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# Tokenism in Board Diversity: An Analysis of the Zimbabwean Economy; A Case of the Manufacturing Industry

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**ABSTRACT**

The paper sought to interrogate the motives and intentions of board member appointments. The composition of board members has come under scrutiny with a call for diversity. Studies have indicated that there is a direct relationship to improve firm value and a diverse board composition. However; the intentions of a board can never be taken at face value as there is a risk of tokenism in board diversity. The paper sought to shed light on the possibility of window dressing that can be utilized by firms to be seem as to conform to the current dictates of board diversity. The paper reviewed empirical evidence from countries that have a diverse board composition and those that are not strict on-board composition to evaluate the motivation for all firms to have a seemingly diverse board composition. Various theories (Resource Based, Legitimacy, Agency, and Institutional, Stakeholder theory) explained the possibility of firms incorporating tokenism diversity. The paper utilized a content analysis of listed companies in the Zimbabwe Stock Exchange to establish board diversity and potential presence of tokenism. The paper proffered possible counter measures when considering the firm value and a diverse board composition which included critical mass, training and support, inclusive culture, power dynamics and accountability.

**Key words: tokenism, board composition, diversity**

## Introduction

Board diversity refers to the inclusion of individuals from various backgrounds, experiences, demographics, competencies, and skills on a company's board of directors (Raddant & Karimi. 2024). Therefore, board diversity aims to create governance structures that reflect the diversity of the world in which organizations operate. It is interesting to note that the supposed benefits of diversity are basic presumptions that can only be realized with inclusion. What matters in diversity is not the variety of people but rather an enabling environment created to foster pragmatic collaboration and allow directors to showcase their inherent talent in helping corporations attain predetermined goals (Mellisa et al., 2020). Winter (2014) argues that diversity is just a "noun", but inclusion is the action word that makes the diversity really count. The effectiveness of board diversity as a corporate action is largely dependent upon whether it has enterprise-wide acceptability and commitment.

Organizations in today's interconnected and diverse world increasingly recognize the crucial role of diversity and inclusion in driving innovation, enhancing talent pools, and fostering positive brand perception (Berstein, 2023; Edelman Trust Barometer, 2023). However, the pursuit of these benefits can be overshadowed by the paradoxical presence of tokenism. This practice involves superficially including a small number of individuals from under-represented groups without addressing the underlying systemic inequalities that contribute to their exclusion (Barrett & Angele 2024). While seemingly intended to promote diversity and inclusion tokenism often produces negative consequences, undermining the very value it attempts to create. A diverse environment is one made up of people with a wide range of characteristics, beliefs, backgrounds and mindsets, however, when specific people are hired, placed or tolerated strictly to prove that an organization is not discriminatory, this is where equality and inclusion becomes tokenism. Too often tokenism is a mask for box-ticking, an easy gesture to show that people with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 are represented. According to Pitoura et al. (2021) tokens are the minority members in a skewed group, that is a group where there is a large majority and a very small minority, perhaps up to a ratio of 85:15.

Tokenism is defined in the Oxford Learner's Dictionary as "the fact of doing something only in order to do what the law requires or to satisfy a particular group of people, but not in a way that is really sincere". Tokenism means including minority groups because it is deemed politically correct or, moreover, economically advantageous, to do so. The issue is, however, when this inclusion stops at just token representation, statements and policies rather than implementing full equality and inclusivity. There is a very fine line between equality, diversity and inclusion, and tokenism. Tokenism is a forced form of diversity that creates a superficial appearance of equality without truly achieving it and lacks the inclusive behaviors that matter. Diversity can be costly if adopted for tokenism. (Lawal & Nuhu, 2021) argue that the cosmetic adoption of diversity without due consideration of the inherent corporate culture is likely to hurt shareholders" earnings due to high costs. The cost of forced board diversity includes potential loss of cohesion due to lack of trust among members, sacrifice of competence for compliance, passive boards and groupthink syndrome due to overcrowding (Rhode & Packel, 2014).

## When board diversity goes wrong because of tokenism

When people think about the term tokenism, they often think about statistics and representation in employment. However, tokenism can happen in almost every aspect of life like employment, media, advertising, politics, health and sport (D'Ignazio and Klein 2020) Tokenism is being exercised when an organization is not willing to acknowledge, address and find solutions to fix the diversity imbalance in its workplace at the root. Tokenism is the practice of making a symbolic action by, for example, recruiting a small number of people from under-represented groups to create an appearance of racial or gender equality within the workplace, or having policies in place without ensuring their implementation. When this happens, all other activities are merely cosmetic and will appear as a token gesture or a tick-box exercise. Negative impacts of tokenism include; reduced credibility, negative publicity and reputation and brand damages.

## Reduced Credibility, Negative Publicity and Reputation and Brand Damages

Stakeholders, particularly socially conscious consumers and investors, readily recognize tokenism. This perceived inauthenticity erodes trust, leading to negative word-of-mouth, brand avoidance, and potential boycotts (Cone Communications, 2022) Consumers and stakeholders increasingly value authenticity. Business & Society (2023) found a direct correlation between perceived tokenism and decreased firm credibility among socially conscious consumers. When tokenism is suspected, firms are viewed as inauthentic and opportunistic, leading to negative word-of-mouth and brand avoidance. In business, if an organization is seen to be just tokenizing, for example using diverse characters in advertising but not catering for or employing a diversity of people, then their business may suffer adverse publicity and their brand might be damaged. Consumers see through tokenism very quickly and are generally unforgiving Mokyr et al. (2015). When tokenism is exposed, it can spark damaging media coverage and public backlash, significantly impacting a firm's reputation and financial standing (Harvard Business Review, 2021) A 2021 Harvard Business Review article cites examples of companies facing PR nightmares due to perceived tokenistic practices, highlighting the significant reputational and financial risks involved. Customers increasingly value authenticity and purpose-driven brands. Cone Communications Study (2022) revealed that 83% of consumers would boycott a brand if they felt its diversity efforts were merely performative. Tokenism alienates such customers, leading to loss of loyalty and business. Stakeholders, particularly socially conscious consumers and investors, readily recognize tokenism. This perceived inauthenticity erodes trust, leading to negative word-of-mouth, brand avoidance, and potential boycotts (Cone Communications, (2022).

## Employee Morale and Decreased Productivity

According to Kaiser and Pratt-Hyatt (2020), highlighted that there are effects associated with token positions emanates, first under-representation, token board members may feel isolated and burdened by representing an entire group. The second effect is related to lack of influence, their voices may be drowned out by the majority, limiting their ability to effect meaningful change. Lastly pressure to conform, token members may feel pressure to conform to existing norms rather than challenge them. Therefore, tokenism can demoralise the workforce with token position affecting the productivity of the company. Under-represented employees included through tokenism often feel isolated, undervalued, and lacking opportunities for advancement. This fosters low morale, decreased engagement, and higher turnover, impacting firm productivity and innovation (Robinson & Dechant, 2017). Being a token is frustrating and individuals may feel the extra pressure to represent their outnumbered group. They may also feel a sense of isolation, especially when their contribution may go unacknowledged or when they do not have somebody to support them if any micro-aggressions happen.

Tokenism can have negative effects on employees from under-represented groups. It causes minority employees to doubt their talents, leading them to develop serious imposter syndrome. They may begin to believe that they are not actually good at their job, and that they were only hired because they were a diverse candidate. When the token employees are not given a chance to get actively engaged in the organization, they can often feel unmotivated to perform at the best of their capacity. Another aspect of tokenism that can have an effect on the mental health of a token person is the pressure of the consequences of messing up, because they may feel that by messing up that they might be doing so for everyone else who looks like them (Chris, Bourg 2017). Tokenism is a forced form of diversity that creates a superficial appearance of equality without truly achieving it. The practice of tokenism is not only harmful to the individuals, but it can also negatively influence the whole organization.

## Investor Confidence and Long-Term Sustainability

Investors increasingly see diversity as a factor impacting financial performance (McKinsey Global Institute, 2023). Tokenism raises concerns about a firm's long-term commitment to diversity and its ability to attract and retain top talent, potentially influencing investment decisions. Investors increasingly see diversity as a factor impacting financial performance (McKinsey Global Institute, 2023). Tokenism raises concerns about a firm's long-term commitment to diversity and its ability to attract and retain top talent, potentially influencing investment decisions (Filatotchev & Boyd 2009). Recent years have witnessed a surge in investor focus on ESG factors, where diversity and inclusion are key components. McKinsey Global Institute Report (2023) emphasizes that genuinely diverse firms outperform their peers in financial metrics. Conversely, tokenism raises concerns about a firm's long-term sustainability and ability to attract top talent, potentially leading to negative investment decisions.

## Theories and Board Diversity

In a large number of studies, the results have suggested that board diversity has impacted organizational performance positively (Kang and Kim 2020). Ozedemir and Yaylacicegi (2020) suggest that no single theory offers, by itself, a comprehensive framework to make a solid link between diversity and performance. This is obviously due to the multidisciplinary nature of the board. The paper seeks to use the following theories to try and explain how firms can window dress their board composition through tokenism (Resource Based theory, Legitimacy theory, Agency theory and Tokenism theory). Generally diversified firms have been argued to produce better financial results and it is on this premise that some firms introduce tokenism to appear to be diverse. It has been established by (Rahman and Zahind, 2023; Qayyum et al, 2021) that tokenism has a negative effect on the firm value in as much as having a non-diverse board also has negative connotations. Therefore, these theories shall be utilized to explain the motivation of firms to adopt tokenism so as to appear to be conforming to board diversity.

## Tokenism theory

The tokenism theory is a study by (Kanter 1977a) that is a derivative of gender discrimination and the theory states that "individuals who are available in limited numbers in their professions face performance pressures, boundary heightening and role entrapment." The theory speaks to a white washing to include any female into a predominately male environment so that the board seems to be diverse in gender terms. With even UN SDG5 hoping to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Firms that are not seen to be adhering to board diversity are therefore viewed in negative light. Therefore, firms would rather put a figurehead so as to be seen to be compliant in board diversity. Tokenism creates the illusion of diversity without addressing systemic issues. Organisations may showcase these token board members as evidence of their commitment to diversity, but their actual impact on decision-making processes may be minimal. These appointments are often symbolic and lack genuine commitment to diversity and inclusion. Therefore, tokenism theory can be used to explain the rationale why institutions may include women on their boards so at to appear to be adhering to the dictates of law and public perception.

According to Kanter (1977), groups without a critical mass are regarded and treated as tokens in the workplace. In this theory, it is not race or gender which evokes silencing behaviors and concomitant levels of invisibility, but rather the structural condition of limited numerical representation. Therefore tokens are individuals in the board who because of their unique social characteristics are not a part of the dominant group (Wright 1996).

According to the tokenism theory (Kanter 1977), firms appoint diverse directors for purely symbolic reasons and such directors are not expected to participate as full members of the board. Tokens find themselves being treated as representatives of their category, rather than, as individuals. They are generally so few in numbers that they cannot form a power alliance in the board. Tokenism involves a self-perpetuating cycle that reinforces low numbers and keeps tokens in their positions. Wright (1996) suggests that being different forces tokens to act differently in that they perceive themselves as, working under different conditions than dominants in the board, always in the limelight, and never able to make any meaningful contribution. Furthermore, race and gender are used to magnify erroneous situations involving tokens, and also, to draw additional attention to their absence and or presence. Despite the universal appeal of its rhetoric and the regular policy conversations on the topic, progress in terms of gender diversity on corporate boards is slow and rife with tokenism (Sotola 2019). While increasing women representation may give the impression that a board is diverse, it might create problems owing to a lack of depth in the pool of board-ready women. This can lead to the 'golden skirt phenomenon', where a few women accumulate board positions due to tokenism. In order to realize the real intent, board appointments must go beyond tokenism. Though there are some presumed benefits associated with the involvement of women in the boardroom, concern has been raised over forced involvement, including the adoption of binding quota systems and timelines for when corporations should diversify, which some have claimed maybe counterproductive (Harjoto, Laksmana and Yang, 2018)

## Resource-Based Theory and Board Diversity

According to Barney (1991) and Wernerfelt (1984), organizations can gain an advantage over their competitors by possessing a strategic resource that is rare, valuable, difficult to imitate, and has no substitutes. This resource allows organizations to develop strategies that can capitalize on opportunities align their resources, skills and expertise towards core competencies, which give them an advantage over rivals (Chi, 1994). Proponents of the Resource Based Theory maintains that a firm's essential resources, both tangible and intangible, can be effectively deployed to enhance its competitiveness (Charterjee, 2021). Such resources may be in actual fact a diverse board. Ghasemaghei (2021) highlighted that competitiveness can be enhanced through valuable, rare, inimitable and irreplaceable resources which can be used to create value and improve performance. The Resource Based theory suggests that firms should endeavor to raise the value of their resources because the combined value of the complementary resources is higher than the sum of each resource (Ghasemaghei, 2021). This then seems to imply that firms that have a diverse board composition are more formidable than those with a homogeneous board composition. This alone can fuel firms to diversify their board compositions utilizing various tokenism aspects such as gender, age, ethnicity and educational diversity that add no real value to the firm.

The Resource Based theory suggests that the presence and diversity of knowledge on the board is a resource that provides the board with the capabilities to participate in the firms' strategic decisions (Barroso-Catro 2017). The Resource Based theory advocates that the existence of a diverse board shall turn out to be fruitful for the organizational performance, as they will promote legitimacy between the society and stakeholders (Lückerath-Rovers, 2013). Different authors suggest the base is the impact of diversity on Resource Based theory, coming into the category of research on organizational behavior (Hillman and Dalziel, 2003). Resource based theory is used to analyze Board functions and actions (Gabrielsson and Huse, 2004). Thus, the focus of the relationship between ownership and management is shifted to the links of the company with its environment. According to this framework, Boards are part of the organizations and their environment, and by providing the organization with information and resources, Boards help to create a cushion against an uncertain environment. This viewpoint suggests that, on an individual basis, Board members bring resources to the organization as a result of their backgrounds Alvarado, Briones and Ruiz (2011). Based on this premise of the Resource based theory, the more the board seems to have diversity the more formidable the board is. This can act as a catalyst to add diversity in the board for the sake of on paper diversity through tokenism in board positions.

## Legitimacy Theory and Board Diversity

The legitimacy theory was developed by Dowling and Pfeffer in 1975 (Guthrie and Ward, 2006). The theory is the tool that manages the stakeholders' perceptions of the needs for attaining the organizational legitimacy. Thus, legitimacy offers to an organization the right to perform its activities in consensus with stakeholders' interests (Suchman 1995). This in itself is a paradox in itself as stakeholders have conflicting interests, the internal stakeholders are concerned with a profitable enterprise and external stakeholders are concerned with the enterprise doing what is right. According to legitimacy theory, companies disclose social responsibility information to present a socially responsible image so that they can legitimize their behaviors to their stakeholder groups. Legitimacy theory is based on the idea that a social contract exists between business and society. Therefore, firms can manipulate the public’s perspective based on their board composition that may at surface value appear diverse yet it has been filled with tokenism posts.

The legitimacy theory suggests that by adopting more diverse boards, firms can respond to the pressures from institutional investors and labor markets and attain increased legitimacy and business advantages Singh, Kota, Sardana and Singhania (2007). According to Suchman (1995), cited by Mahmud (2019), authenticity is a consolidated discernment in which an element performs appealing and correct behaviors within socially defined standards, values, convictions, and definitions. In relation to disclosures, legitimacy theory that is congruency between the society’s expectations and company’s value systems plays an important role. The quality of such disclosures would also be subjective and context dependent (Beattie, McInnes and Fearnley, 2004). According to a study by Prasad, Mishra and Kalro (2017), the extent of disclosures after having implemented diversity in boards, increased from twelve in 2011 to fifteen in 2014, Moreover, the quality of disclosures also improved. The operations of organizations, according to this theory are legitimized not by the activities themselves but by the public's perception of the way the organization behaves. As cultural norms shift, organizations may need to adjust their training methods to remain relevant. Public image is receptive to the assumptions of society, and the organization should gain legitimacy by taking financially responsible, environmentally friendly, and socially responsible actions that do not threaten the social framework in which it operates (Deegan, 2019). The board should therefore address its authenticity, which differs from legal legitimacy by implying acceptance of genuine and willful moral norms (Zyznarska, 2018).

The legitimacy theory postulates that a firm is part of a social system in which the corporate and society influence each other. The influence of the corporate is mainly centered on those charged with corporate governance particularly on issues relating to board diversity (Samaha, 2010). To this end, the influence of those charged with governance is very critical thus positions the corporate governance mechanisms such as board composition, board gender diversity, board size, CEO/Chairman duality, sustainability committee and multiple directorships as key drivers which may influence the performance of a company (Kolk 2017). And as such legitimacy may be achieved by an organization by a token sanitization of the board composition.

## Agency Theory and Board Diversity

Agency theory is the main theoretical approach underlying the idea that a more diverse board may improve performance. Agency theory explains the principal-agent relationship. The principles are the firm's owner or shareholders, whereas the agents are the company's manager or senior management. The company's agents or managers are recruited and managed by the owner or principal. The principle or shareholder delegated authority to the shareholder's agent, who is the management or director, to run the company or corporation (Clarke, 2014). The agents, directors, or managers are intended to make choices in the long-term interests of the principle or shareholders, according to agency theory. Agents, on the other hand, are not compelled to make judgments only in the best interests of the principal, according to Padilla (2017). Therefore, the agent will not always act in the best interests of the principal, meaning the agent is not an extension of the principal. It will be plausible for the principal to portray a diverse board composition though the agents will fill board positions with token member for the purposes of appearing diverse.

As a theory, it has launched one of the most productive areas in business literature Alvarado, Briones and Ruiz (2011). Studies have used agency theory and focused on the characteristic of “independence”. In fact, major developments in this area link characteristics of the Board of Directors to the performance of the company. The Agency theory suggests an inherent imperfection in the relationship between capital providers (principals) and fiduciaries (agents) of that capital. It is a long-held concept which argues that when corporate ownership is separated from corporate management, behaviors, decisions, and actions by managers will deviate from those required to maximize shareholder value. In other words, agency theory assumes a divergence between the interests of corporate managers and those of shareholders (Aguilera, Filatotchev, Gospel and Jackson (2008); Bushman and Smith, (2001); Coles and Hesterly, (2000)). Asymmetric information and incomplete contracts lead to agency conflicts between capital providers and managers. These conflicts have associated costs to the extent that certain internal factors (corporate governance structures) reduce these costs, and might give an impulse towards a better performance. The theory contends that board diversity helps to maintain cost-efficient contracting between executives and employees. It premises that, an employee as agent may not always act in the best interest of the principal and may lack due care and professional skepticism hence there may arise inefficiencies on the work of the agent. These inefficiencies may manifest as tokenism in the board composition.

According to Alvarado, Briones and Ruiz (2011) Predictions about performance are similar to those of the agency theory if applied to gender diversity on boards. In this context, diversity would expand to profiles of the directors, for example, in order to improve relations with competitors and customers, knowledge about the sector or possibilities of financial access. Weak corporate governance causes agency costs and, consequently, a poorer performance (Core Guay and Rusticus 2006). Hillman and Daziel (2003) suggest that boards are the key to aligning the interests of shareholders and managers. This is the reason to consider gender diversity on boards as a tool for reducing agency costs and, thus, improving performance Organizations may introduce tokenism so as to appear to be diverse as an attempt to reduce agency costs. This argument is only acceptable if heterogeneous boards are thought of as a tool for better control. (Alvarado, Briones and Ruiz 2011).

Kang, Cheng, and Gray, (2007) argues that these theories share many similarities hence overlap with each other for example the legitimacy theory postulates that a firm is part of a social system in which the corporate and society influence each other. To buttress this argument, resource-based theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) stipulates that the external resources of the corporate affect the functioning and behavior of the firm. Clarke (2018) argue that at management level, one of the important resources is expertise as transcended by the caliber of the “brains” of the board. Since it is the responsibility of the management to drive corporates by efficient procurement of resources, it is important to note that their ability to create interlocks, alliances and corporate influence to overcome dependencies and improve firm’s autonomy and legitimacy is very key and this can be achieved by a diverse board (Kolk, 2017).

## Comparatives amongst different countries

### Japan

Japan is a very homogenous society and has little to no ethnical or racial diversity. There are no ethnic groups in Japan therefore there is no diversity in Japanese boards on ethnic grounds as they have a strong sense of group and national identity (http://afe.easia.columbia.edu ). Although women in Japan were recognized as having equal legal rights to men after World War II, economic conditions for women remain unbalanced. Modern policy initiatives to encourage motherhood and workplace participation have had mixed results but Japan has some rigid gender roles that are not oriented to the business environment. According to Cabinet Office data, (http://afe.easia.columbia.edu ), the percentage of female executives in Japan's prime market-listed companies was 10.7 per cent in 2020 and remained at just 11.4 per cent as of July 2022. This was far lower than France (45.2 per cent), the United Kingdom (37.2 per cent) and the United States (31.3 per cent). It is apparent that the participation of women in corporate Japan is very low and by extension their presence in boards will be lower than the statistics above. Since the Global Gender Gap Index was introduced by the World Economic Forum in 2006, many countries have generated significant improvement on having women in the workplace. Japan according to www.statista.com, is ranked 125th out of 146 in 2024 with regards to gender equality in the work place. Japan, in spite of the voices for adopting more women leaders that have been increasing and drawing attention to the percentage of women in leadership positions has not made any significant integration of females in board composition. The need for diversity in boards to include women may give rise for gender tokenism. This global positioning is indicative of Japan actually regressing in terms of women inclusion as in 2020 it was ranked 120th. Therefore, as firms rush to comply with the standards put in place by Japan's Financial Services Agency and the Tokyo Stock Exchange under the revised code the propensity to include women tokens in board may thus increase so that Japanese firms are seen to be compliant.

### South Africa

Research has shown that diverse boards are more likely to make better decisions, consider a wider range of perspectives, and be more innovative. However, when companies engage in board tokenism by appointing only a small number of women or minority individuals to their boards, they fail to reap the benefits of true diversity and inclusion. In the South African context, where diversity and transformation are key priorities in the wake of apartheid, board tokenism is a prevalent issue (Willows and Van der Linde 2016). Companies may appoint a single woman or minority individual to their boards in order to meet regulatory requirements or appease stakeholders, without making any meaningful changes to their overall board composition. This can create a false sense of progress and diversity, while maintaining the status quo of a predominantly homogenous board. Research has shown that board tokenism can have negative effects on firm value and performance. A study by Adams and Ferreira (2009) found that companies with token women on their boards actually underperformed compared to companies with more diverse boards. This suggests that simply adding a few women or minority individuals to a board without addressing the underlying issues of diversity and inclusion may not lead to better decision-making or performance. Furthermore, board tokenism can also have negative implications for corporate governance. A lack of true diversity on a board can lead to groupthink, reduced accountability, and ineffective oversight of management. This can ultimately harm shareholder value and erode trust in the company's leadership. In order to truly promote diversity and inclusion on corporate boards, companies in South Africa should strive to go beyond tokenism and implement meaningful strategies for increasing representation and inclusion. This may include setting targets for board diversity, implementing mentorship and training programs for underrepresented groups, and fostering a culture of inclusivity within the organization. Board tokenism can have detrimental effects on firm value and performance in the South African context. Companies that engage in superficial diversity practices may not realize the full benefits of having a truly diverse and inclusive board. In order to promote meaningful diversity and inclusion, companies should strive to go beyond tokenism and create a culture of inclusivity and representation at all levels of the organization Adams and Ferreira (2009).

Gyapong et al (2015) have noted that the previous studies on the value relevance of board gender and ethnic diversity have produced mixed results. Their paper re-examined the relationship using hand-collected data of 245 South African listed firms over the period 2008–2013. They noted that there is an increase in firm value when boards have three or more women directors. In contrast, ethnic minority directors contribute less to firm value when there are three or more on the board. According to Willows and van der Linde (2016) female directors were found to make up, on average, 18.78 per cent of the board of directors, with the majority of these women being in non-executive positions. Women representation appears to influence company performance positively when using accounting-based measures of performance (such as return on assets and return on equity), but negatively when using market-based measures (such as Tobin's Q). The critical mass concept is also assessed and is found to have a positive effect. Therefore, when the board diversity is done on ethical grounds, not just as tokenism it has positive effects on the firm value.

**India**

Tokenism is a prevalent practice in many organizations, including boards of directors, where individuals from under-represented groups are included in order to create the appearance of diversity without embracing true inclusion. In the context of Indian firms, there is a growing concern about the effects of board tokenism on firm value. Board tokenism can have various negative effects on firm value in India. One of the main consequences is the lack of diverse perspectives and experiences that token directors bring to the table (Pooja, 2020). When individuals are appointed solely based on their identity, rather than their qualifications and abilities, they may not be able to effectively contribute to the decision-making process. This can lead to suboptimal strategic decisions and ultimately lower firm performance. Additionally, board tokenism can create a sense of resentment and disengagement among other board members and employees (Singh and Verma. 2019). When individuals believe that their colleagues were hired for reasons other than their merit, it can undermine morale and teamwork within the organization. This can lead to decreased productivity and innovation, further impacting firm value. Furthermore, board tokenism can also have legal and reputational risks for firms in India. With increasing scrutiny on diversity and inclusion practices, organizations that engage in tokenism may face criticism from stakeholders, including investors, customers, and employees (Reddy and Gupta, 2018). This can result in damage to the organization's reputation and potential legal action, leading to negative effects on firm value. To address the negative effects of board tokenism, Indian firms must focus on promoting true diversity and inclusion within their organizations. This involves creating a culture that values diversity of thought and experiences, rather than simply meeting quotas or checkboxes. Firms should also ensure that board members are selected based on their skills, qualifications, and ability to contribute meaningfully to the organization. In conclusion, board tokenism can have detrimental effects on firm value in India (Sanan 2016). By prioritizing true diversity and inclusion practices, organizations can avoid the negative consequences of tokenism and create a more inclusive and successful work environment.

***Zimbabwe***

After employing a content analysis of the financial reports of manufacturing companies listed on the Zimbabwe Stock Exchange (ZSE) as sample. There are three companies under manufacturing on the ZSE (Delta Corporation, AFDIS and Innscor Africa) to establish the presence of women in their boards and what areas of expertise they brought to their entities. Zimbabwe does not have regulations that enforce board diversity but borrowing from the Constitution and SDGs that guide the trajectory of the nation companies are beginning to introduce women on their boards. The following were findings then gathered in this research;

In Zimbabwe, many companies still exhibit a significant gender gap on their boards. The current share of women holding positions in the manufacturing companies in Zimbabwe under study is no more than 2 (Annual Reports 2019-2023). According to Delta Corporation's Annual Report (2022), two females served as board members out of a total of thirteen board members. One female served as the Group Company Secretary and the other as a Supply Chain Director both being Executive Director positions. In Innscor Africa, two females served as board members out of a total of fifteen board members. One female served as a member of the Audit Risk Committee and the other the Group Finance and Sustainability Executive. These are Non-executive and Executive positions respectively (Annual Report 2021 and 2022). In AFDIS, two females served as board members out of a total of ten board members one female served as a Finance Director whilst the other served as a Director. Both were Executive Director positions (Annual Report 2019-2023). These women were reported as having played important roles in shaping their respective company's strategic direction.

With two female board members out of a total of thirteen board members, the board of Delta Corporation exhibits limited gender diversity, with eleven of its directors being male. With BA Econ and BSc Econ qualification, the females are committee members for the Audit and Risk, and Chairperson of the Remuneration Committees respectively. While there is a growing awareness of gender inclusion, Delta is yet to fully incorporate women into top leadership positions as no female is yet to occupy a top post such as board Chairperson (Annual Report 2019-2023).

Similarly, Innscor Africa's board shows limited gender diversity with only two females serving on the board out of a total of fifteen board members. Both females have a CA(Z) qualification and one is a committee member for the Audit and Risk, and Non-Executive director respectively Women's representation is minimal with thirteen of its directors being male. The males also occupy top leadership roles as no female has ever occupied the position of board Chairperson (Annual Report 2019-2023).

Whilst AFDIS has made significant strides in gender inclusion, they still lag behind in attaining more representation with two women out of a board of ten members serving. One female holds a CA(Z) qualification and is a Finance Director whilst the other holds a B. Laws (Hons) qualification and is a Director. Women's roles are still underrepresented as the males occupy top leadership roles in the board (Annual Report 2019-2023).

According to Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Framework, Zimbabwe (2020), Organizations should adopt and implement inclusive governance policies that address gender diversity. Organizations may want to consider the introduction of policies that sets a minimum percentage of female representation on boards so as to encourage organizations to proactively recruit and promote women in leadership positions (Chimuka, Sena, Musengwa (2023). Organization should consider reviewing their recruitment practices so that they actively reach out to diverse candidates for board positions thus making the board more inclusive. Training should also be ongoing amongst board members so as to indoctrinate an inclusive culture that supports diverse perspectives. The benefits of gender diversity are well known and they include increased effectiveness and efficiency and strengthened decision-making. However, most boards continue to fall short of reaching gender balance, with women constituting a small minority of the Executive Directors and Alternate Executive Directors meaning there is a clear need for change (IMF 2024).

## Counter measures for board tokenism

Bello and Nuhu (2021) highlighted some counter measures to address board tokenism which include critical mass ensuring that multiple individuals from underrepresented groups are appointed to the board, rather than just a single token representative. It is also imperative to define specific roles and expectations for new appointees to ensure they have a clear understanding of their duties and authority. Firms should also foster an inclusive culture that values diverse perspectives and encourages active participation and contribution from all board members and hold the organization and its leaders accountable for promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion, and for addressing any instances of tokenism or marginalization. For tokensim to be countered firms need to be aware of power imbalances and ensure that new appointees have equal access to information, resources, and decision-making processes and regularly assess the effectiveness of diversity and inclusion initiatives and make adjustments as needed to address any issues or concerns. By implementing these countermeasures, organizations can help prevent board tokenism and create a more inclusive and effective leadership environment.

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