





Women, Fashion Design and Ancestrality: Reflections on the Past and Future Possibilities

Fernanda Enéia Schulz^(✉)  and Joana Cunha 

Centro de Ciência e Tecnologia Têxtil, Universidade do Minho, Campus de Azurém, Guimarães,
Portugal

ferschulz.design@gmail.com, jcunha@det.uminho.pt

Abstract. The design profession is not immune to the systematic oppression of patriarchy, although it has its own gender-specific histories. From the history of design, it is possible to understand the relationship and participation of women in its development and understand the need for other approaches, especially those associated with fashion design and the relationship with female textile ancestry. Currently, there is a considerable number of studies that address female relationships, the role of gender and female textile ancestral knowledge both in relation to the area and design processes. These add data and values to the question of how gender is constructed through design processes, which can directly contribute to more sustainable results, as well as to the configuration of meaningful and culturally relevant products. This article aims to address the marginalized relationships in the history of design: women - fashion design - female textile ancestry.

Keywords: Fashion Design · Women in Design · Feminism · Gender inequality · Craft education · Textile ancestry

1 Contextualization

Historically, what is verified are data that reflect the bases of the design of the 19th century with a masculine and separatist character, where feminine knowledge is interpreted as domestic and masculine knowledge is associated with production [1]. For Moura [1], such gender and class hierarchization is explicit in the language used by design to characterize the workspaces and the way in which design itself is practiced, where it is necessary to emphasize that spaces such as the atelier maintain a connotation distant from the ateliers of domestic spaces, since the design profession is not seen as an activity connoted with domestic and female activities. With regard to the segmentation of areas in design, Moura & Ramos [2] refer to the Bauhaus, a school that had a great impact on industrial design in the 20th century, shaping and inspiring many academic courses, and training a good part of the world-renowned designers. According to the authors, the school promoted the discourse of equality among students, but in practice what happened was a sexist separation, where women were mostly enrolled in the textile area, an occupation for which they were considered “vocational”, connoted to domestic spaces and to feminine characteristics, such as calm, patience, obedience, delicacy and

submission. Corroborating with the discourse, historical and statistical, Lupton [3] and Hall [4] point to the great absence of women in the male-dominated profession. A survey carried out by the Design Museum UK in 2018 showed that only one in five professional designers are women, despite these being seven out of ten design students [5].

The lack of female representation in the academic environment, through lectures, publications, knowledge from the female universe and the erasure of these references in the history of design itself, contributes to the propagation of the male model of design, making it difficult for female students to pass from the classroom to the labor market [5]. All these shortcomings not only make access to women and minority genders difficult, but also generate uncertainty, lack of confidence and insecurity to assume creative or leadership positions. For Ellen Lupton [3], it is not enough for women to create support networks, it is important that the faculty of design institutions explore contexts in which anyone can develop intellectually. According to the aforementioned author, currently, designers are looking for tools and practices that develop design in an inclusive and sustainable way, since the insertion of cultural, collective and collaborative processes is part of design projects [6].

It is in this context, between the historical and academic space of design, that the need arises for didactic implementation capable of recognizing the intellectual and creative value of women, as well as a sense of historical reparation, through the inclusion of activities, methods and methodologies that encourage the development of female ancestral techniques. Almeida [6] defends the point of view of gender discussion in design relations, as a sociocultural construction, pointing to the development of semiotic values and the need to identify erasures and invisibilities in the process. Through an inclusive gender perspective, it is possible to understand feminine design as an approach and invitation to contemporary explorations, falling short of the uniform discourse of the design field [7], since design is also the result of cultural and social experiences.

With regard to fashion design processes, an area marginalized by design itself, due to its direct association with the feminine, which for a long time was conditioned to domestic and family spaces [8], it is important to remember that the area is directly associated with cultural expression and interacts directly with social values and canons. For Schulz and Cunha [9] it is through understanding the relationship between clothing, design and handicraft that values of cultural and symbolic identity are re-inserted into society through fashion production. In this way, it is possible to observe the absence of female ancestral craft processes (crochet, knitting, embroidery, weaving, sewing, etc.), classified as distinct from design, and consequently minimized or excluded from the historical context by historians and academics [10], since that these are part of the female domestic context and do not emphasize the relationship with modernism and industrial concepts, which Buckley [8] determines as selective and exclusionary design. It is important to remember that the craft techniques associated with textiles have always been part of the global female context, both in individual contexts of production and use, and in social contexts through communities and groups of artisans [9]. For the feminist designer Middleton [11], when design denies the feminine, as much as the femininity expressed in projects, it is affirming that in its space, of design, there is no appreciation of female professionals. Designer and writer Anja Neidhardt [5] adds that it is through

hierarchization that men are seen as creators and women are seen as muses, which strengthens disbelief in women's creative potential.

It is from a reactive and avant-garde perspective, which causes a rupture with the historical and traditional concepts related between design and fashion design, transcending the masculine barriers imposed on the discipline of design, that we seek to explore the feminine universe, in the field of fashion design education, as a way of exposing realities in the creative, ethical, innovative and culturally sustainable fields.

2 Female Ancestral Knowledge, Fashion Design and Academia

We understand the importance of female creative and intellectual approaches in academic spaces as a way to change the traditional rhetoric of design history. In this way, the approaches that follow, start from a critical analysis of the fashion design education in Portugal and its relationship with the erasure of female textile ancestry, as well as pointing out evidence of a male scenario in fashion design at global and Portuguese levels.

2.1 Feminine Ancestral Knowledge and Fashion Design Education

Reflection on women's participation in historical, cultural and economic development represents a cross-cutting need in several areas, including design, an area whose capacity is to make possible the reproduction of artisanal textile typologies that are part of the various cultural lexicons. Understanding the relationships and transmission of ancestral and craft knowledge, associated with female cultural learning, provides the rescue of identity, cultural and symbolic values [12] of textile craft techniques and the appreciation of female intellectual work. In this process, the designer plays an important role in the designer-craftsman interaction process, as he must have creativity, ability and sensitivity to unite traditions, cultural and emotional values, innovation and vision to create products that tell stories [13]. The project "Voces De La Artesanía" [14] develops artisan-designer relationships, where artisans feel listened to and valued, and designers recognize artisans as living sources of wisdom. It is understood that sustainability in design must overcome the ecological barriers associated with the term, meeting values such as quality and social and cultural integrity [9]. Transcending barriers imposed on handicraft techniques and seeking to explore the universe of possibilities through the designer's eye, it is fundamental to insert women's textile cultural knowledge in design teaching, using methodologies that explore memories, cultural ties, identities, traditional and geographic knowledge [1], as it is in the academic space that the role of the designer is shaped, being a mediator between local and technical knowledge, connecting historical human factors and technologies [15]. It is essential to develop new methodological strategies for design education, encompassing factors and experiences beyond those already contained in traditional curricula [16]. Crafts are part of everyday life and it is necessary to propose reflections on the many ways in which design is produced, especially in the women-design axis [8].

2.2 Exclusion of Crafts – The Portuguese Case

The fashion design education in Portugal has its bases in product design itself, and in the 1990s it underwent curricular adaptations to better meet the global needs of the fashion industry [16], which contributed to the rupture with regard to cultural and ancestral heritage. In this way, it is based on the traditional models of design education, which, among other issues, are supported by the idea that “making” involves giving shape to the material through the designer’s project, with the final objective being the created product [17]. Thus, it is common for education to be orientated towards solving problems, largely supported by drawing skills (manual and digital), knowledge of materials (as raw material) and creation of prototypes of clothing.

In this view, the materials are the textile surfaces that conform to a given design, which is why, in general, education in fashion design only values the practice of sewing as a technique for assembling this material, leaving aside other millennial textile practices that have enormous potential for the development of the designer’s tacit knowledge.

Recent works have shown the importance of giving greater emphasis to craft processes in designer training, Ingold [18] argues that in the design process the primacy should be in the process of shaping the material and not in the final product, which is why it becomes more important how the material is transformed, that is, the techniques used. On the other hand, Niedderer et al. [19] argue that craft activities are activities that, when well executed, give individuals a sense of pride and confidence, which motivates them to share their knowledge and promote experimentation. Kokko & Räisänen [20] stress the importance of craft disciplines as a way of sustaining the local and global changes necessary for sustainability.

Although several studies conducted in the last decade have made it clear that craft disciplines are important for the training of designers, in the case of fashion design, it is noted that the curricula of courses in Portugal does not include an approach to these practices [21]. The reasons for excluding artisanal textile practices in the academic approach to fashion courses are related either to their direct association with the feminine, as previously mentioned, or because they are practices perceived as having a lower status due to either their low economic value or lack of intellectual rigor as referred by Niedderer [19]. In any case, these are indisputably ancestral female practices associated, in many parts of the world, with female learning, in which girls learned to become women by spinning, weaving, embroidering and actively participating in the production of the trousseau that marks their entry into married life [22].

The recognition of the association between fashion design and handicrafts corroborates the way designers understand human ancestry, converting these into creative, sustainable materials that can be linked to innovations and the development of differentiated products, endowed with these ancestral cultural values [9]. It is in the handicraft-design interaction that dialogues can be developed that allow the insertion of aesthetic and symbolic values into products [23], imbuing them with their own poetics [24]. In this process, the union between design and handicraft gives rise to new possibilities for creation and makes room for the creation of practices capable of making traditions relevant in the contemporary and future scenario of fashion design. On the other hand, according to Kokko [25], the inclusion of craft practices as subjects in higher education gives value and visibility to crafts while at the same time reinforcing their cultural identity.

The result of this discourse, between craftsmanship and design, leads to an appreciation that is felt by the difference, authenticity and uniqueness of production [23].

Despite being a timid and slow process, in Portugal initiatives are already emerging that aim to promote the various forms of cultural expression associated with handicrafts, such as the example of the “TASA” project, born in 2010, which promotes dialogue between Portuguese artisans and designers, with the aim of combining tradition and innovation, in a set of products of interest to the consumer, associated with social and cultural sustainability [26]. Another example worth mentioning is the “Portugal Manual” project, born in 2018, and which disseminates manual and cultural knowledge through products designed by artisans and designers. Associated with fashion design, it is possible to find names of women who work with traditional Portuguese handicrafts, revisited by design and made through the hands of expert artisans, as is the case of designer Helena Cardoso [27]. In a more recent example, we mention Béhen, created in 2020 by designer Joana Duarte, who, through collective work methodologies, associated with design practices and methodologies, recreates traditional Portuguese embroidery, not only with the aim of reviving the technique, but also to work crafts from a cultural and feminine point of view, valuing the identities and individual creative value of each craftswoman [28].

2.3 Gender in Fashion Design: Global Vision and Portugal Vision

The idealization and conception of fashion design, as education or as a creative area, has always been associated with the feminine, due to the nature of the activity itself, endowed with femininity, delicacy and knowledge associated with the domestic, and therefore it is not surprising that the female gender thus constitute the majority among students in design courses. Ironically, what is observed is the male occupation of the profession of fashion designer [29]. Although in recent decades we have been witnessing a slow feminization of the fashion designer (or fashion creator) profession, the fact is that the vast majority of renowned fashion designers/creators continue to be male [30]. Contrasting this scenario, what is recorded is, in many cases, the use of female knowledge and craftsmanship, which, far from the spotlight of the fashion scene, remain hidden, even if essential to creators. Duran [30] exposes the case of Karl Lagerfeld’s interview for the New York Times in 2006, where the designer, now deceased, mentioned the term “*petites mains*” [little hands] when referring to the countless women behind his work.

In 2017, the BoF¹ website carried out a survey, cited by Marques [29], referring to the main world brands present at international fashion weeks, that revealed male superiority in the creative direction of these brands. In 2016, Pike [31] reports that only 14% of the top 50 world fashion brands are intellectually directed by women.

Given the scarcity of scientific literature on this subject, we sought to find out if these data were maintained in the present. For this we conducted an internet search, using a new private browser window, using the search term “Best Fashion Designers”². The analysis focused on the first 5 search results (Fig. 1) and on the images of the first

¹ The Business Of Fashion - <https://www.businessoffashion.com/>

² Search conducted in 23, April 2023.

50 designers obtained (Fig. 2). Given the scope of the search term, the results refer to the universe of fashion designers from the 20th century to the present.

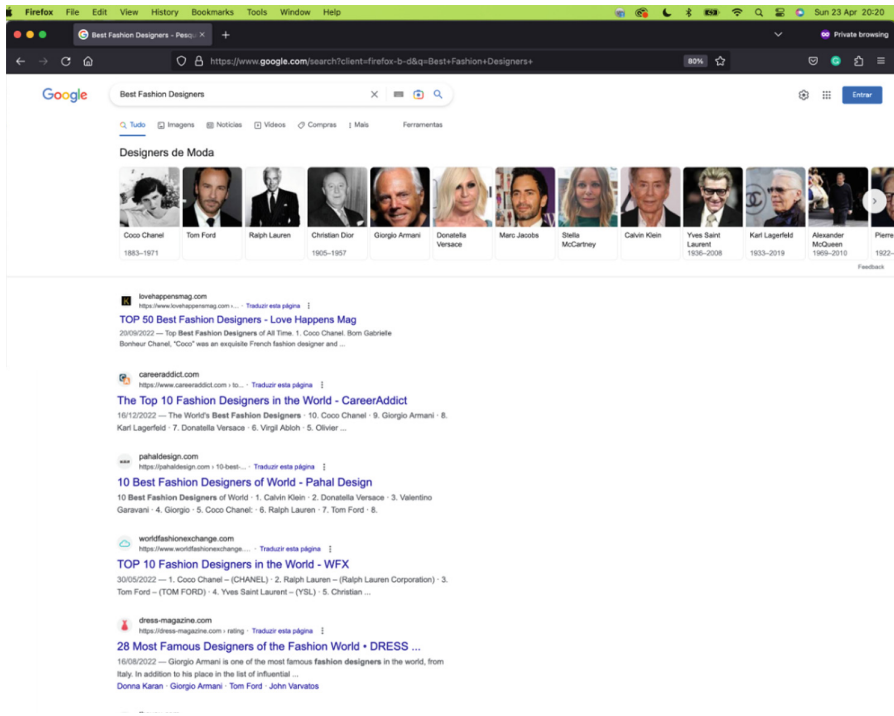


Fig. 1. Search results for “Best Fashion Designers”.

Among the 50 designers in Fig. 2, only 16 are women. A similar relationship is obtained from the analysis of the first 5 articles found. The article “TOP 50 + Best Fashion Designers”³ names 57 designers of which only 18 are women; The CareerAdict article, a publication by Joanna Zambas entitled “The World’s Best Fashion Designers”⁴ features only 2 women in the Top 10, Coco Chanel and Donatella Versace; The pahaldesign.com article entitled “10 Best Fashion Designers of the World”⁵, presents 3 women in the Top 10, they are Coco Chanel, Donatella Versace and Kate Spade; “TOP 10 Fashion Designers in the World”⁶, presents 3 women in the Top 10, they are Coco Chanel,

³ TOP 50 + Best Fashion Designers. (2022). *LoveHappens*. [online] Available at: <https://www.lovehappensmag.com/blog/2022/09/20/top-50-fashion-designers/> [Accessed 23 Apr. 2023].

⁴ Zambas, J. (2022). The World’s Best Fashion Designers. Career Adict. [online] Available at: <https://www.careeraddict.com/top-10-fashion-designers-in-the-world> [Accessed 23 Apr. 2023].

⁵ Pahaldesign.com. (2012). *10 Best Fashion Designers of World | Pahal Design*. [online] Available at: <https://pahaldesign.com/10-best-fashion-designer-of-world/> [Accessed 23 Apr. 2023].

⁶ TOP 10 Fashion Designers in the World. (2022). *WFX*. Available at: <https://www.worldfashionexchange.com/blog/top-10-fashion-designers-in-the-world/> [Accessed 23 Apr. 2023].

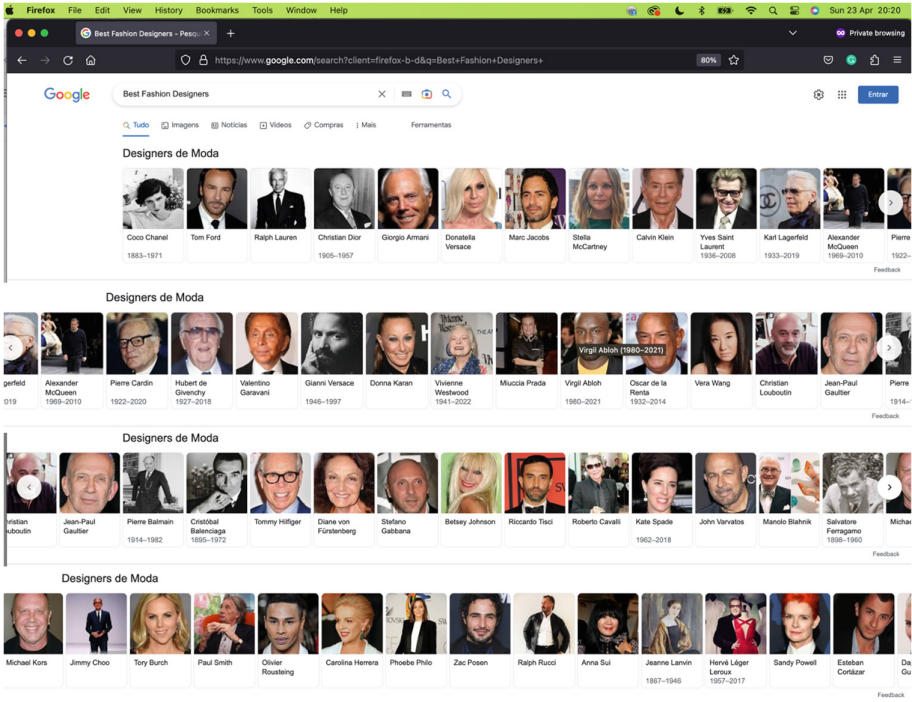


Fig. 2. Images obtained in the search with the term “Best Fashion Designers”.

Donatella Versace and Stella MacCartney; Finally, the Dress Magazine article entitled “28 Most Famous Fashion Designers Who Changed the Fashion World”⁷ presents 6 women out of 16 designers of the moment, but when referring to the 12 most famous designers of all time, only one woman is mentioned in the group, Coco Chanel.

In the Portuguese universe, reality differs from the world scenario regarding notoriety. Repeating the search now using the expression “*Os melhores designers de moda portugueses*”⁸ [The best Portuguese fashion designers] the image search results only present 12 designers, of which half are women (Fig. 3). The first entry of the search points to an article by Vogue Portugal entitled “the 7 Portuguese designers who are shaping the future of National Fashion”⁹ where of the 7 designers 5 are women; The second entrance leads to the Lisbon Lux website¹⁰ where out of 9 designers/stylists that

⁷ Berg, H. (2022). *28 Most Famous Designers of the Fashion World*. [online] Available at: <https://dress-magazine.com/rating/most-famous-fashion-designers/> [Accessed 23 Apr. 2023].

⁸ Search conducted in 23, April 2023.

⁹ Silva, M. (2021). *Os 7 designers portuguesas que estão a moldar o futuro da Moda nacional*. [online] Vogue.pt. Available at: <https://www.vogue.pt/designers-portugueses-emergentes> [Accessed 23 Apr. 2023].

¹⁰ www.lisbonlux.com. (n.d.). *Moda em Lisboa - Os Melhores Estilistas*. [online] Available at: <https://www.lisbonlux.com/lisboa/compras/estilistas-de-moda.html> [Accessed 23 Apr. 2023].

the website presents, 4 are women. The third entry leads to the website Modalisboa¹¹ where of the 24 designers listed, only 10 are women; and finally, the fourth entry points to the article entitled “TOP 5: Portuguese stylists to keep an eye on!”¹², where only 1 is a woman.

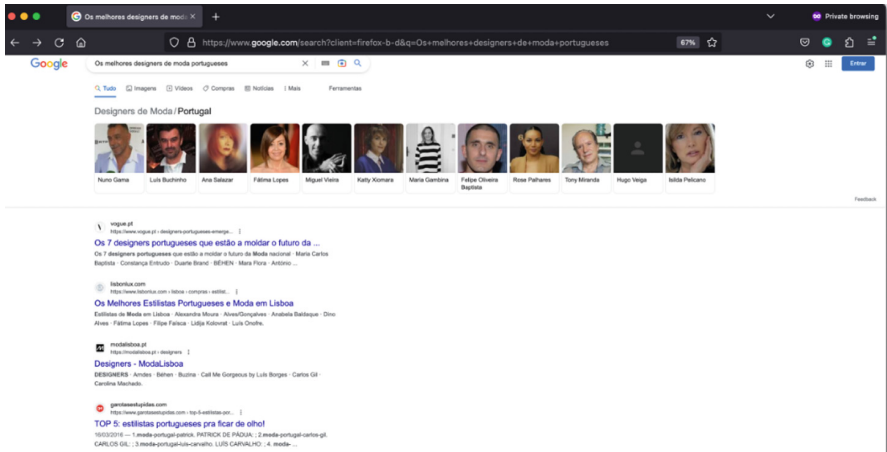


Fig. 3. Search results for the term “The best Portuguese fashion designers”

3 Discussing Female Ancestral Knowledge, Fashion Design and Academia

When analyzing the exposed facts, both from the historical point of view of design, as well as the professionalization of fashion design, the imbalance present in gender rhetoric is perceptible, as well as the lack of information. In a recent study carried out by Almeida [6], it was found that the lack of collections of women’s work constitutes one of the great gaps in terms of the reconstitution of the trajectory of women in the areas of design and the arts, thus contributing to the absence and the erasure of the female gender. In part, this is also due to the fact that research is centered on men, even when the data are separated by sex, as well as tending to underestimate female work, classifying activities as domestic or “household”, while characterizing male activities, as profitable [32]. In this context, it should be noted that craft activities undergo the same discriminatory process, as in addition to being associated with the aforementioned domestic activities, they are also considered amateur, in parallel with male activities, which are of an “extra domestic” character and understood as professionals [33]. In

¹¹ Associação Moda Lisboa (2022). *Designers - ModaLisboa*. [online] Modalisboa.pt. Available at: <https://modalisboa.pt/designers/> [Accessed 23 Apr. 2023].

¹² Coutinho, C. (2016). *TOP 5: estilistas portuguesas pra ficar de olho!* [online] Garotas Estúpidas. Available at: <https://www.garotasestupidas.com/top-5-estilistas-portugueses-pra-ficar-de-olho/> [Accessed 23 Apr. 2023].

addition to this assumption, discussed throughout the article, it is also worth noting that female ancestral practices, which require a high level of skill, attention and creativity, are seen only as fun and hobby, since they demand little capital investment [33].

The cultural heritage of women's work, from a historical and creative point of view, is still unknown, not only to the general public, but also to academics and professionals in the various areas of design, even though women are the main producers of handicrafts, since the craftsmanship is seen as female and domestic work, to the point that teaching in arts and design is conventionally male [33]. When craft activities gain notoriety, they are always associated with the masculine, as in the case of male appropriations of female jobs and crafts associated with the profession of fashion design. These activities, known as domestic activities, commonly known as sewing, embroidery, tapestries and knitwear, when they gain prestige and economic value, are taken over by men, who not only learn them, but also start to occupy female spaces, excluding women from their own cultural space [30], as observed in the survey on the occupation of creative positions in world haute couture brands. Therefore, when we observe these traits of masculinization of female work, we understand that the activities associated with fashion design are directly associated with social, economic and political areas.

In the aforementioned surveys on the "best fashion designers" globally, we noticed that in addition to the low number of female names, there is also a constant repetition of the few female names, which opens us up to questions within the proposed rhetoric, such as female erasure and male domination in fashion design positions, but also to a possible lack of opportunity for new names to emerge in the fashion scene, especially if these names are associated with textile, craft and cultural traditions, as already mentioned, marginalized arts labeled as entertainment.

The Portuguese scenario, although slightly better in terms of professionalization of fashion design, does not differ from the historical rhetoric already discussed, with numerous paths being pointed out for the lack of female representation in design: cultural issues associated with the female domestic role, political issues related to the dictatorship period and finally, issues related to the lack of possibilities to remain connected to the labor market, which may be directly related to the factors mentioned above. Moura [1] describes the Portuguese design profession as selective from the gender point of view, with design being associated with male activity and thus assuming the exclusion of specific design disciplines, such as fashion design. At this point in the discussion, it makes sense to recall the role of design, both as a unifier of the various disciplines (product, graphics, fashion, jewelry, etc.), and its social role, that is, its ability to train designers capable of relate directly to multiple cultures, knowledge, traditions and languages [1, 15].

In addition to the aforementioned case of female creative, cultural and ancestral exclusion, fashion design demonstrates how the male gender issue is imposed on women in several other ways, one of which is standardization through unisex or "gender neutral" fashion. In both cases, they are approaches of masculine character and of exclusion of feminine traits, which Middleton [11] describes as androcentrism. That is, involuntarily and even believing that they are creating inclusive fashion, fashion designers are creating products for men [34].

We live in a world designed by men and for men, we need more women in design leadership to correct design errors (such as gender-inclusive proportions, solutions that are suitable for women's needs, etc.) as well as to propose more inclusive solutions at the gender level regarding work, and intellectual and creative value. Even though this article was composed of an almost absolute majority of female intellectual academic works, what is observed in the academic field is a male predominance. When analyzing the main European design conferences in 2019, it was found that the average number of women speaking at events was only 35.7%, as well as the average speaking time was less than the time given to male colleagues [34].

Another relevant data pointed out through the bibliographies of this research, is the significant number of feminine and gender approaches around graphic design and architecture. As an example, we mention the project "Designing women" [5] which reflects on historical factors, intellectual values and female participation in graphic design. Also, in the field of graphic design, we cite the publication "Extra Bold: A Feminist, Inclusive, Anti-Racist, Nonbinary Field Guide for Graphic Designers" [3], which synthesizes a practice guide for new approaches within graphic design. Another example, the project "MoMoWo" [35] aims at gender equality at the social and professional levels associated with design, architecture and engineering. For this, the project is supported by academic productions, book publications and an online platform. Finally, we mention the recently published "Woman Made" [4], which presents a collection of projects with female authorship in the areas of product design and architecture.

In all the cases mentioned above, even though they have made a great contribution to the proposed reflections and have directly contributed to breaking the old paradigms around design, none of them presents cases of female authorship in fashion design, neither at a creative level nor on an intellectual level. Even in broader cases on gender issues, such as the publication "Ivisible Women, exposing data bias in a world designed for men" [36], where cases of design, engineering, everyday life, etc. are cited, we found no references associated with fashion design.

In this sense, we believe that an academic approach capable of inserting feminine cultural and craft content into fashion design education, developing artisan-designer-university interactions, can provide a new perspective and significant possibilities for the future of sustainable fashion, contribute to the participation full and effective participation of women and equal leadership opportunities [37], following the example of what has been developed in the aforementioned project, "*Voces de La Artesanía*" [14]. Specifically in the Portuguese case, we mention here two initiatives:

1. "*Portugal Manual*" [38], which aims to promote and encourage Portuguese artisans, designers and brands. Even though it is not a specific example of fashion design, the project directly contributes to the presentation of traditional handicrafts and especially of those who make them. On the platform, in the fashion area, we find several examples of artisans and designers who work with new perspectives on traditional crafts.
2. "*Cooperativa Capuchinhas de Montemuro*", a group created by women in the 1980s that specifically works with traditional Portuguese handicrafts, clothing made

from *burel*¹³, linen and wool fabrics, woven on manual looms, transcribed in a contemporary vision through the reinterpretation of fashion design [39].

In the second case, we particularly emphasize the importance of the connection between artisans and fashion design, as already observed in the aforementioned cases of the *Béhen* brand and the designer Helena Cardoso. We understand and visualize the existence of Portuguese and international fashion brands (such as the renowned London fashion house Vivienne Westwood) that, through the work carried out with groups of artisans, disseminate cultures, values and identities of groups, erased, discriminated or forgotten by the great scenarios.

The aforementioned practices, associated with feminine crafts and the incursion into design by social initiatives and economic projects, alert to the need for these approaches in academia, specifically in the curricula of fashion design courses. For Maffei and Sandino [33] such relationships constitute a solid body of actions and tools that correspond to identity formation, with a strong impact on gender discourses, as well as on social and domestic life, capable of suggesting changes in traditional design discourses.

4 Final Thoughts

Through the proposed article, we point out several studies related to the effective participation of women in design and the importance of the traditions, inheritances and cultures that are part of the female nucleus to be inserted in academic contexts, mainly in fashion design. In this context, we observed the existence of emphatic approaches in specific areas of design, which made us reflect and question about the approaches of fashion design: “where are the academic, philosophical and cultural discussions centered on the representation (or exclusion) of women in fashion design?”, “Is design itself constantly repeating the exclusion of fashion design from intellectual and creative approaches?”.

In our understanding, the feminine cultural erasure in fashion design still lacks in-depth discussions, research supports and the construction of its own historical-reflective research material. We observe a vast organization in the areas of graphic design, product design, architecture and engineering, which has been seeking to remake history, through the appreciation of women’s work, both in the past and today.

We recognize the work carried out by the Craft Council and the London College (both in England) and the *Métiers d’Excellence* project by LVMH (France), for the teaching, dissemination and development of artisanal manual knowledge, both as recognition of the intrinsic values of humanity, and as tools for new approaches to sustainability for the future.

Even so, through this article, we point out the importance of dialogues around the theme proposed here, as the systematic factors presented contribute to the absence of intellectual discussions around fashion design and gender relations. Therefore, changes are needed to combat discriminatory practices and include women in creative and decision-making positions, as well as to encourage greater representation and dissemination of female practices and knowledge in academic circles, design competitions,

¹³ *Burel* is an ancestral wool fabric once used by Portuguese mountain shepherds still produced in an artisanal way in some localities in the interior of the country.

conferences, textile and clothing companies, among others that we may lack memory at the moment.

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