybe even hoped to see a white girl.	White name as a black person		
r4	They would not say it out loud but you could see the surprise on their faces when I walked in as a black girl, when they expected and maybe even hoped to see a white girl.	Microaggression		

r4	I have not experienced racism. My concept is African clothing so I don't get into contact with people who do not want this clothing. It would be weird.	Racism in the fashion industry		
r4	There is a difference between black and white women.	Difference black and white women		
r4	I once went to a market where I sold some products. There was a white girl standing next to me who sold almost the same product. Then, someone came and asked if these products were hers. I said: "No, these are my products. But feel free to buy something." I said that because we practically had the same products but she then walked away and ask the white girl for her prices and didn't even take the time to look at my products. She wasn't willing to invest in my products because I am African. She said that out loud as well. I respect her opinion but it was hurtful because you buy clothes for their shape and colour, not for who made it. But she did not want to invest in black women but in <i>her own people</i> .	Example racism		



r4	At Koningsdag, I had a booth where I sold my clothes but people were shouting that I didn't have the right to sell African clothing on Koningsdag because it had nothing to do with it. I thought that was inappropriate because we are supposed to be one. No matter what I sell. As long as we offer different and unique things, it's okay.	Example racism		
r5	as a freelancer, I haven't experienced it. I can see it but I didn't experience it myself.	Racism in the fashion industry		
r5	In little details, I see it happen to other people.	Microaggression		
r5	For examples, model agencies don't really like natural African hair and prefer braids and wigs. They treat them different because when a blonde girl who has dyed her hair blue shows up, it is not a problem. The non-white people are really underrepresented in the fashion industry. It's mostly white people.	Example microaggression		
r5	It were cliches that they joked about. They were making fun of me and made jokes, but that kind of humour didn't make me laugh at all. But it happened every day.	Inappropriate jokes		
r6	No, I haven't. If you want to buy my clothes and you are racist, something is wrong.	Racism in the fashion industry		

r6	Yes, I do, but I open that up. I think black women entrepreneurs are behind in all sectors. This is then due to knowledge but mostly due to a lack of resources.	General racism towards black women		
r7	Yes. Especially in the earlier days of my career. I was the only black stylist back in my day. A lot of people refused to work with me because of my skin colour.	Racism in the fashion industry		
r7	Today, that's less the case, but I still think some people refuse to work with me or acknowledge my work because I'm black.	Racism in the fashion industry today		
r7	They wouldn't say it anymore these days, but you can see it in their behaviour and non-verbal communication. When you talk to them, they literally look down on you and look you up and down. They can't wait for the conversation to be over	Microaggression		
r7	For example, when they ask you to send an email with some of your work before they want to work with you, when if a white person wants to work with them, they immediately say yes. As a black woman, you just get less opportunities than white people.	Example microaggression		

r8	It's more unspoken things and actions made by people. It's more under the table and subtle than really outspoken inequalities.	Microaggression		
r8	the deciding committee were all male and they chose another man to work for them. A man who was very, very unqualified for the job compared to me. That speaks for itself.	Example microaggression		
r8	I think it's more like microaggressions. I have to be honest, I have never had a situation where somebody treated by in a racist way, for which I am very thankful because I have heard stories that are very different to mine. But of course, under the table, there is racism and discrimination. For sure. If you experience discrimination as a black woman in your every day life, you definitely experience it in your job as well.	Microaggression		
r9	I think there is definitely racism in the industry, because in every industry you will find racism, so in the fashion industry as well. But again, I've been fortunate enough to have never felt discriminated.	Racism in the industry		

r10	How I see it is that I get a lot of free passes because I am light-skinned. They guess the wrong ethnicities for me. They are always very racist towards dark-skinned women. They say they don't want to have too dark-skinned women. They make them feel very bad. They manipulate the community so hard that we start fighting with each other.	Racism in fashion		
r10	How I see it is that I get a lot of free passes because I am light-skinned. They guess the wrong ethnicities for me. They are always very racist towards dark-skinned women. They say they don't want to have too dark-skinned women. They make them feel very bad. They manipulate the community so hard that we start fighting with each other.	Difference light and dark-skinned		
r10	I once had a booking and the agency would pick me up, bring me to the shoot and bring me back home ... That showed me again that nothing has changed.	Example racism		
r10	I do feel like today it's not as outspoken. People are racist but in a subtle way or not so verbal way.	Microaggression		

r1	I think there is a nice mix and the people I've met, most of them are female.	Female representation	Representation	
r1	I do think there are. But I think rather on a smaller scale	Black female representation		
r1	there is also some lack of daring to go big to really move forward with a product. I think it's because of that.	Reason low representation		
r1	If you look at magazines here in Belgium, how many black models do you see?	Black representation in magazines		
r1	In the Belgian fashion sector, I wouldn't be able to say that any brand is really doing its best in that area.	Representation at Belgian brands		
r2	The higher up the ladder, the fewer women there are. There are no people of color sitting there.	Representation top management		
r2	I think in politics they already have those difficulties within their own. They're struggling there, too, the ladies.	Female representation at government		
r2	I think they need to set a good example to politicians. But do they give it? That's something, too. How can you promote and proclaim something if it is not yet as it should be in your own party?	Female representation at government		
r2	Rwanda is a country where 60% of the parliament is female.	Female representation in Rwanda		

r3	I also usually only work with women. I don't usually come into direct contact with designers. Their entourage is usually made up of women who have to do hundreds of things at once.	Female representation in fashion		
r3	There are still fewer female entrepreneurs than male entrepreneurs. You have fewer female CEOs.	Representation in top management		
r3	We have never sat down with female investors. We've only chatted with men. You face a man who looks down at you and there is not a single woman to be found in the room. The investor are always men.	Female representation investors		
r3	I'm in a sector where I'm always the only black woman.	Black representation in fashion		
r5	every time I work with other creatives, it's with females. The models are females, the makeup artists are female, the styling is female.	Female representation on shoots		
r5	A lot of them are white men so it may be hard for them to put themselves in our shoes.	Female representation government		
r7	Another challenge I encountered was entering Belgium's still largely white and male-dominated fashion industry as a black female stylist.	Female representation in fashion		

r7	It's a male-dominated industry, in my opinion, so it can be demanding and challenging to break the barriers that they set and continue to set.	Female representation in fashion		
r7	I also think that the fact that there are less women working in the fashion industry is an important inequality. Or at least, I don't know much. And I've been working with a lot of brands and people over time. I should've seen much more women cross my path in the industry, but there are still a lot of men in comparison to women.	Female representation in fashion		
r7	There are some very loud voices in the fashion industry, but in the end, they are silenced by the voices that are placed higher in position, which are male voices.	Female representation top management		
r7	See, the problem is that if you go to an investor, all of the time, those are men. Men who are more interested in investing in very innovative techniques or products or things that have to do with financing or economics. They rarely see the potential for companies that act in the fashion industry, especially if this company is run by a woman.	Female representation investors		

r7	Black women are definitely underrepresented in the Belgian fashion industry. I'm very certain of that. I don't see many black women working in the industry or I don't encounter situations where I even see one other black woman in the same room as I am.	Black female representation		
r7	There should be more women in different position at different levels in the fashion industry.	Black representation top management		
r7	Look at the colour found in the government. Exactly, very white. If you would have a colouring book for the government, you would have 100 pencils with white skin colours and only 1 with a darker-skinned colour. How do you expect them to tackle this problem when they don't even tackle it in their own government.	Black representation government		
r7	No. Again, no. I'd be joking if I told you that black women are a high-priority topic for either the government or the fashion industry.	Black representation in fashion		



r8	because it proves that us women can be very successful in an industry that used to be very white and male-orientated. Which is ironic, because a lot of the time, they target women, but the industry is ruled by men.	Female representation in fashion		
r8	I think the fashion industry in Belgium still has issues when it comes to female representation. Some of the big brands are from a male designer.	Female representation in fashion		
r8	Of the Antwerp Six, only two are women. If the biggest names in the Belgian fashion industry isn't represented equally, how do we expect it to be equal today? It is just deeply rooted in routines and prejudices that men are superior to women.	Example representation Antwerp 6		
r8	I think there is just always that barrier of being a woman who needs to first speak to a man before getting money	Female representation investors		
r8	Black women are highly, highly, highly, and I repeat, highly underrepresented in the fashion industry in our country.	Black representation in fashion		

r8	I am not joking if I tell you I have only met five black women working in the industry. Only two of them are entrepreneurs. The other three work at companies as an employee. So, in terms of entrepreneurship, very underrepresented.	Experience black representation		
r9	I think that was because there are mostly men involved in investing and you are always faced with the problem that you have to talk with only these men to get investments.	Female representation investors		
r9	In my opinion, there are women in the fashion industry. Is it divided equally? I don't think so, but I don't think the difference is very dramatic.	Female representation in fashion		
r9	It's a fact that higher position such as management or leadership roles are filled in my man, though.	Representation top management		
r10	It's difficult to say. I have the feeling there is underrepresentation. Women who look like me, black woman, I don't think I can say a lot of other examples. And if you add names, it's women who are different from me.	Black female representation		

## Annex 4: Coding tree

