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Five centuries of wage inequality in the Mexican textile industry

Cinco siglos de desigualdad salarial en la industria textil mexicana

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Abstract

The Mexican textile industry faced socioeconomic problems from the sixteenth century to the MSMEs; the sexual division of labor in textile factories was a watershed in the wage gap in the socioeconomic context in conjunction with the allocation of activities. The objective of analyzing the wage gap and social transformations in the Mexican textile industry through a logical-historical methodology allowed us to capture the changes, trajectories and continuities to identify patterns and causal relationships that underlie the historical facts of this industry related to wages for more than six centuries. The socioeconomic metamorphosis of labor precariousness and wage inequalities of MSMEs and large factories are also visualized as the main variables in this research, resulting in the construction of comparative tables of wages between men and women, educational levels and the number of workers according to gender. Among the findings is the presence of female textile empowerment since the sixteenth century as a relevant phenomenon that consolidated this sector, which allowed concluding that manufacturing activities led by women contributed to the search for wage equity, the reduction of labor precariousness and the creation of MSMEs.

Keywords: *Textile industry, wages, social and economic rights, industrial sector, industrial worker, industrial worker.*

Resumen

La industria textil mexicana enfrentó problemas socioeconómicos a partir del siglo XVI hasta las MIPYMES; la división sexual del trabajo en las fábricas textiles fue parteaguas en la brecha salarial en el contexto socioeconómico en conjunto con la asignación de actividades. El objetivo de analizar la brecha salarial y transformaciones sociales de la industria textil mexicana mediante una metodología lógico histórico permitió plasmar los cambios, trayectorias y continuidades para identificar patrones, relaciones causales que subyacen a los hechos históricos de esta industria relacionados salarialmente por más de seis siglos. También se visualiza la metamorfosis socioeconómica de las precariedades laborales y desigualdades salariales de MIPYMES y grandes fábricas como principales variables en esta investigación que, arrojan como resultados la construcción de cuadros comparativos de salarios entre hombres y mujeres, los niveles educativos y, el número de trabajadores de acuerdo con el género. Entre los hallazgos está la presencia del empoderamiento textil femenino desde el siglo XVI como fenómeno relevante que consolidó este sector que, permitió concluir que las actividades fabriles lideradas por mujeres coadyuvaron en la búsqueda de la equidad salarial, la disminución de las precariedades laborales. y en la creación de MIPYMES.

Palabras clave: *Industria textil, salarios, derechos sociales y económicos, sector industrial, trabajador industrial.*

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Introduction

The textile industry is part of everyday life; wearing garments to cover one's skin before others and to protect against changing weather was a necessity that humans first met by using animal hides. However, textiles today are a matter of fashion, social status, income level, and cultural influence within each country.

Textile activity and clothing styles in Mexico were based on beliefs, lifestyles, and—above all—the resources available (Mayorga et al., 2018). Meanwhile, the establishment of textile workshops (*obrajes*) in Mexico City, Xochimilco, Puebla, Tlaxcala, Tepeaca, Celaya, and Texcoco helped boost production and increase the demand for female labor due to the type of work required for silk production.

Yet, as these were basic-need goods and both textile companies and the population grew, the increased demand for labor gave rise to poor working conditions, inflexible schedules, and long working hours, paving the way for labor exploitation. Women, because of their creativity, delicate hands, and patience, were the most affected, enduring exhausting workdays and poor working conditions—both of which became characteristic of the textile sector—along with child labor (sons and daughters) working for almost no pay (De Ita et al., 2005). The socioeconomic restructuring of the textile industry, from the Spanish Conquest to the present day, reveals wage inequality spanning from the establishment of *obrajes*[2] to the creation of micro-workshops, the emergence of large factories, and the appearance of Micro, Small, and Medium-Sized Enterprises (MSMEs).

This wage gap emerged mainly due to the cultural assignment of domestic tasks to women, which was replicated in the allocation of factory activities. Combined with the lack of academic education among women, this deepened wage inequality.

This leads to the research question: What have been the economic causes and social transformations that intensified the wage gap in Mexico's textile industry? The hypothesis is that the changing economic environment and social transformations—such as the unequal assignment of factory work, the intensive use of female labor, poor working conditions, inflexible schedules, and long workdays—were decisive factors that drove the restructuring of this sector. Therefore, the objective was to analyze wage inequality in Mexico's textile industry from the Spanish Conquest to 2024.

Methodology

Through the historical-logical method, wage inequality across five centuries of Mexico's textile industry was contextualized. By conducting an exhaustive review of specialized literature from scientific databases, the information was categorized (Gómez, 2024). The objective was to analyze the wage gap and social transformations within the Mexican textile industry. The historical-logical methodology made it possible to capture changes, trajectories, and continuities to identify patterns and causal relationships underlying historical events in this industry related to wages over more than six centuries. It also highlights the socioeconomic metamorphosis of labor precariousness and wage inequality in MSMEs and large factories—main variables in this research—resulting in the construction of comparative charts showing male and female wages, educational levels, and the number of workers by gender.

Results and Discussion

The dynamism and high demand for textiles contributed to the national economy, while the restructuring of this sector was shaped by social dynamics, as it adapted to the needs of complex social groups and to the gender-based assignment of textile factory tasks. For example, embroidery has traditionally been performed by women since the *obraje* era, as it requires delicacy, patience, and creativity—qualities attributed to women.The textile industry has endured a long transformation—from the *obrajes* to modern MSMEs—despite the fact that labor

[2] The term obraje has been used broadly to refer to textile manufacturing workshops primarily based on the use of wool. These were the predecessors of textile factories, where there existed an important and direct link with technologically advanced forms of production (Giordano, 2000).

assignments began to be controlled by men in the late nineteenth century (Escandón, 2000).

a. **From the Spanish Conquest to the 19th century**

Aztec belief marked a primary axis in Mexico's textile production because it shaped its way of life and how to control the resources available (Mayorga et al., 2018) through attempts to evade slavery with tributes such as textile pieces, bundles of cotton and fabrics, sacks full of cochineal for dyeing, jewelry, hides, quetzal feathers, and agricultural and livestock products (Mayorga et al., 2018). In contrast, Indigenous workers in the *obrajes* performed different tasks of forced male labour, while, on occasions, a small number of women — who frequently tended to be the wives of prisoners — were condemned to be included (Escandón, 2000).

When the *obrajes* of Mexico City, Xochimilco, Puebla, Tlaxcala, Tepeaca, Celaya and Texcoco exported to Peru and Guatemala (Giordano, 2000), textile production reached its national apex, and the importation of Eastern silks (Bazant, 1964) through the port of Acapulco increased silk-thread production that was unwound and easily turned into garments by the work of the *obrajero* and female loom workers (Bonialian, 2017).

The *obrajes* began to decline, leaving standing those dedicated to manufacturing Spanish-style cloths, so some families of artisans and manufacturers (Tutino, 1985) chose not to be subjected to voluntary *obraje* labour and continued producing garments of national cotton near the markets of Mexico City, Puebla and Tlaxcala.

Importation of Asian cloth was halted in 1767 by the Spanish Crown when textile products were heavily taxed to protect the local industry (Guzmán, 2007) and to strengthen national producers. With the abolition of *obraje* slavery in the 18th century, the creation of textile micro-workshops mainly located in Mexico City, Texcoco, Puebla, Tlaxcala, Toluca, Valladolid and Querétaro increased (Guzmán, 2007), since they produced fabrics to be resold in nearby markets, and spinning of wool began to be delegated to women in rural families for minimal pay due to their lack of education (Quiroz, 2020; Tutino, 1985).

However, mechanization of the textile activity resulted in more intense labour exploitation because women suffered the worst consequences (Ramos, 1988). The precarious working conditions for women included working on their knees for hours because culturally they were seen as possessing a notion of art and an advanced sense of the idea of beauty in their souls (Ramos, 1988).

The boom in micro-workshops led to the few remaining *obrajes* no longer producing enough to supply the market (Bazant, 1964) because they produced little and eliminated permanent jobs, which reduced spinning work for rural women (Tutino, 1985). However, in 1830, Lucas Alamán and Esteban de Antuñano, by laying the foundations of industrial policy, managed to shape the textile industry (Ruíz, 2011).

Thus, by 1838 the El Hércules factory was established beside the Río Blanco (Carbajal, 2015) with cheap labour from neighbouring towns; children and women were paid 75 centavos daily for a 12–16 hour workday from sunup to sundown because the early hours of the day implied lack of materials and light for workers (Keremitsis, 1972). The textile industry prospered, the few remaining *obraje* workshops and women artisans continued weaving coarse cotton and wool fabrics (Murgueitio, 2015); meanwhile, female factory workers became symbols of family strength as a consequence of their incorporation into the textile labour force, despite the fact that their working and living conditions were poor, and they requested improvements year after year — for example, they used to earn 30 centavos for 12 hours of work in 1901 (Ramos, 1988).

b. **The Mexican textile industry during the 20th century**

The establishment of rail lines and factories during the Porfiriato energized international trade; however, mechanization of textile activities brought long and exhaustive working days with cheap labour that ignorance justified with low wages (Meyer, 1971). Nevertheless, the beginning of constant strikes produced stockpiling of textiles in 1921 that triggered a socio-commercial crisis (Gómez, 2024) that closed

factories, reduced working hours and caused unprecedented unemployment (Gamboa, 1990).

Textiles became family sustenance—such as hat-making—because they allowed all family members to work; income multiplied and some continued in factories despite the fact that their wages fluctuated constantly and women's wages were around one third lower than men's (Escandón, 2012). Low production, few sales, and employer lockouts due to the overproduction crisis were accompanied by the Great Depression, aggravating demand and production with few profits and diminishing investments (Rodríguez, 2006).

Industrialization accelerated with the import-substitution process[3] consolidated by World War II (Mayorga et al., 2018). The textile industry increased its productivity through large facilities and the workday with low wages rose (Vera & Vera, 2012). Women were admitted without the need to be accompanied by a male relative, as were children, who often — being children of workers — tended to labour in invisible conditions without pay (Asseff, 2022).

While men carried out dyeing, mechanics and supervision tasks, women were generally weavers and performed all finishing work such as sewing, making buttonholes and quality control (Asseff, 2022), which contributed to, by 1955, a significant number of industrial firms — mainly small and medium-sized (Solís, 2017) — beginning to be led by women.

By the 1970s, technological changes intensified with the introduction of automatic and electronic controls that increased machine operating speed (Portos, 1992). The shuttle loom was innovated; the continuous finishing system technique was disseminated, and mixing synthetic fibres with natural ones spread. Production costs fell, and sales accentuated the use of automatic controls and computer programming for textile machines (Portos, 1992).

Technological advances together with the exhausting workdays, precarious working conditions, disregard for human and labour rights and the lack of product diversification provoked another socio-commercial crisis that brought factory closures, layoffs, decreased commercial activity and the inability of other manufacturing sectors to drive economic development, revealing the lag in methods compared to major world producers (Rodríguez, 2006).

With Mexico's adhesion to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) it began to be considered a developing country with special treatment (Vega, 1986) and to start exporting maquiladora company products, which helped obtain some textile advantages such as increased certainty in tax payments for imports and rationalisation of protection as part of structural change to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness of national companies, mainly in manufacturing (Vega, 1986).

Labour became increasingly cheaper, which produced a territorial dispersion of maquiladoras (Marín, 2004). Therefore, the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) consolidated a new economic model (Rouquié, 2015) and turned Mexico into one of the main suppliers to the United States with access advantages and an increase in the total value of national goods exported to the neighbouring country (Pino Acevedo, 2020).
The textile workforce of 442,617 workers employed in maquiladoras increased to 1,241,617 by the late 1990s (Marín, 2004); the productive process improved with international quality standards and evolved toward the full-package model[4], favouring local productive linkages by encouraging chains so producers would integrate.

Consequently, several firms began or expanded their shared production operations in Mexico after relocating plants installed in Central America and the Caribbean (Ferreira, 2020) to make Mexico the first

[3] An economic model of industrialization adopted by several Latin American countries, which states that for a nation to develop, it must work with its own natural resources instead of exporting them; therefore, the role of the State was to support national industry.

[4] This system standardizes the entire production process—from design to the final product—turning it into a dynamic system, which is believed to have begun in the new millennium (Bravo et al., 2018). Meanwhile, according to García et al. (2018), the complete textile package process involves productive integration from the production of raw materials and the manufacture of textile inputs to design and the final goods, all produced entirely within a national framework.

textile and apparel supplier to the United States, followed by Canada and China (Herrero, 2010).

c. **The textile industry in Mexico in the 21st century**

The factory-workshop dichotomy persisted throughout the 19th century with mechanized factories favoured over artisanal workshops in Mexican textiles (Escandón, 2012). Factories strengthened in 1994 with NAFTA until 2003, when Mexico, together with China[5], Hong Kong and Central America, became the main suppliers of textile and clothing products to the United States (De Ita et al., 2005). Mexico fell from first to second place as a textile and clothing supplier and became dependent on the economic shifts of the United States (Rodríguez & Fernández, 2006).

By the end of the 20th century and the start of the 21st, the Mexican textile industry comprised 43,774 MIPYMES (not including leather and footwear industries) (Rodríguez & Fernández, 2006) strategically positioned in the Fibre-Textile-Garment Chain (Cadena Fibra-Textil-Vestido, CFTV)[6] and in the international market with eyes toward developing sectoral competitiveness programmes (Rodríguez & Fernández, 2006).

Tlaxcala is an example: in the garment branch it went from 107 factories to only 31 factories by 2003; while in the textile branch it fell from 97 factories to only 35 for the same year. The disappearance of these eliminated jobs, especially for women (Herrero, 2015), and of the 84 maquiladora garment companies, 16.5% closed by 2002 because they were not operating at full capacity (Herrero, 2003).

Globalization, communication technologies, and innovations in machinery and equipment involved the textile industry in economic development and the exchange of goods to cover the physiological and economic needs of people in the 20th century (Rangel, 2017). Nevertheless, in the 21st century the egocentrism of being fashionable led large factories to engage in fast fashion of low quality and high demand, which triggered unprecedented domestic production as the main source of employment for large proportions of the population (Moreno-Brid et al., 2023).

With fast fashion and China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, the Mexican textile sector was affected by a lack of technological development and coordination, losing competitiveness relative to countries in Eastern Europe and Asia (López & Solís, 2010). However, with the creation of 477,000 jobs between 1996 and 2011 — the majority of them (305,000) in domestic production (Moreno-Brid et al., 2023) — through MIPYMES, and with the CFTV competitiveness programme of the Ministry of the Economy (SE) to facilitate access to business credit, reduce or subsidize electricity tariffs, increase security, combat informal trade and support integration into the CFTV (López & Solís, 2010), national production rose.

Thus, and with the subsequent signing in 2020 of the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA/T-MEC) that included some benefits for artisans and Mexican traders seeking to internationalise — since all textile products manufactured in the region would be eligible for duty-free treatment by the importing party (Carvajal, 2012) — the CFTV reactivated.

Consequently, according to INEGI data, in 2022 the largest labour force in the Mexican textile industry was female (60%) focused on garment manufacturing (58%). Meanwhile, tailoring, seamstress work, sewing and garment manufacturing occupations (82.8%) retained the best productive levels mainly because working hours were reasonable and flexible, since in some MIPYMES priority was given to managing schedules according to their needs (Barrios, 2013; Rajchenberg, 2021; Gómez, 2022).

Thus, during the COVID-19 pandemic textile production concentrated on four main products (44.4%): finished cotton denim fabrics; finished fabrics of blended soft fibres (artificial and/or synthetic fibres); coated and plastified waterproofed fabrics; and non-woven fabrics for industrial use (INEGI, 2022) despite

[5] The reason for China's incursion into the textile industry converges in 2001 with its entry into the World Trade Organization.

[6] The CFTV is a textile chain made up of three links: (1) fibers, (2) yarns and fabrics, and (3) garment manufacturing. It has represented a strategy in Mexico since the division of its linkages has allowed the textile industry to focus on specific areas (De Ita et al., 2005).

the closure of large factories and the increase in self-employment in MIPYMES.

d. **Contextualization of wage differences in Mexico's textile industry**

Carbajal (2015) set out in his article titled *The Pioneers of the Textile Industry*, the case of Cayetano Rubio who bought the Colorado mill and an extensive plot in 1838 in the city of Querétaro to build the "El Hércules" factory and achieve unprecedented industrial growth at that time.

However, the prosperous growth of this industry contrasted with the needs of workers, who laboured in inhumane conditions with 12 to 16 hour shifts because employers fixed wages, the duration of shifts and working conditions. The sexual division of activities together with the exhausting textile workdays caused wage inequalities that did not fully satisfy basic family needs (food, clothing, health, housing, education and services).

For example, despite economic growth during the Porfiriato, control of the country and monopolisation by a few economic groups managed to exclude a large part of the population that suffered deficiencies in food, health, education, clothing, among others (Reyes, 2011), favouring only the bourgeois class. Therefore, after the Mexican Revolution the primary objective was to guarantee minimum working conditions of welfare for the workforce in any sector. Thus, from the 1940s to the 1960s there was an improvement in wages thanks to industrialization driven by the import-substitution model (ISI) which generated adequate infrastructure conditions for installing improvements such as drainage, electricity, roads and housing; this was considered a period of sustained growth for the national economy that was reflected in workers' wages and denominated the Stabilizing Development Model (1951–1976). However, from 1976 the decline of the minimum wage intensified until the 1980s; a decade considered the largest real drop of 65% (Santiago, 2011). For its part, the textile industry showed wage growth between 300 and 900 pesos per month due to Mexico's adhesion to GATT (Gómez, 2022) which, after economic crises and structural imbalances, caused the minimum wage to fail to present improvements, increases or changes reflected in per capita GDP in the following decades.

Thus, in the 2000s the government, with an inflation-targeting policy, kept the economy stable without high inflation levels, as a result of increasing the minimum wage, so it was established that wage increases were to be in line with inflation increases, without surpassing them until 2020 (Figure 1).

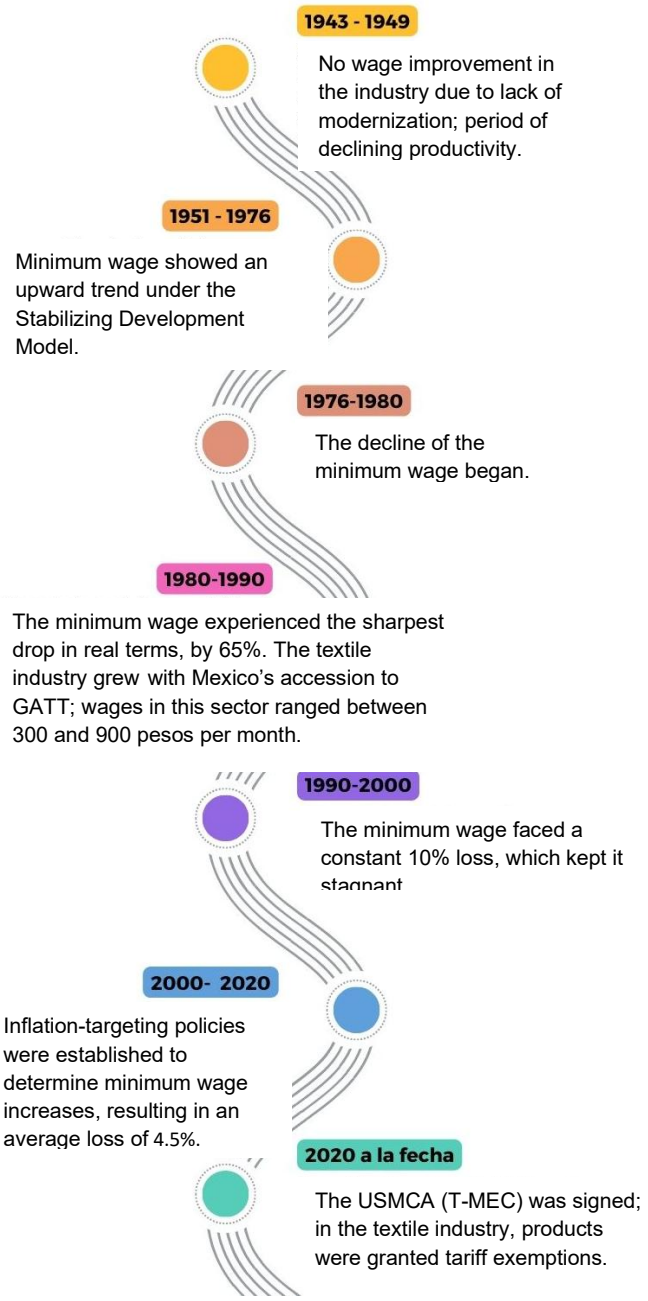

Figure 1. Descriptive timeline of wage-related events in the Mexican textile industry.

The study of wages in Mexico gained relevance, according to González (2010), when the State, during the 20th century, allowed the regulation of property and the strengthening of the guiding principles of Article 123 of the Constitution. This article established the essential social and labor guarantees for the population, such as: (1) the right to decent work, (2) promotion of employment, (3) minimum wage, (4) length of the workday, (5) formation of unions or professional associations, (6) regulation of strikes, and (7) social security. These measures significantly reduced abuses related to working hours and wage payments, and led to the creation of institutions such as the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) and the Institute for Social Security and Services for State Workers (ISSSTE).

For this reason, the study of wage inequality has become a key issue for the textile industry (Portos, 2015), as it draws on statistical data from the 2019 Economic Census, which reported a total of 42,067 Economic Units (EU) engaged in garment manufacturing. Among these, Puebla (5,512 EU), the State of Mexico (4,138 EU), and Oaxaca (3,921 EU) were entities that contributed to the GDP with a total of 122.99 billion pesos.

Moreover, garment manufacturing employed 336,505 people in that same year: 26,102 were 20 years old, 118,262 were between 21 and 30 years old, 102,625 were between 31 and 40 years old, and 89,455 were over 40 years old. Additionally, according to ENOE (2022), the educational level in the textile industry showed that there were still workers with no formal education (8,608 workers), while 221,095 had basic education, 78,914 had upper-secondary education, and 27,827 had higher education.

ENOE (2022) also highlighted that the states with the largest number of people working in garment manufacturing were the State of Mexico, Puebla, and Tlaxcala. These states had a predominantly female workforce with an average age of 40.7 years and an average schooling of 9.16 years—equivalent to basic education. In contrast, men had an average age of 38.4 years and an average of 9.63 years of schooling. The same source reported that out of 767,000 people employed in the textile industry, 32.3% were men, earning an average monthly wage of 4,093 pesos, whereas women (67.7%) earned an average of 3,065 pesos per month.

Similarly, it was reported that the textile occupations with the largest number of workers included tailoring, dressmaking, sewing, garment assembly, embroidery, and fabric cutting, as well as more demanding jobs such as machinery and textile equipment operators, and shoemaking (Table 1).

Table 1. Total number of workers, ages, educational level, and wages in the Mexican textile industry, 2019–2022.

Year	States	Total workers	Ages of workers (subsector: garment manufacturing)	Educational level	Women's wages	Men's wages
2019	**Total**	42,067	336,505	336,444	$102.68	$102.68
	State of Mexico	4,138 (both sexes)	20 years (26,102); 21–30 years (118,262); 31–40 years (102,625); over 40 years (89,455)	No education (8,608 workers); basic education (221,095); upper-secondary (78,914); higher education (27,827).	Daily minimum wage: $102.68	Daily minimum wage: $102.68
	Oaxaca	3,921 (both sexes)				
	Puebla	5,512 (both sexes)				
2022	**Total**	767,000	–	–	$121.66	$121.66
	State of Mexico	32.3% men and 67.7% women	Women: average age 40.7 years; Men: average age 38.4 years	According to ENOE data: primary level 29.2%, secondary level 26.5%, upper-secondary level 21.3%.	Daily minimum wage: $121.66	Daily minimum wage: $121.66
	Puebla					
	Tlaxcala					

Source: Own elaboration based on data from ENOE (2019, 2022).

With this wage trajectory, it should be noted that the increase in salaries in the textile sector has been due to the fact that higher national production leads to higher wages, which improves the standard of living and reactivates the economy, since greater consumption stimulates savings — that is, a virtuous economic cycle is generated.

In the analysis of wage differences from a social perspective within the textile sector, salary disparities have existed since the establishment of the *obrajes*

(textile workshops) in Mexico. Although women often worked there to assist their enslaved husbands, they were paid 50% less than men.

Wages in the *obrajes* depended on the type of activity, since slavery meant that people worked for free for life (Gómez, 2022). In cases of voluntary labor, women's wages were typically two pesos per month.

With the abolition of slavery in the *obrajes* and the emergence of home-based workshops, wages began to vary. For instance, in the 19th century, wages for textile workers ranged from 1.5 to 3 *reales*[7] (for both sexes) (Sandoval Zarauz, 1979). As industrialization advanced, productivity increased, and working hours became exhausting due to the intensity of labor and product demand (Escandón, 2000) (see Table 2).

Micro-workshops, through networks of trust and familiarity, achieved higher incomes than factory wages. For example, the *El Hércules* factory near Río Blanco (Carbajal, 2015) used to pay between 12.5 and 75 cents per day, whereas other textile factories in Mexico City paid about $1.50 per day (Keretmisis, 1972). The informal, family-based nature of micro-workshops resulted in little empirical evidence regarding exact wages, but it is known that most workers in such enterprises were single or widowed women (Toledo, 2003) (see Table 2).

Micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) addressed needs such as flexible working hours, social benefits, respect for labor rights, the reduction of mistreatment, and improved hygiene conditions. They also sought to balance task distribution between men and women in order to strengthen these businesses and promote more equitable employment. However, this situation did not benefit large factories, as the wage gap widened.

For instance, as shown in Table 2, an MSME composed of four people (three women and one man) earned approximately $250 per day in 2021 (Gómez, 2022). Similarly, according to ENOE (2022), in large factories, 32.3% of employed men earned an average monthly salary of $4,093.00, whereas women (67.7%) earned $3,065.00 per month.

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Table 2. Analysis of wage inequalities and labor precariousness in the Mexican textile industry.

Form of Organization	Wages	Labor Precariousness
Textile Micro-Workshops (1830)	Familiarity and trust prevented the collection of precise wage data. Factory wages for both sexes ranged from 1.5 to 3 *reales.*	Main employment of single, widowed, or unmarried women with or without children. A room within the home was adapted for work, allowing childcare. Men began working in large textile factories, earning stable wages that ensured family security.
Textile Industry (Large Factories) (1830–2000)	Wages for both sexes ranged from $102.68 per day in 2019 to $121.66 per day in 2022.	Women worked under poor and unhygienic conditions (Escandón, 2000). Men usually supervised machinery and equipment.
MSMEs and Large Factories (2000–2023)	In an MSME of four people in 2021, the income was approximately $250 per day. In a textile factory in 2023, seamstresses earned $3,650, while skilled personnel earned an average monthly wage of $13,650.	Both men and women experienced poor working quality and minimal attention to psychosocial aspects such as job satisfaction, social mobility expectations, learning, and personal development.

Source: Author's own elaboration based on data obtained from Gómez (2023) and Sandoval Zarauz (1979).

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Wage disparities mark women workers in the textile industry with lower earnings than their male counterparts. However, overcoming job insecurity through the creation of self-employment in micro-workshops—mainly established by single, widowed, or single-mother women seeking stable pay and flexible hours—brought about a modest yet dynamic source of employment. This, in turn, led large factories to undervalue women's work through long working hours and unsanitary, difficult conditions (Escandón, 2000).

Consequently, in 2022, the Ministry of Labor and Employment Promotion (STyFE) published in the *Official Gazette of the Federation* (DOF) that the minimum wage for textile industry workers would be $215.97 per day. By 2023, according to the Government's *Data México* website, the average wage for sewing, embroidery, and cutting machine operators in textile and clothing manufacturing was set at $3,890.00 per month, while seamstresses and garment makers earned $3,650.00 monthly.

It is worth noting that a qualified textile engineer earned an average monthly salary of $13,650.00 in 2023. However, upon entering the sector, such professionals typically began with $8,300.00 and could reach up to $32,870.00 per month depending on the development of their skills and competencies, according to the Jobted website.

Despite these established wage levels, working conditions in the 21st century have been marked by deficiencies in quality and psychosocial aspects—such as satisfaction, social mobility expectations, learning, and personal development (López et al., 2014a)—as well as by poor hygiene, temporary or

[7] For current equivalence, 8 reales would be equivalent to $1.00.

indefinite contracts, mistreatment, and the lack of respect for labor rights and benefits (López et al., 2014b), all of which directly affect wage inequality.

Added to this are the economic shifts caused by demographic transformations in the labor force, which can be observed throughout history. This is evident in the *obrajes* (colonial textile workshops), where women who worked alongside their enslaved husbands often received no pay. In voluntary workshops, however, a marked wage gap existed: men earned $4.00 monthly, while women earned $2.00.

A century later, micro-workshops sought to improve this situation, although little is known due to scarce data and strong family networks. Inequality in factories, on the other hand, was evident but not necessarily unequal, since both sexes earned between 1.5 and 3 reales.

The economic significance of the 20th century lay in continuous wage improvements, which were later affected by the lack of industrial modernization between 1943 and 1949. Combined with the *stabilizing development model* (1951–1976), wages began to decline. Earnings for both men and women fell from 0.30 cents for twelve-hour days in 1901 to between $300.00 and $900.00 per month for a five-day, forty-hour workweek in 1970.

By the 1990s, the establishment of reasonable working hours (8–10 hours per day) led to fixed wages for both men and women, who earned $7.10 per hour regardless of their specific factory role. This improvement coincided with Mexico's accession to the GATT, which spurred growth in the textile sector.

At the beginning of the 21st century, inflation-targeting policies brought about an increase in the minimum wage: from $95.85 for 9–10-hour shifts in 1998 to $102.68 for an 8-hour workday in 2019—a $6.83 rise alongside a one-hour reduction in working time.

Finally, the limited knowledge of women's earnings in 19th-century micro-workshops, combined with the care-centered nature of women's labor in the 21st century, finds continuity in the restructuring of the textile sector. Economic and commercial developments have led to the resurgence of these enterprises, now known as MIPYMES—mostly led by women, with an average daily income of approximately $250.00—and representing 95.5% of all businesses in Mexico.

Conclusions

The historical context of the Mexican textile industry, analyzed through the logical-historical methodology, made it possible to portray wage inequalities and labor precariousness between men and women—from the *obrajes* to the MIPYMES—across six centuries.

Given the growing demand for female labor in this sector, factory work has long reflected wage disparities that eventually led to the reemergence of 19th-century micro-workshops in the 21st century, now called MIPYMES and led by women seeking wage equity, flexible schedules, and improved working conditions.

Thus, the establishment of MIPYMES fostered employment, workplace equity, and the creation of daycare centers near work facilities, as women's empathy became the bridge linking industrial labor to the advancement of labor rights and working conditions.

Therefore, overexploitation, wage disparity, and precarious labor conditions have been key factors in the persistence of the gender wage gap—especially from the female perspective of this sector, where women working in large textile factories often faced lower pay than men and more difficult working conditions.

Finally, the objective of this research article—to analyze the wage gap and the transformations of Mexico's textile industry—was achieved through the logical-historical method, as temporal analysis clearly demonstrated wage inequalities in this sector. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that although these inequalities and precarious conditions have decreased according to official data, they remain largely invisible to the business community.

Author contributions

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