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Abjection in extremely gendered colonial organizations: Female military firefighter officers in Brazil

Abstract

It is often suggested that some occupations are inherently more suited to men or to women. Such beliefs can become norms that can have powerful effects on those who inhabit – or wish to enter - such occupations. This article explores the discursive framing of gendered occupations by considering the experience of cis female military firefighter officers in the masculine world of the Corpo de Bombeiros Militar in the Brazilian state of Espírito Santo. We identify this Global South organization as extremely gendered but also profoundly colonial in its patriarchal order and its hierarchical culture and structure. We use Kristeva (1982, 1989) and Butler's (1990, 1993a, 1993b, 1997) work on abjection – referring to processes of exclusion or casting out - to understand how these officers and their bodies are differentiated in the Corps. Based on interviews and analysis of a recruitment document, we foreground their abjection using three examples: the organization's physical entrance test, the maternal body and its masculine organizational grammar. Yet, just as they are targets of exclusion, these women and their bodies are also necessary to maintain the hypermasculinity of this organization. Our contribution is to analyse abjection in a specific hypergendered organizational context where masculinity is not only amplified by the co-presence of military service and firefighting but also where gender relations, structure and culture have deep colonial roots.

Keywords: abject, body, Brazil, coloniality, extremely gendered organizations, female military firefighter officers, power

Introduction

Military organizations are masculinized environments that attach great importance to the body and have been classified as extremely or hypergendered (Barrett, 2001; Godfrey, 2009; Godfrey and Brewis, 2018; Godfrey et al., 2012; Hale, 2012; Höpfl, 2003; Husain-Talero and Angulo, 2019; Karazi-Presler, 2020; Lee at al., 2019; Sasson-Levy, 2008, 2011). In this context, the centrality of the assigned male at birth (AMAB) cis body[1] and masculine identity privileges men and male bodies – and their assumed capabilities and performances - over all others. Our contention is that this hypermasculine symbolic order renders women and female bodies abject, cast out, shunned. We explore how processes of abjection operate in one military context by analysing the experiences of cis female officers in the Corpo de Bombeiros Militar, the Brazilian Military Firefighting Corps. Traditionally in Brazil, military activity was an exclusively male activity: in fact, only in the 1990s were women allowed to join the Corpo de Bombeiros Militar in Espírito Santo (CBMES hereafter). More recently, the number of women seeking to enlist has increased considerably due to the excellent salaries, job stability and retirement benefits on offer. The Corps combines military service with firefighting, another extremely masculine occupation (Baigent, 2005; Ericson and Mellstrom, 2016; Perrott, 2019; Tyler et al. 2019). Moreover, unlike the military organizations discussed in the vast majority of the research we review later, it is located in the Global South. What we contend, then, is that CBMES is also a highly colonial organization.

We use conceptualizations of the abject developed by Kristeva (1982, 1989) and Butler (1990, 1993a, 1993b, 1997) to understand how female officers are abjectified in the Corps, producing anxiety about and exclusion of them and their bodies. Our argument therefore adds to understandings of self-construction, bodily differentiation and cultural and structural aspects of

being excluded or included (hereafter ex/in-clusion) in extremely gendered organizations in highlighting the consequences of abjection for female officers and their leadership performances (Hook, 2006). To understand how female officers and their bodies are constituted as abject, we analyse: a rite of passage related to entrance into CBMES; the maternal body in this military organization; and the effects of its masculine organizational grammar[2] for women's leadership performances. We suggest these instances of abjection are firmly embedded not only in the formal and informal practices, structure and culture of this branch of the Corps, but also in how its firefighters construct themselves. Our respondents are all cis women – in other words, they identify with the female sex they were assigned at birth (AFAB), so we cannot speak to the experiences of transgender or gender non-conforming military firefighters, or their cis male colleagues, based on our data.

The growing body of research on abjection in organizations offers valuable insights into processes of ex/in-clusion (eg, Brewis and Linstead, 2000; Fotaki, 2013; Kenny, 2010, 2012; Phillips and Rippin, 2010; Rizq, 2013). Using Butler and Kristeva together, we seek to add to this research by foregrounding abjection as a series of power effects of normative discourses on selves and bodies in CBME, surfacing the naturalization of men and the cis male body as the norm for military firefighting. However, women and their bodies cannot be completely excluded from CBMES: their abject status is a necessary counterpoint for this naturalization in order to maintain its hypermasculine symbolic order.

Some empirical organization studies research on abjection has focused on female leaders and their bodies, including Gatrell (2013, 2014, 2019), Hunter and Kivinen (2016) and Mavin and Grandy (2016), at times enrolling participants from what are likely to be hypergendered organizations. But none analyses the Global South. As such there is no attention to the abjectifying

consequences of colonialism in this context. As Brazilian anthropologist Gonzalez (1979) argues, emotions and subjectivities are discursive attributes or effects which become concrete in different social and political sites, thus producing specific linguistic and political instantiations of symbolic and physical violence against women. Put another way, the abjectification of women occurs differently in different organizations and different societies - it is a locally constructed phenomenon (Grosz, 1994). More research is therefore needed in a wider range of societal and organizational settings – especially beyond the Global North - to better understand variations in practices, processes and experiences of abjection.

Our paper thus seeks to problematize how women have been abjectified in a specific social context - a hypermasculine military organization in Brazil. We argue that gender violence and the exclusion of women are rooted in Brazil's colonial period and persist to this day in CBMES (Pitanguy, 1982). We highlight local processes of abjection that are relevant to Brazilian women's struggles, considering that their abjection in the workplace has not yet been researched. Furthermore, despite attempts to combat gender discrimination in society and in organizations through the creation of laws and norms that seek to establish equality, the paper evidences that they fail in practice due to the gendered symbolic order of organizations and of the wider social context.

First, we situate our analysis as a reading of the coloniality of power, gender and organizational forms in modern Brazil, discussing the gender violence and 'elitist and authoritarian practices' (Rauber, cited in Misoczky et al., 2017: 250) which characterize its government institutions and private sector organizations alike. Next, the specificities of military and firefighting organizations are presented, highlighting their hypergendered characteristics and suggesting connections to coloniality and its organizational forms. Having established this

backdrop, we discuss the concept of abjection in Kristeva (1982, 1989) and Butler (1990, 1993a, 1993b, 1997), emphasizing how their understandings both differ and coincide. We selected these theorists because of their gendered readings of abjection. We then review work in organization studies on abjection of cis women leaders and their bodies. Afterwards we outline our methodology and approach to data analysis. Our findings and discussion then explore three aspects of the abjection of female officers in CBMES: (1) their formalized abjection through the Physical Aptitude Test during candidate recruitment; (2) the maternal body; and (3) how CBMES' masculine grammar subordinates these women's leadership. We argue that these examples of abjection act together to maintain the colonialist hypermasculine symbolic order of CBMES.

Coloniality, power, gender and organizations in modern Brazil

Brazil was colonized by the Portuguese in 1500, seceding in 1822. However, although the forcible sovereignty of political and economic colonialism is largely at an end worldwide, coloniality, the 'colonization of the *imagination* of the dominated' (Quijano, 2007: 169 – emphasis added), is not. Indeed Quijano suggests that coloniality is most profoundly exemplified in Latin America (page 170). His central thesis is that colonialism created fictional categories of 'biological' difference to distinguish between the colonizers and the colonized, the most central of which he identifies as race. This led to cultural hierarchization of societies in which, hitherto, differences had never been placed one above the other. With colonialism, and its accomplice coloniality, 'some identities depict superiority over others' (Maldonado-Torres, 2007: 244) as more modern, more civilized, more rational. As Quijano (2007) argues, aspiring to these

identities was a simple means of survival given the colonialist extermination of huge numbers of indigenous people.

Lugones, however, asserts that colonialism was more than a process of racialization – she insists that it simultaneously relied on gendering. For her, we should not look 'for a non-colonized construction of gender in indigenous organizations of the social. There is no such thing; "gender" [as a dichotomizing binary] does not travel away from colonial modernity' (2010: 746). Lugones identifies this gendering as specific to colonialism and coloniality, saying it is inextricably connected with both race and class and has no predecessor in pre-colonial European gender systems. She notes that 'The long process of subjectification of the colonized toward adoption/ internalization of the men/ women dichotomy as a normative construction of the social – a mark of civilization, citizenship, and membership in civil society – was and is constantly renewed', adding that 'coloniality infiltrates every aspect of living' (pages 747, 754), including the organization of labour. Indeed gender violence is part of Brazilian colonial history, characterized in the imperial era by the hypersexualization and rape of enslaved African women. Carneiro (2011) agrees that this violence was fomented by the colonialist gender binary which constructs women as the fragile and incomplete Other to men. Thus, violence and gender exclusion are part of a discursive order originating in the colonialist production of hierarchies and bodily differences between men and women (Lopes, 2019). Pitanguy (1982: 5) suggests that 'the attribution of such qualities [as] opposite removes from the human being its dialectical movement, concealing its integral meaning'.

And gender violence is still very much present in 'post'-colonial Brazil, with its exponentially high levels of rape, femicide and domestic violence. It has the fifth highest rate of femicide in the world (Sudré and Cocolo, 2016) and, for the thirteenth consecutive year, has been

the country with the most murders of transgender people and *travestis* (United Nations, 2021). This violence endures despite recent changes like the Maria da Penha law of 2006 which aims to curb domestic violence (Nothaft and Lisbon, 2021). Pitanguy's (1982) assertion that violence against women is part of the sociohistorical fabric of Brazilian society - and that laws alone are not enough to address this - bears testimony to the immutability of this aspect of coloniality.

Maldonado-Torres (2007: 261-262) underscores the importance of asking 'questions about the effects of colonization in modern subjectivities and modern forms of life'. We take up this injunction in the Brazilian context in order to analyse the 'post'-colonial social processes that simultaneously involve violence against as well as exclusion of certain bodies in this cultural space, reflecting on the symbolic and physical gender violence which characterizes CBMES – the relentless ways in which its women officers are abjectified.

But there is more at work in our empirical site than the gendered effects of coloniality. Another consequence, working alongside and amplifying these effects, is the modern form of organization itself, of which CBMES is a prime exemplar. As Misoczky (2011: 347) argues, following Mignolo, the imperial hallmarks of 'domination' and 'classification' are reflected in colonialism's establishing a series of 'institutions whose function is to define and maintain such classifications'. Like gender violence in Brazil, these institutions endure to the present day. CBMES' 'elitist and authoritarian vertical practices' – its steep hierarchical structure and how this plays out in everyday organizational practices – are thus in themselves colonial. The resulting 'reproduction of the routine and the previously learned' (Misoczky et al., 2017: 252) is both coercive and dehumanizing in the way it continually marks women as abject. It embodies 'power organized as inequality, discrimination, exploitation, and as domination' (Quijano, cited in Misoczky, 2019: 3-4).

Our choice of abjection as a conceptual vehicle to unpick the gendered workings of this colonial institution is based on observations like the following, from Lugones (2010: 751 – emphasis added):

> One can look at the colonial past and, as an observer, see the natives negotiating the introduction of foreign beliefs and practices as well as negotiating being assigned to *inferior* positions and being found *polluting and dirty* … pressed under difficult circumstances to occupy *demeaning* positions that make them *disgusting* to [their] social superiors. To see … coloniality is to see the *powerful reduction of human beings to animals, to inferiors by nature,* in a schizoid understanding of reality that dichotomizes the human from nature, the human from the non-human.

Abjection, we contend, allows us to understand how these notions of inferiority, pollution, dirt, animality and disgust persist in modern Brazilian colonial organizations. Inspired by Gonzalez (1979) and Grosz (1994), we foreground the abjectification of women as a localized phenomenon, varying across different social and organizational contexts and with different effects. Thus, the processes of abjection must be thought of according to the geopolitical spaces where they occur, allowing us to highlight issues of relevance to contemporary women's struggles (Misoczky and Camara, 2020) and workplace equality in Brazil. Blay (2001) observes a logic of exclusion of women from the Brazilian workplace which means they live on the margins of power, margins that were produced in the country's colonial past and persist in contemporary society. CBMES emerges from our analysis as a particularly acute example of Blay's observation, given its colonialist (read authoritarian and hypermasculine) culture and structure.

We now turn to the literature on military organizations, seeking to contextualize these institutions where relevant as an outcrop of colonialism.

Military organizations as extremely gendered

Military organizations like CBMES may present themselves as gender neutral, but structurally and culturally they are masculine. As such, and as we suggest above, they attach great importance to the body (Godfrey et al., 2012). These organizations not only 'rely on men, but also … serve as fertile ground for the restructuring of masculine identities, hegemonic and heteronormative masculinity and women's exclusion' (Karazi-Presler, 2020: 9). In this restructuring, the military body is constituted as cis male, strong, active and healthy (Sasson-Levy, 2008). Other forms of embodiment are marginalized. For Sasson-Levy (2011), military organizations are extremely gendered because they: (1) privilege the idealized male body in ways not replicated in other organizations; (2) rely on mostly physical rites of passage; and (3) foreground the patriarchal hegemonic order. These characteristics also actively exclude people considered not suitable for military activity.

With our empirical site in mind, here we detect postcolonial scholars' emphasis on binary gender as a profoundly colonial consequence – Lugones (2010: 746), for example, arguing that this dichotomy 'does not travel away from colonial modernity' – as well as what Misoczky and Camara (2020) argue with relation to the patriarchal gender order of colonial institutions. Karazi-Presler (2020) demonstrates that hypermasculinity is also expressed in day-to-day behaviours in military organizations such as women working to claim recognition due to their exclusion from, or at minimum their struggles to attain and maintain, leadership positions. These behaviours are arguably counter-productive, as we will suggest in our findings and discussion. In other words,

seeking recognition in a colonial hypergendered institution like CBMES serves to perpetuate its key characteristics.

Extremely gendered organizations like the military therefore (re)produce ‘dichotomous, hierarchical, and essentialist conceptions of femininity and masculinity ... these perceptions superimpose a narrow range of gender identities that are available to individuals within the organizations’ (Sasson-Levy, 2011: 394). ‘Superimpose’, of course, is a very significant term given our empirical context and our contention that CBMES is a colonial institution. There is an overvaluation of physicality in military service (Woodward and Winter, 2004) and selection examinations require very high levels of fitness to qualify for entry. All would-be entrants and members are judged using hypermasculinity as a reference. This privileges cis men and cis male bodies, affirming their superior physical strength, with cis women (and transgender and gender non-conforming people) evaluated accordingly as fragile and Other (Carneiro, 2011; Lee et al., 2019; Lopes 2019; Sasson-Levy, 2008, 2011). Sasson-Levy also identifies a degree of homogeneity between military organizations across the world, produced through joint operations or wars, alliances and cooperation and exchange visits. This, once more, speaks directly to our claim that, in Brazil, these institutions are the product of European imperialism.

CBMES is also a firefighting organization, of course, and these spaces are also considered to be hypermasculine (Baigent, 2005; Ericson and Mellstrom, 2016; Perrott, 2019; Tyler et al., 2019). Again, they value characteristics like strength, aggressiveness, courage and heroism (Maleta, 2009; Perrott, 2019), compelling female firefighters to perform masculinity. Firefighting organizations, relatedly, favour the establishment of fraternal ties between men to the detriment of women (Ainsworth et al., 2014). We suggest then that CBMES is doubly masculinized – or perhaps an extreme example of an extremely gendered organization – in its

bringing together of two highly masculinist occupations. The difficulties that women are subjected to in military service and firefighting exemplify Tyler et al.'s (2019: 1305) claim that 'If an organization is so closely tied to particular notions of masculinity, then challenging this – through, for example, the greater inclusion of women – can be seen to challenge the existence of the organization itself'. Whilst this does not mean that cis women cannot and do not serve with great distinction in the military and in firefighting, it does mean they have a great deal more to overcome in these hypergendered contexts than cis men, to whom a sort of 'natural militarism' attaches itself by virtue of their AMAB bodies. Indeed, when we apply the lens of coloniality to CBMES, we can see that this natural militarism is not only far from natural, but has its origins in empire.

Next we elucidate Kristeva and Butler's conceptualizations of the abject in order to provide the theoretical backdrop which underpins our findings around how women officers in CBMES are treated as inferior, polluting and dirty, per Lugones' (2010: 751) comments on coloniality.

Abjection in Kristeva and Butler

For Kristeva (1982: 101), birth is 'a violent act of expulsion [/ abjection] through which the nascent body tears itself away from the matter of maternal insides'. As such, birth begins the process through which physical and psychological distinctions emerge between child and mother. The infant's repulsion of the maternal body via socialization rituals like weaning and toilet training further separates it from the mother. It emerges as an intelligible, singular subject via the establishment of these boundaries between itself and the (m)Other. As Tyler (2009) points out, it is this singularity which Kristeva sees as fundamental to viable personhood – to

one's sense of oneself as *one* self. Abjection beyond infancy therefore describes how we react when we experience a lack of distinction between ourselves and something Other (a person, an animal or a thing), which threatens our existence as a legitimate living being and creates 'feelings of anxiety, disgust, repulsion and fear' (Rizq, 2013: 1297). The ultimate example of the abject for Kristeva is a dead body because it demonstrates what we must 'permanently thrust aside in order to live' (1982: 3).

Indeed, although Kristeva (1982: 9) recognizes abjection as a boundary, a way of 'thrusting' the Other 'aside', she warns that it 'does not radically [or permanently] cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger'. We will always depend on the Other to constitute ourselves as subjects (Rizq, 2013) because it is, simply put, what we are not. Abjection is triggered by the fear experienced by the subject as it works to repel anything which threatens the maintenance of its singularity (Mavin and Grandy, 2016). Nonetheless, the abject is also 'a space … to which the subject is continually and repetitively drawn' (Phillips and Rippin, 2010: 481). As Tyler (2009) clarifies, Kristevan abjection therefore involves experiences that generate aversion and repugnance but also fascination and compulsion.

Tyler (2009) nonetheless suggests that Kristeva's reading is too focused on self-contained psychological processes of attraction and repudiation and needs to encompass social experiences where hate, dehumanization and physical violence are manifested beyond the individual subject. For Tyler, the abject 'is a force which disrupts the social world *in order* to secure social norms, including those of gender … [it] can explain the structural and political acts of inclusion/ exclusion which establish the foundations of social existence' (pages 79, 84). Butler (1990) also criticizes Kristeva's argument as based on a pre-discursive and ahistorical essentializing of the

maternal body. For Butler, as for Grosz (1994), all abject bodies are cultural constructions – they do not exist outside of discourse. She adds that it is not fundamental for the constitution of identity to have such well-defined frontiers between self and Other as Kristeva suggests. Butler uses Foucault to depict the abject as an effect of discursive practices which circulate normalizing power effects. Here abjection – rejection of what is considered impure, dirty, improper, inferior, animalistic - is the process through which the 'normal' subject is built via the 'abnormal' subject. For Butler, then, the abject always produces the exclusion of certain bodies (Janzen et al., 2013). She sees abjection as a power apparatus, 'an entire system of interrelated and organized discourses and professions, which together produce a particular truth about society and social relations' (Janzen et al., 2013: 144). This constitutes an abject body as 'not quite' or 'not yet' a person; or, in our case, not quite or not yet – or perhaps more accurately never to become - a firefighter (Butler, 1993b; Janzen et al., 2013). The abject body therefore does not matter: it literally fails to count as a body, much less a subject (Butler, 1993b: 15).

Nonetheless, 'the impossibility of a full recognition, that is, of ever fully inhabiting the name by which one's social identity is inaugurated and mobilized, implies the instability and incompleteness of subject-formation' (Butler, 1993a: 18). In other words, as Kristeva (1982: 9) also has it, we never achieve permanent separation from what threatens our subjecthood. Consequently, the intelligible subject which is reproduced via abjection will always be 'incomplete and struggling' (Kenny, 2012: 1177). And yet subjects cannot exist outside of the symbolic order. Even though none of us is completely identified with discursive norms and therefore recognized as socially legitimate once and for all, we prefer to embrace these norms continually, painfully and incompletely to exist as subjects: it would be even more painful not to (Butler, 1997). When a person doesn't conform to the symbolic order – eg, gender norms in a

certain time and space – then they are not a subject: they are abject (Kenny, 2010). As such the subject can only exist alongside abjection: it is 'constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, "inside" the subject as its own founding repudiation' (Butler, 1993a: 3).

Despite their differences, there are commonalities in Butler and Kristeva's readings. First, to talk about abjection is to talk about frontiers: whether these are permeable (Butler) or well-defined (Kristeva), the abject cannot be eliminated forever. Second, it is fundamental for the construction of subjectivities: we depend on the Other to constitute ourselves as subjects. Third, whether the abject is conceived as pre-discursive or not, abjection operates discursively as a means of maintaining the symbolic order, aiming (but always failing) to reject everything which endangers social norms. It is also important to point out at this stage that, although we borrow from Kristeva's theorizing in what follows, we want to identify the sociocultural specificities of the hypermasculine colonial space of CBMES and as such follow Butler (1990) and Grosz (1994) in reading abjection as always particular to a time and place. This also echoes Gonzalez's (1979) insistence on understanding the dynamic concretization of violence against women in discrete contexts.

Abjection in organization studies: leadership and maternal bodies

We now consider the uptake of the concept of the abject in organization studies in regard to cis women leaders and their bodies. One relevant study is Mavin and Grandy's (2016) discussion of female leaders. Inspired by Tyler (2011), they expand the concept of abject labour to understand these leaders' bodies, demonstrating the centrality of abjection in the ongoing (re)production of organizations. Mavin and Grandy develop the theory of abject appearance to

understand how female leaders embody their identities, demonstrating how they seek to disavow their abject organizational status in how they look and also their relationships to other women's bodies at work. Since leaders' bodies are conventionally understood as cis male, women leaders need to navigate norms which position their bodies as 'out of place' (Mavin and Grandy, 2016: 1096). This means they are subject to constant judgement and control by masculine rationality and also explains the low numbers of women in leadership positions.

Relatedly, leaders who are pregnant or new mothers experience particular challenges in organizations because their 'maternal bodies' (Gatrell, 2011) violate the boundaries between (masculine, rational, self-contained, non-corporeal) public and (feminine, leaky, emotional, animal) private life. Pregnancy and early maternity can both be understood as 'a series of biological transitions over which the mother-to-be has little control, a period during which matter literally takes over from mind and the phenomenology of the body becomes the focus of attention' (Warren and Brewis, 2004: 222) - and so they call into question our control over our bodies. We also know from Kristeva (1982: 207) that anything 'double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered' – like the maternal body – can be experienced or regarded as blurring our selfhood, our sense of ourselves as one self. In her interviews with senior women, Gatrell (2013, 2014, 2019) finds they were engaged in constant concealment of their maternal bodies – of morning sickness and exhaustion, for instance – but also rigorous self-discipline so their bodies only produced breast milk outside of work. Similar silencings are found in Hunter and Kivinen's (2016) study of staff in two girls' magazines offices, for example where one editor did not want readers and advertisers to know she was pregnant and thus was disinclined to go to an annual occasion for these communities. She did attend eventually, but dressed to conceal her bump, to downplay the literal doubling of her pregnant body.

In this strand of organization studies research, we can detect the peculiarities of abjection as experienced by female leaders and their reactions. There is a motif of the particular difficulties these women face because of their senior – and therefore highly visible – organizational positions. They are seemingly even more of a threat to masculinist, 'rational', supposedly disembodied workplaces than their more junior counterparts – and so much more likely to trigger the anxiety-ridden process of abjection. When they take their maternal bodies to work, this only amplifies their visibility and the consequent abjection. Some of these analyses have also surfaced gendered abjection in what are very probably hypermasculine organizations – for example, some of Mavin and Grandy's (2016) respondents worked in sectors like agriculture, construction, transport, manufacturing, finance and defence.

Here we also conceive of abjection as a contingent practice, a phenomenon located in space (CBMES) and time (data were gathered during 2019 and 2020). To reiterate, Gonzalez (1979) instructs us that the violent subjugation of women in particular places must be analysed as just that – particular. Similarly, Grosz (1994: 192) avers that abjection links experiences with 'socially and culturally specific meanings of the body'. We argue in what follows that the centrality of masculine discourse in CBMES causes women to be represented accordingly, abjectifying them, generating fear and revulsion (and potentially attraction, although we detect no evidence of this in our data). But, more than this, CBMES is an institution whose hypergendered, authoritarian characteristics are also intensely colonial. As such, our analysis illuminates experiences of abjection as tangible, highly patriarchal traces of empire in contemporary Brazil.

Next we outline the methodology used to explore the abjection of female officers in CBMES.

Methodology

Firefighting in Brazil is carried out by military organizations, known collectively as the Corpo de Bombeiros Militar (CBM), which are also auxiliary forces for the Brazilian army. The CBM unit we focus on is in the state of Espírito Santo, in southeastern Brazil – CBMES. Eloisio was granted access by its General Commander on the basis of his research on gender inclusion and leadership in military organizations, given the Commander's espoused commitment to promoting the inclusion of women. He was keen for Eloisio to explore this at CBMES, especially after a CBMES command meeting where female officer Daniele used the feminine term 'bombeiras' and provoked a very strong reaction from the men present. We discuss this in 'Masculine grammar and its consequences for women's leadership in CBMES' later in the paper. Eloisio also agreed with the Commander that he would present relevant findings to CBMES personnel. CBMES has nine fire brigade units; six battalions and three independent companies. Each battalion consists of two companies. The General Commander is in overall charge. At the time of the research there were 1254 Corps personnel in total in Espírito Santo, 142 of whom were officers.

CBMES' officer command structure has the rank of Second Lieutenant at the lowest level and General Commander at the top. In ascending order in this structure, one woman is a Second Lieutenant, four are First Lieutenants and twelve are Captains. None occupies the more senior ranks of Major, Lieutenant Colonel or Colonel; and all General Commanders of CBMES since its foundation have been men. This in itself reflects the valorization of cis men and their bodies in its symbolic order. Further, and although we acknowledge that interviewing 'rank and file' female firefighters may have illuminated more extreme instances of abjection, our data indicate that officers of CBMES are scarcely immune from it despite their formal rank. Indeed we index

how their leadership is affected by abjectification, thus echoing other studies of female leaders in our discipline. Importantly, the leadership style in CBMES, in common with other colonial organizations, is autocratic, which as Flores-Pereira et al. (2008: 1019) suggest is 'very traditional … in many [Brazilian] social situations, such as family, politics, church and organizations'.

Eloisio conducted semi-structured interviews with all 17 female officers during 2019 and 2020. Interviewees were aged between 28 and 59 and their service varied from 8 to 22 years. All consented to recording of their interviews which lasted for approximately 12 hours in total. The recordings were transcribed and translated from Portuguese into English for analysis. The interviews covered four themes: context and demographics; joining CBMES; military activities and gender; and gender and leadership. Only data relating to the process of joining and leadership are utilized in this paper. To protect the identities of the interviewees, we give them typical female Brazilian first names. Many were familiar with Eloisio's research on gender, women leaders and LGBTQ+ people and as such seemed to feel very comfortable discussing the issues raised in the interviews.

In our data analysis, similarly to Gilmore and Harding (2021), we first sought to understand the themes that appeared repeatedly in interviewees' responses, which were typically very emotional accounts about feelings of exclusion in CBMES. Daniele's account of how she was treated at a command meeting, which we reference above, is a prime example. The same is true of respondents' narratives of struggling with the physical entrance test and how profoundly unsupported those who were mothers felt in the organization. Here we began to see Othering processes at work whereby female officers were confronted with processes and behaviours at CBMES which constantly reinforced a sense that they were neither welcome in nor suitable for

this military organization. Then we delved deeper to highlight the consequent symbolic and at times physical violence and intense frustration experienced by these officers. Only during this step did abjection, with its connotations of inferiority, pollution, dirt, animality and disgust, emerge from the data. As an illustration, the prevalent masculine grammar in the organization continually reaffirms to female officers that, in symbolic terms, they are not and can never be military firefighters because no accepted words exist in the CBMES vernacular to describe them. Following Butler's use of Foucault to depict abjection as an apparatus of power, here we became concerned to identify the discursive norms in CBMES that function as truth in accounts of the ideal military firefighter, and therefore generate power effects. Foucault (1980) understands discourse as a collective form of practice in certain social spaces, like CBMES, that constitutes the subject. Our analysis likewise focuses on discourse in a specific context, 'generating interpretative claims with regard to the power effects of a discourse on groups of people' (Powers, 2007: 18) – in our case, abjectification of women in CBMES who are constructed as the abnormal Other to the ideal military firefighter. In her feminist decolonial work, Ribeiro (2017: 31) states that this kind of approach allows us to understand how 'power and identity work together depending on their contexts', legitimizing or delegitimizing certain identities in particular social sites. This also echoes Butler's (1990) and Grosz's (1994) emphasis on the specificity of abjection and Gonzalez's (1979) underlining of the contextual particularities of symbolic and physical violence against women.

In our findings and discussion, a physical rite of passage – the Physical Aptitude Test (PAT) - is discussed first to unpick how it differentiates between bodies (Hook, 2006) to make it much harder for female aspirants to gain entry to the Corps. Second, we analyse the repudiation of the maternal body in CBMES. Third, and regarding abjection's role in the maintenance of the

hypermasculine symbolic cultural order, we explore the consequences for female leaders in exercising leadership in this extremely gendered and highly colonial organization.

Findings and discussion

Physical rites of passage in CBMES: female officers and bodily abjection

As established, key characteristics of this hypergendered organization are the centrality attributed to the AMAB cis body and the existence of bodily rites of passage like the PAT (Godfrey et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2019; Sasson-Levy, 2008, 2011). The PAT defines the frontiers between who can belong to CBMES and who is abject. Since the selection process is standardized according to the bureaucratic logic that 'guarantees' equality and impersonality in the treatment of candidates, CBMES styles itself as a gender-neutral organization (Acker, 1990), not establishing any gender quotas for entry. Thus, women theoretically compete for vacancies with all other officer candidates regardless of their AFAB cis bodies, as Leticia explains:

> Right, in some states there is a distinction in relation to the guaranteed number of places, percentage, the amount for men and women. Not here … The competition is free and what stands out is the application of the PAT, which is a table [of requirements] for men and [one] for women. Other than that distinction, all other [entrance] exams are the same.

However, this apparent neutrality cloaks the reification of the male military body, as we will go on to elucidate. The PAT to become an officer consists of a hanging bar, an abdominal rower, press ups, running and swimming. Only 'candidates who pass the arm hang bar test will be submitted to the abdominal rower test, in the same way as only candidates who pass the abdominal rower test will be subjected to the press ups test on the ground' (Governo do Estado

do Espírito Santo, 2018: 14). Table 1 documents the differences between requirements of men and women.

Table 1: Gender differences in PAT requirements

	Hanging bar	Abdominals	Press ups	Running	Swimming
Men	10 pull ups with flexed arms on a dynamic bar	47 repetitions on a rowing machine	33 repetitions	2500 metres in 12 minutes	100 metres in 2 minutes
Women	45 seconds of dead hanging on a static bar	37 repetitions	31 repetitions	2000 metres in 12 minutes	100 metres in 2 minutes

At first glance, the reduced load for women in these tests looks like something that facilitates their inclusion in CBMES. However, it can also be understood as abjectifying, because it establishes a boundary between bodies that represent the ideal military firefighter in the Corps symbolic order and bodies that do not – those which are not quite, not yet or never to become firefighters (Butler, 1993b; Janzen et al., 2013). Moreover, among all PAT activities, the dead hang bar test is intended for women only, consolidating the reproduction of this boundary but in a different way. As Rebeca explains,

> The indices are different, and some exercises are different. But regardless of that, the exercise is not the same: like the arm bar, for example, for men it is the dynamic bar and for women it is the static bar. But the static bar time is exceedingly long, it's 45 seconds. In other military fire departments in Brazil, for example, I graduated in another Brazilian state and there … it was 28 seconds to get an A grade in the physical test. Here at [CBMES] it takes 45 seconds just to enter. So it is very difficult for women to enter.

For women not to be eliminated in the first stage of the PAT they need to hang for at least 45 seconds on the static bar, while - as Rebeca points out – elsewhere in Brazil the requirement is

28 seconds. In comparison, in the women's asymmetric bars competition in the Olympics, athletes perform the dead hang for mere seconds at a time. This illustrates the difficulty of this physical test: indeed Daiane describes the CBMES PAT for women as 'the most difficult in the whole of Brazil', again illustrating the spatio-temporal specificity of abjection and symbolic violence against women (Butler, 1990; Gonzalez, 1979; Grosz, 1994). If the candidate fails the dead arm hang, she fails the PAT at the first stage.

Here male and female bodies are constructed differently, with what appear to be more generous standards for women. However, this not only reaffirms the fragility and Otherness of women's bodies (Carneiro, 2011), establishing a gendered hierarchy of bodily differences (Lopes, 2019), but at the same time includes a test for women which is more demanding than that required of their Olympian counterparts. As such, it works to ensure that many women will never become military firefighters in its reproduction of 'the dehumanizing structure of [colonial] power' (Misoczky, 2019: 10). We can also see the classificatory practices of coloniality very clearly in the PAT, the distinctions being drawn between 'fit' and 'unfit', 'able' and 'not-able' bodies (Misoczky, 2011). Indeed, as CBMES cannot legally prohibit women from participating in these selection tests and given the increasing numbers applying, our respondents suggest senior officers deliberately created the exclusionary mechanism of the PAT:

> When the firefighter department opened a public contest of selection for officers, there was a lot of talk about making it as difficult as possible. I heard it several times: "Make access as difficult as possible, the physical test". Why? To avoid female access. This has been going on for many years... So that was said a lot. That was the intention. (Laís).

Laís's observations echo Tyler et al.'s (2019: 1305) suggestion that, '[i]f an organization is so closely tied to particular notions of masculinity, then challenging this – through, for

example, the greater inclusion of women – can be seen to challenge the existence of the organization itself'. This challenge, Laís suggests, generates anxiety among the most senior men in CBMES, and women's abjection is a form of defence against this anxiety. Only by establishing classificatory colonial boundaries like the gendered PAT can what is considered pure, proper and representative of the ideal military firefighter be preserved (Kristeva, 1982; Rizq, 2013). To borrow again from Butler, abjection here provides the 'constitutive outside to the domain of the subject … where abjected or delegitimated bodies fail to count as "bodies"' (1993b: 3, 15). Those women who do pass the entry PAT have laboured to *de*differentiate their bodies from the cis male bodily ideal, and have to continue to perform at the very highest levels of physical aptitude in subsequent biannual tests to persist in presenting as socially legitimate at work (Butler, 1997): these tests are not only applied in the selection process for CBMES officers but are a recurring feature of the female firefighter's military career. In addition to this, every time vacancies for training courses for officers arise which feed into chances of career advancement, a PAT is also employed to select those eligible to take these courses. Overall then, the physical ability 'of men is more valued than of women', as Flávia puts it. She continues:

> So who commands and who is the base and the middle of the organization? The middle and top of the organization are men. So the culture is kind of their thinking. And this culture values the question of physical vigour and they attribute [physical vigour] to the male gender, right? ... Physical strength should not be so important to the detriment of other [skills], but this is still very much rooted here in the organization.

Flávia affirms that CBMES overvalues physicality (Woodward and Winter, 2004) and indexes its extremely gendered culture (Hook, 2006; Sasson-Levy, 2011). All potential and actual military firefighters are evaluated using hypermasculinity as a parameter, (re)producing a

gender hierarchy that abjectifies women[3] (Sasson-Levy, 2011; Tyler, 2009). The gendered character of the PAT maintains this hypermasculinity against the additional existential threat posed by women's excellent performance in the intellectual selection tests:

> Because the first test of entry into [CBMES] is the intellectual test, increasingly more women enter. And whoever prepares the public contest, especially when it comes to the physical test, starts trying to create a barrier for women to get approval. Because … [senior officers] have the idea that they need a lot of men to do heavy street work (Jade).

Here again we see attempts to 'thrust' the abject 'aside' (Kristeva, 1982: 3). This abjection of female bodies in CBMES limits their access to the organization as well as making it much harder for them to develop their careers once admitted. It (re)establishes boundaries and (re)constitutes their bodies as a site of fragility to ensure the maintenance of the symbolic gender order (Tyler, 2009). As such gender is a fundamental organizing principle at first encounter with CBMES, one which classifies and ranks would-be entrants along patriarchal colonial lines (Misoczky, 2011) which are re-affirmed throughout a female officer's career.

Next we turn to the maternal body as another exemplar of the abjectification of women at CBMES.

The maternal body in CBMES

If there are barriers around cis women's access to and progression within CBMES as exemplified by the classificatory PAT regime, the maternal body simply has no place at all – no classification of its own - in this hypergendered organization. Daiane, for example, discusses the almost impossible expectations of pregnant women in the Corps:

> When I got pregnant, I was working 24-hour days. My sister [also a firefighter], until two days before having a baby, she was on 24-hour days. A woman at 40 weeks pregnant will be required to work a 24-hour day, so like this.

Here we see abjection in what Tyler (2009: 79) describes as 'structural and political acts of inclusion/ exclusion' - a refusal by CBMES to make allowances for the rigours of pregnancy, even when women are days away from giving birth. The organization's symbolic order is (re)secured via a normalization of non-pregnant bodies which are presumed capable of working 24-hour shifts, and the maintenance of the discursive boundary around ideal military firefighters (Butler, 1993b; Janzen et al., 2013). The breastfeeding body is also completely unwelcome in CBMES, as Daiane explains:

> There is the issue of breastfeeding … the Ministry of Health advises it should be for a year and we [firefighters] are unable to do that … [I have to] go home with my breasts bursting with so much milk. I cannot feed my daughter at work. She came here to breastfeed, but I was on a call-out, so I was unable to give her milk.

Daiane can't breastfeed her infant daughter when she is on a call-out which can happen at any point in a shift. Neither was she able to stay at home for long after she gave birth: CBMES did not pay the additional 20% of Daiane's salary related to her officer status during her maternity leave, so she had to go back to work as soon as she could. She says no space exists for requests for alternative working arrangements during pregnancy or whilst breastfeeding because maternal bodies are not recognized in CBMES. Despite their material presence, the classificatory colonialist regime at this organization omits them entirely. Any adjustments to meet the needs of pregnant or breastfeeding women would apparently violate the hypermasculine rationality of

military firefighting. No accommodations are made for post-natal bodies in terms of the overvaluation of physicality (Woodward and Winter, 2004) at CBMES either:

> every six months we do a physical test. Those who score 10 are rewarded [eg, with a promotion], those who do not, who score between 7 and 10, have passed, and under 7 they are unfit. And [failing] can have repercussions for several things. Even not [being allowed] to take other training courses, if you want to ... [A]fter my two pregnancies, it was difficult to return [and score adequately]. Now I always have to chase the points I've lost and over the years it gets more difficult (Ana Paula).

Here Ana Paula works as hard as she can to pass the regular PATs. As Butler (1993a) suggests, recognition as a subject depends on ongoing labour (like scoring well on these demanding tests) to embrace discursive norms in order to be identified as such. So Ana Paula and other officer mothers at CBMES must simply continue to struggle to present their bodies as *un*differentiated from those of their male colleagues, against the highest of odds, in order to keep their jobs – which again plays a role in perpetuating the Corps' hypermasculine symbolic order (Hook, 2006). The bodily alterations which pregnancy brings about – changing size and shape, weight gain, loss of muscle tone and strength, production of fluid – apparently symbolize animality and lack of physical mastery too strongly and thus cannot be accounted for in this organization (Kristeva, 1982: 207).

Camila's description of how senior male officers react when women do make requests connected to their maternal bodies is also germane. She talks about how the visible doubling of motherhood (Kristeva, 1982: 207) – here related to childcare – is judged at CBMES:

> [Male officers] use sarcasm in the face of a situation, of a need. You ask to leave early because your child is feeling sick … Thank God I had a particularly good [family]

structure, my mother lived with me, so I very rarely asked to leave. I did my childcare outside of working hours: I almost never asked to leave early because I had to give medicine or do something else with my son.

When mothers need to be absent from work in the event of an emergency with their children, they are treated sarcastically by superiors, deterring them from asking for such allowances in future. Here we see the workings of ‘elitist and authoritarian vertical practices’ (Rauber, cited in Misoczky et al., 2017: 250) in this colonialist organization as well as the reproduction of the ‘routine and previously learned’ (Misoczky et al., 2017: 250) in that women are made very aware that no accommodation will be made for the private sphere of reproduction in the public world of CBMES. This is power very much ‘organized as inequality, discrimination, exploitation, and as domination’ (Quijano, cited in Misoczky, 2019: 3-4), exemplifying the colonial attachment to hierarchy and control (Misoczky, 2011). Maternal bodies are repudiated in extreme ways: they do not exist in CBMES in any meaningful sense, and so female military firefighters’ mothering is done at home during limited maternity leave or outside working hours. The threat which these bodies cause generates a form of defence to differentiate the proper firefighter from the Other, to continue to maintain what is pure and clean in the CBMES symbolic order (Hook, 2006; Tyler, 2009). What we also see in these data is the direct effects of abjection as a power apparatus on female firefighters, their bodies and their careers. This has specific consequences for their leadership in CBMES, as we discuss next.

Masculine grammar and its consequences for women’s leadership in CBMES

Although women and their bodies produce aversion and anxiety in CBMES, they cannot be excluded entirely, as they are fundamental to the ongoing maintenance of this organization as

hypermasculine. They are Other - that which this and other military and firefighting organizations are not. Thus, the existence of 129 female firefighters, and an even smaller number of officers (just 12% of the command structure), is vital for the reproduction of the hypermasculinity of CBMES. Still, being a leader and at the same time abject has contextually specific consequences for leadership in this space (Butler, 1990; Gonzalez, 1979; Grosz, 1994). The main consequences for female officers are that symbolic acts in the (re)construction of a masculine organizational discursive grammar affect the representation of their competence, indeed their intelligible existence as female military firefighters per se (Butler, 1993b). In analysing this grammar, another classificatory mechanism like the PAT, we focus on an incident during a CBMES command meeting, which Daniele attended to talk about a conference for female firefighters she had been to. She was the only woman at the meeting:

> And then I went to talk about the conference … literally, I will say that I almost brought the command meeting to a premature close ... the command had to pause to breathe because it had a lot of friction. I will say that, if I had not seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't believe that emotion, that mania. I did not say anything too much … but even so I caused a revolt amongst those officers .... In my first sentence I said "Ah, the Commander invited me to talk about the conference we were at" … and the name of the congress was written there - National Meeting of Military Bombeir*as*. [This was t]he first sentence I said ..., [it] was the first slide. The senior officer got up and said "We have to stop perpetuating this error. ... There is no such word as bombeir*as*. Bombeiro has only one gender - bombeir*o*. We do not have a female word bombeir*as*" (emphasis added).

Generally in Portuguese, as in many Latin-derived languages, for every masculine word there is a feminine counterpart. What usually differentiates one from the other is an 'o' (masculine) or an

‘a’ (feminine) at the end, so the feminine version of the masculine word ‘gato’ (male cat) is ‘gata’ (female cat). However, there is no official word for a female firefighter in the Portuguese language, which shows just how masculine the discursive grammar of military firefighting is. This grammar declares that masculinity is a necessary gender to occupy in order to hold the occupation (Husain-Talero and Angulo, 2019). Indeed, and as we saw earlier, until the 1990s only men could become CBMES firefighters and the masculine word ‘bombeiro’ is a clear and persistent linguistic effect of this gender exclusivity which continues to affirm the occupation as only appropriate and natural for men (Gonzalez, 1979). And, of course, Portuguese is itself a colonial language in the context of Brazil.

Some Brazilian women who occupy masculine professions like firefighting deliberately use feminine words to describe themselves as a form of resistance and gender resignification. ‘Bombeiras’ is also used in media coverage, like Cruz’s (2019) article on the rescue efforts mounted in January 2019 - the largest in Brazilian history - in the wake of the collapse of the Brumadinho Dam in Minas Gerais. As she says,

> … the performance of [female] firefighters in Brumadinho stands out and draws attention to a contradiction between fieldwork and the rules for hiring personnel: while they perform in the same service, under the same conditions as their colleagues, to enter the Fire Department, [female] candidates only have 10% of the vacancies.

Here we see how feminine versions of masculine Portuguese words are employed to make political points. However, and importantly, Daniele was sent by CBMES command to represent the Espírito Santo firefighters at a national event, the official name of which contains the word bombeir*as* (National Meeting of Military Bombeir*as*). Thus, her use of this word was not an act of resistance. She describes the senior officer’s interjection as violent and aggressive, saying that

he didn’t want ‘to speak sitting down. There are chairs in the auditorium, and I sat at the end and ... [he] had to come close and point a finger [at my face] and speak loudly’. However, Daniele simply politely replied ‘Yes, sir, but … [t]he name of the meeting is the National Meeting of Military Bombeir*as* - I didn’t invent it’. She 'felt morally harassed .... When a man is in a group with other men, the behaviour is different from when he is alone ... one leaned on the other and supported themselves, he became emotional, and I felt coerced'. Indeed tempers were running so high about her use of the word bombeiras that the meeting had to be adjourned. Daniele says her outlook has now changed:

> I thought there wasn’t much distinction [between women and men at CBMES] in the past. I thought “it’s just a joke” ... But after the meeting, after my speech in the auditorium, from the friction in the auditorium, I realized that *I am an alien here* and I must work every day to see if that changes. *[I am a] strange body.* (emphasis added)

Her use of a ‘non-existent’ feminine word threatened the CBMES symbolic order with its hypermasculine grammar, causing aversion, anxiety and a very strong reaction among the men present. Daniele’s remarks here also underline how she was made to feel inferior, abject, a complete outsider at the command meeting. Indeed the senior officer’s reaction seems to exemplify ‘the dehumanizing structure of [colonial] power and the practices that sustain and reproduce it’ (Misoczky, 2019: 10). Here we also see the Butlerian connections between self and Other, subject and abject again. The reaction of the male officers is a highly charged attempt to eliminate the abject that exists within themselves, since the very word ‘bombeiras’ destabilizes their own identities, demonstrating their always precarious character (Butler, 1993a; Kenny, 2012). They respond by degrading Daniele, using both symbolic and more literal violence against her in seeking to silence her feminine grammar.

CBMES grammar affirms masculine superiority in other ways as well, as Mariana suggests:

> The only [command] position that has a feminine word in militarism is 'capitão' [male captain], which is 'capitã' [female captain]. Everyone else is [known by masculine] words ... So it is the only post that has this variation. But usually we call even women 'capitão'. Although there is a 'capitã' ... we say 'capitão' too - [even for women] it's automatic, we don't say 'capitã'.

The near-exclusivity of this grammar means that female officers in CBMES are always represented – or classified - through masculine discourses that explicitly Other them (Karazi-Presler, 2020). In this symbolic order, our respondents also suggest there is significant resistance, especially from the highest-ranking male officers, to women occupying command functions. Their competence is constantly scrutinized because they occupy a position that, symbolically, they should simply not be in (Mavin and Grandy, 2016). As Jade suggests,

> Look at this, an annoying thing [people say here]: "She is a woman, but she is very competent", "She is a woman, but she can do it". As if it were almost a defect that you are a woman in a military organization ... you have to always be proving, proving, proving like this: "No, I am a woman, I am competent. I am a woman and I can".

In this context, female leaders are persistently embodied as deficient in the exercise of leadership. They must constantly 'thrust aside' the abjection that establishes them as inappropriate for leadership (Kristeva, 1982: 3) in this steeply hierarchical colonial organization with its patriarchal gender order. If we recall that even the cis male subject produced through processes of abjection and exclusion is always 'split, incomplete and struggling' (Kenny, 2012: 1177), then the 'proving, proving, proving' these women must sustain to confirm to the Corps'

hypermasculine norms, to be recognized as socially legitimate on an ongoing basis (Butler, 1997), emerges as even more onerous. And, again, it works to perpetuate CBMES' hypermasculinity.

Conclusion

Our analysis suggests the presence of female officers in CBMES represents a threat to the purity of its hypermasculine symbolic order, triggering processes that mark women as abject in this organization. To eliminate the anxiety caused by their presence, recruitment strategies use gendered physical tests for admission, the maternal body is entirely repudiated and a masculine grammar is so prevalent as to mean there are no culturally appropriate words to describe these officers. As Kristeva (1982: 70) has it, 'the masculine, apparently victorious, confesses through its very relentlessness against the other, the feminine, that it is threatened by an asymmetrical, irrational, wily, uncontrollable power'. And yet, antagonistically, women and their bodies cannot be completely excluded from CBMES. They are crucial to the construction of the pure firefighter subject, acting fundamentally in the self/ Other relationship and in the reconstruction of a masculine organizational grammar.

These arguments also underscore the corollaries of colonialism in coloniality, the roots of gender hierarchies, gender violence and gendered organizations in Brazil (Blay, 2003; Carneiro, 2011; Lopes, 2019; Lugones, 2010; Pitanguy, 1982). They indicate that the institutional form of CBMES is an imperial European imposition on the Global South and therefore – we would suggest – especially egregious in its gendered effects, amongst other significant problematics. Interestingly, in fact, the Corpo de Bombeiros Militar only dates back to 1856 – some 34 years after Brazil gained independence from Portugal. It was militarized in 1880. There is, furthermore, a specificity to its colonialist gendering (Butler, 1990; Gonzalez, 1979; Grosz,

1994). If women are recruited as officers in CBMES via the rigours of the entrance PAT (one of the most demanding in Brazil, as our respondents Rebeca and Daiane suggest), they must continue to *de*differentiate their bodies from those of their cis male counterparts by continuing to pass the regular physical texts which are a mandatory element of their continued service as well as of any chances for promotion (Hook, 2006). Should they fall pregnant, they must accept that this institution will make *no* allowances for their maternal bodies, instead expecting them to work incredibly long shifts even late in their third trimester, to return to work very quickly after birth and to manage childcare thereafter without this impinging on work at all. This invisibilization of women also permeates CBMES language, so that female officers can only be bombeir*os* or capitã*os,* never their feminine equivalents. In sum, in this organization, the gendered colonial 'degradation that gives us two renditions of life and a being rendered by them' (Lugones, 2010: 751-752) is both profound and far-reaching. It exemplifies, to revisit Quijano (cited in Misoczky, 2019: 3-4), 'power organized as inequality, discrimination, exploitation and as domination', whereby women are relentlessly classified – and treated accordingly - as inferior, polluting and dirty (Lugones, 2010: 751).

In sum, then, our analysis has surfaced how the extremely gendered, colonialist site of CBMES is reproduced both by the men who it benefits and the women who it works to abjectify. Our argument contributes to extant understandings of the abjection of female leaders but deepens these by attending to the legacies of empire in this Global South organization as well as emphasizing the need for more research foregrounding the specifics of abjection in workplaces across the world.

Notes

1. Assigned male at birth (AMAB) and assigned female at birth (AFAB) refer to how biological sex is discursively attributed to new-born babies. Cis, an abbreviation for cisgender, refers to people whose gender identity matches their assigned at birth sex. We use women, female, she, her and so on here as placeholders for cis women, and male and female bodies, body, embodiment etc. as placeholders for bodies assigned this way at birth.
2. Given that grammar is the system and architecture of language, then organizational grammar refers to the language that is specific to an organization. This grammar is typically represented in and reproduced by both its structure (eg, the names of particular roles in the organizational chart) and its culture (how people communicate on an everyday basis). The organizational grammar in CBMES reifies AFAB cis men as 'natural' military firefighters.
3. Although this is outside of the scope of our argument here, many men also fail the PAT and are abjectified (Lee et al., 2019). It is only a subset of men who are able to demonstrate a superiority of physical strength and thus a hypermasculine cis male body.

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