

Theoretical-empirical article

Process of (Re)Organization of Productive and Reproductive Work of Women in Confection



Processo de (Re)Organização do Trabalho Produtivo e Reprodutivo de Mulheres na Confeção

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ABSTRACT

Objective: this article analyzed how women who own a clothing business in the Agreste region of Pernambuco (re)organized their productive and reproductive work in the private space of their homes, taking into account gender relations. **Theoretical framework:** it is based on the discussion about the sexual division of labor, the dynamics of conciliation between public and private spaces, the triple shift, and the insertion of women in the labor market, based on the problems they face. **Method:** a qualitative descriptive approach was used, with 23 semi-structured interviews. **Results:** findings point out that having their own business at home generates a false impression of flexibility for women; the owners' work routine is exhaustive and with the accumulation of productive and reproductive activity intertwined in the same space, generating triple shifts and precarious working conditions; the financial emancipation of women who work in clothing occurs from the (re)organization of their functions in the private environment of the home, diverging from the literature that relates their autonomy to entering the public environment of the labor market; and informality, typical of the region, favors the entry of the interviewees into the clothing sector, but deprives them of access to social security. **Conclusion:** the theoretical contributions reveal that women do not necessarily need to leave the private space to enter the productive work world and achieve a certain emancipation, as they manage to do this from the (re)organization of productive work in the home environment itself.

Keywords: gender; sexual division of labor; organizational processes; confection.

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RESUMO

Objetivo: o artigo analisou como as mulheres proprietárias de negócio de confeção no agreste pernambucano (re)organizaram seu trabalho produtivo e reprodutivo no espaço privado de suas casas levando em consideração as relações de gênero. **Marcos teóricos:** embasa-se na discussão sobre divisão sexual do trabalho, dinâmica de conciliação entre espaço público e privado, tripla jornada e inserção da mulher no mercado laboral, a partir das problemáticas enfrentadas por elas. **Método:** utilizou-se da abordagem qualitativa do tipo descritiva, com realização de 23 entrevistas semiestruturadas. **Resultados:** os achados apontam que ter seu próprio negócio em casa acarreta uma falsa impressão de flexibilidade para as mulheres; a rotina laboral das proprietárias é exaustiva e com acúmulo das atividades produtiva e reprodutiva imbricadas no mesmo espaço, gerando tripla jornada e condições precárias de trabalho; a emancipação financeira das mulheres que atuam na confeção ocorre a partir da (re)organização das suas funções no próprio ambiente privado do lar, divergindo da literatura que relaciona sua autonomia ao ingresso no ambiente público do mercado laboral; e a informalidade, típica da região, favorece a entrada das entrevistadas no setor de confeções, mas as priva de acesso à seguridade social. **Conclusões:** as contribuições teóricas revelam que as mulheres não precisam, necessariamente, sair do espaço privado para adentrar o mundo laboral produtivo e alcançar certa emancipação, pois conseguem fazer isso a partir da (re)organização do trabalho produtivo no próprio ambiente do lar.

Palavras-chave: gênero; divisão sexual do trabalho; processos organizacionais; confeção.

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INTRODUCTION

In the 1970s, there was an increase in paid employment for women worldwide, both in formal and informal sectors of the economy (Bruschini, 2007). Between 2014 and 2019, female representation in the labor market continued to grow steadily (Conjuntura Econômica, 2022). However, this increase is accompanied by precariousness, vulnerability, wage inequalities, unhealthy working conditions, and women's health risks, along with the persistence of the sexual division of labor (Hirata, 2002).

In Brazil, women's entry into the labor market is also marked by significant inequalities (Hirata & Kergoat, 2007). Despite some women occupying positions in management, leadership, supervision, and coordination, gender inequality is still evident, as the majority continues to receive lower wages. Data from the Annual Social Information Report (RAIS) in 2017, for example, indicates that the earnings of these female workers represented 69.8% of the salaries of men in the same positions (Ministério da Economia, 2019).

Lodi (2006) states that even though women faced historical difficulties in entering the labor market, they managed to break the isolation that existed between the home (private space) and the public space. This social right to participate in productive activities, demanded by women and facilitated by capitalist interests, was an achievement for women.

However, inequalities are not limited to the public sphere but also affect women in their private lives, leaving them overwhelmed and at a disadvantage in both environments. In the private sphere, women are practically solely responsible for household chores, such as taking care of the home, children, the elderly, family health, among others, with men not sharing these responsibilities. Whether actively participating in the labor market or not, the domestic tasks performed by women are indispensable for the survival and well-being of individuals, yet they are still undervalued and disregarded in statistics that classify them as 'inactive' (Lodi, 2006).

In this context, Talavera (2020) describes the daily routine of women in three work shifts: the first begins at dawn with household chores and childcare; it is interrupted to make way for second work shift, which takes place in the public sphere with productive activities; and the third is a continuation of the first. This narrative sequence is very common in the lives of Brazilian women. However, in the agreste region of Pernambuco, which is known for its textile industry, there is another mode of organizing female labor, where women strive for emancipation by (re)organizing their work within their own private space, incorporating

both productive and reproductive activities into a single location, their homes.

The textile production in the agreste region of Pernambuco is characterized by family-based operations, a strong presence of female labor (Prefeitura de Caruaru et al., 2015), low educational levels among workers, and learning through practical experience (Martins et al., 2020; Souza et al., 2020). Frequently, subcontracting units known as *façções* and informal domestic production units known as *fabricos* operate within family homes to perform various stages of the production process, such as cutting and sewing.

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), Brazilian women work around 58 hours per week, which is five hours more than men. The majority of subcontracted seamstresses in the agreste region of Pernambuco work between 10 and 19 hours a day (Prefeitura de Caruaru et al., 2015).

However, for these clothing professionals, the practice of working from home has become an opportunity to balance productive and reproductive activities, perhaps one of the reasons it has become a predominantly female activity. Even though they earn little, work informally waives their labor rights, and they must juggle this work with household responsibilities (Bezerra, 2011). In other words, we are facing a new scenario where the first, second, and third work shifts overlap, further burdening these women and accentuating gender inequality.

On the one hand, there is a predominance of female labor in the clothing industry; on the other hand, there has been limited analysis of women in this context. Only two studies involving the workforce, inequality, or precariousness of female seamstresses in the agreste region of Pernambuco have been found in recent years (Bezerra et al., 2020; Milanês, 2020).

Furthermore, there is a lack of data indicating the number of women working in clothing production, especially in informal roles. It is known that in 2008, around 16,228 formal workers operated in this sector in the region (Departamento Intersindical de Estatística e Estudos Socioeconômicos [Dieese], 2010), a low number due to the majority working informally. In 2012, 107,000 people, including both men and women, were employed in clothing-related occupations (Serviço de Apoio às Micro e Pequenas Empresas [Sebrae], 2013). There has been a gap of over ten years in research, making it difficult to quantify female labor in the area.

Therefore, the focus on gender in this study, as indicated by Scott (1995), involves engagement with a history that includes the narratives of the oppressed and an analysis of the nature and meaning of their oppression.

It also involves an understanding of power inequalities. Despite women's participation in significant historical events, they remain invisible as historical subjects. Thus, highlighting their role in social construction helps reduce this invisibility in organizations. Additionally, considering the structural patterns of gender inequality, this study aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by the United Nations General Assembly, with the fifth goal specifically addressing "achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls" (Organização das Nações Unidas [ONU], 2015, p. 1).

Based on the above, this article aims to analyze how women who own clothing businesses in the agreste region of Pernambuco have (re)organized their productive and reproductive work within the private space of their homes, taking into account gender relations.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The gender division of labor and women's roles in the public and private spheres

For Araújo et al. (2004), "in egalitarian societies, often referred to as 'primitive,' where there was no class division, gender relations formed the basis of societal organization and the social division of labor" (Araújo et al., 2004, p. 3). In contemporary times, these class and gender relations serve as social structures and overlap. This can be observed in the gender division of labor, which pertains to the way work is divided based on social relationships between men and women.

In this context, feminist movements challenge the various oppressions women were subjected to and expose social inequalities, highlighting how women were viewed in society, as 'slaves' or as a man's property (Cisne, 2005). Marxist feminism starts from the materialist principle of dialectics, exploring issues related to the connections between social production and reproduction, social and sexual division of labor, gender and class relations, aiming to emphasize women as critical and transformative subjects (Santos & Nóbrega, 2004). It reminds us that gender inequalities will persist unless structural changes occur (Calás & Smircich, 2010).

Therefore, the feminist movement's struggle is rooted in women's low participation in the labor market, influenced by the capitalist oppression system that perpetuates inequality. Thus, this article aligns with this perspective by highlighting labor relations while considering gender issues in the context of the Pernambuco agreste region.

Historical configurations differ in each society and are characterized by the predominant role of men in the productive sphere, such as industry, entrepreneurship, the armed forces, and politics, while women are traditionally associated with the reproductive sphere, including childcare, family, and household chores. As a result, men occupy positions with higher social value, leaving women with less recognized roles (Hirata & Kergoat, 2007). In this case, both men and women were historically concentrated in different types of social relations (Vale et al., 2011).

Turning to the garment industry in the Pernambuco agreste region, we see, on one hand, the gender division of labor in sewing, where knowledge of the craft is naturally associated with women from childhood or adolescence. On the other hand, there have been advancements with women entering the labor market in the region (Bezerra et al., 2020). However, men tend to take over garment work when the market becomes competitive and offers financial gains. Yet, this shift does not extend to the domestic sphere, with men and women still adhering to traditional gender roles, such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for children and the elderly. Guiraldelli (2012) also notes that the occupation of a seamstress, associated with the gender division of labor, highlights the different positions and spaces in society occupied by men and women, revealing the precariousness of work, ranging from low pay to status.

In this regard, Scott (2005) explains that the circumstances or specific characteristics of a minority end up justifying, legitimizing, and rationalizing the exclusion or unequal treatment of a particular group. In the case of women, motherhood, an exclusively female role, serves as a ready response for the majority (men), serving as a 'logical' reason for restricting women from participating in activities related to the public sphere. This process of exclusion thus finds a 'plausible' and 'uncontestable' justification.

Throughout history, women have always worked in either the private or public sphere but have rarely had their work recognized (Perrot, 2007). Their work is generally considered assistance, subsidiary, or complementary, even when they serve as the family's breadwinners. The expectation is that men are the family's providers, while women are expected to be mothers and homemakers (Albuquerque & Menezes, 2007).

The entry of women into the labor market, even through indirect routes, has significantly contributed to their emancipation (Reis & Freitas, 2016). Important factors in this development include the "emergence of feminist movements throughout the 20th century and, more precisely, the development of gender studies in the 1970s, combating the invisibility of women in human history" (Macedo et al., 2012, p. 220). According to Abreu and Sorj (1993), most women needed to leave their

homes and enter the public sphere to gain independence, “becoming present in the labor market, in political and social representations” (Macedo et al., 2012, p. 220).

This process also led women to enter previously male-dominated spaces (Reis & Freitas, 2016). However, this achievement has also resulted in a dual or triple work burden, involving social production (in the public sphere) and social reproduction tasks (in the private sphere). As explained earlier (Furno, 2015), this leads to exhaustion on physical, emotional, or mental levels.

Another issue is the stark distinction in how men and women perceive their professional and family spheres. While men see them as separate, women are forced to see them as interconnected. While for men, coexisting in both the public and private spheres is not considered an obstacle, for women, it means facing significant challenges in their continuous effort to balance both (Lipovetsky, 2000).

One consequence of the dual or triple workload is that women are conditioned to shape their professional goals according to the limitations imposed on them in their private sphere, such as the arrival of children (Figueiredo & Zanella, 2008). In practice, both roles that women assume in society are complex and influence their professional choices. Often, reproductive work takes precedence for the sake of family integration, creating a hierarchy where there should be equality (Saffioti, 1976).

Carloto (2002) highlights that the consequences of motherhood still influence how women position themselves in the job market, affecting the type of opportunities, access, and employment conditions available to them. Social structures compel women to constantly juggle family and professional roles, limiting their availability and qualifications for work. Furthermore, to engage in productive economic sectors, women often need to make complex personal adjustments and domestic arrangements. Gomes (2004) points out that the difficulties women face in both the public and private spheres have led them to work independently. It is no coincidence that women represent 70% of self-employed individuals today (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor [GEM], 2020).

Women seek not only to enter the labor market through formal employment but also as ‘entrepreneurs’ (Gomes, 2004). Some of the activities predominantly pursued by women in recent years include clothing manufacturing, retailing cosmetics, perfumery, and personal care products, operating beauty salons, and providing food services (GEM, 2020). According to Prandi (1978), these activities often require low professional qualifications, making service provision more attractive due to lower initial capital requirements.

The productive and reproductive work of women in the clothing industry in the agreste region of Pernambuco

Gender relations have always been present since the inception of the clothing businesses in the agreste region of Pernambuco, closely linked to the domestic work carried out by women. Female labor is explicitly present not only in selling at markets but also in the production of garments. This second activity, performed in their own homes, has become very common among women because it allows them to balance it with household chores (Bezerra, 2012; Souza et al., 2019).

According to Abreu and Sorj (1993), women engaged in productive work within the home aim to fulfill their domestic responsibilities, while men who perform domestic work seek financial valorization.

The ‘convenience’ of maintaining both roles led to a considerable increase in the number of women working in home-based production units, reaching 84.1% in 2008. This statistic applies to the municipality of Toritama, one of the three main cities in the agreste region of Pernambuco known for its clothing industry (Departamento Intersindical de Estatística e Estudos Socioeconômicos [Dieese], 2010).

Nascimento and Souza (2020) observed a higher adoption of productive work within the domestic space, as they found that 50% of the female seamstresses they surveyed in Agrestina, another city in the agreste region of Pernambuco, established their production activities in their own homes, and 30% lived very close to their workspace. The reason for this logistical choice was the ‘convenience’ of balancing productive and reproductive work, leading to an increasing presence of women in informal sewing activities in the region.

Indeed, home-based work can be seen as the most reconcilable with the traditional roles imposed on women (Carloto, 2002), although this alternative contributes to the accumulation of tasks. This organizational model stems from the fact that many seamstresses are mothers and wives, making it difficult for them to work outside the home, such as in factories with fixed working days and hours.

Thanks to sewing, these business owners not only earn income but also gain purchasing power and control over their finances. As a result, they no longer need to ask for money or justify how they use their earnings to their spouses. This means that their entry into the labor market translates into increased autonomy and visibility within their own families (Milanês, 2020) and, consequently, in society.

In this way, we observe that women in the agreste region of Pernambuco involved in the clothing industry establish their businesses within the private space of their homes as a way to balance productive and reproductive activities, ensuring their financial independence without losing sight of their family integration and seeking a degree of emancipation. They go to shopping centers, which are commonly their sales points in the region, to sell their products on market days, which occur only once a week. Understanding this context and the (re)organization of work in detail, considering gender relations, is crucial, as we will see in the results section of this paper.

Clothing industry in rural Pernambuco and the Miguel Arraes Boardwalk

The productive activity of clothing production in the agreste region of Pernambuco began in the 1950s when cotton production in the Brazilian Northeast was experiencing a crisis. Many families faced extreme poverty and dire living conditions in rural areas, leading them to migrate to urban areas in search of employment. During this period, women played a crucial role in providing for their families by starting to make simple garments from fabric scraps brought from São Paulo and Recife, which they sold at local markets (Bezerra, 2011).

Over the years, clothing production gained importance in trade and expanded to other cities in the surrounding area. Businesses grew, and garment manufacturing became more prominent. In the 1990s, there was a movement to modernize open-air markets, leading to the emergence of large shopping centers that provided a more suitable infrastructure for trade. The clothing industry became firmly established in the interior of the state of Pernambuco, covering more than ten cities in the region, with Caruaru, Toritama, and Santa Cruz do Capibaribe being the main ones (Souza et al., 2020). In this context, the Moda Center Santa Cruz was established in the city of Santa Cruz do Capibaribe in 2006. However, its structure did not benefit all traders and manufacturers equally, as not everyone had the financial means to acquire a booth or store in the facility. This led individuals with lower purchasing power to set up shop in its vicinity, forming what became known as the Feira do Poeirão (dusty fair).

This name reflected the reality experienced by the market workers, who had to contend with mud during heavy rains, and faced poor hygiene conditions, high risks due to exposed wiring, and a lack of restroom facilities (Queiroz, 2016). In response to these conditions, the local government, in partnership with the state government, constructed a new space to improve working conditions for local traders.

As a result of social pressure, the Miguel Arraes Boardwalk was inaugurated in 2014 and was provided free of charge to approximately 4,000 garment-producing families, where this study was conducted. The complex covers an area of more than 25,000 square meters, divided into three modules with 3,480 booths, 62 shops, 48 restrooms, 48 points in the food court, lighting, and a parking area of 7,800 square meters. The business owners in this establishment are characterized as unskilled labor with low levels of education, and most of them are part of the informal sector of the economy (Queiroz, 2016).

This informal sector is characterized by the International Labour Organization (ILO) as an economic unit with small-scale production, limited use of technical procedures, minimal separation between capital and labor, and a low capacity to accumulate capital, resulting in precarious employment and low income (Milhomem, 2003).

Due to the numerous obstacles traditionally faced by women in the formal labor market, self-employment, primarily in the informal sector, has become common. It serves as a means for women to enter the productive sector, allowing them to become not only operational workers but also managers and employers, contributing to the economic development of the region (Gomes, 2004).

Additionally, women in the agreste region of Pernambuco's clothing industry face gender inequalities, such as the sexual division of labor, which hinders their access to paid positions in the public sphere. Consequently, they seek new alternatives to carry out their work and achieve financial independence.

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

The study employed a qualitative and descriptive approach. According to Minayo et al. (2011), qualitative research is important for understanding the relationships that occur among social actors, both within institutions and in the representations of specific groups on particular topics. The descriptive category was used through in-depth analysis, allowing for a better characterization, classification, and interpretation of the analyzed phenomenon in the field.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2021), with 23 women who own clothing businesses operating at the Miguel Arraes Boardwalk, a major shopping center located in the city of Santa Cruz do Capibaribe, Pernambuco, Brazil. The interviews were conducted in person at the establishment by a team of five researchers on a Monday in April 2019, a day when sales were taking place, during both morning and afternoon shifts. One limitation of the

research was that some women could not dedicate their time exclusively to the interview and continued to respond to questions while organizing merchandise or taking breaks to assist customers. As a result, more time was needed to complete some interviews.

The owners were randomly selected based on their willingness to participate in the research. The criterion for ending data collection was the repetition of information in the testimonies, indicating empirical confidence in the saturation of findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2021; Glaser & Strauss, 2017). A voice recorder app was used to record responses, which were then manually transcribed.

The research followed ethical standards and was conducted based on item VII, “research aimed at the theoretical deepening of situations that arise spontaneously and contingently in professional practice, provided they do not reveal data that can identify the subject,” of Resolution 510 of the Ethics and Research Committees and the National Commission for Ethics in Research (Conep) (Brasil, 2016). All participants received information about the study’s purpose, which was voluntary participation with the option to withdraw at any time without prejudice. Consent was obtained through voice recording before the interview began. Anonymity was ensured by assigning code names (M1, M2, Mn) to participants’ names in the results section.

The interview script was developed based on the theoretical review in the article, aiming to achieve the proposed objective. It was structured around three themes: the sociodemographic profile of the interviewees and their businesses, work in the public and private spheres, and gender inequality in both spaces.

The findings were treated using narrative analysis, which promotes a dialogue between multiple areas of knowledge and allows the researcher to focus on the participants’ stories (Butler, 1990). It helps understand the phenomenon through the actors’ life stories, which cannot be separated from their professional lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). “People, by nature, lead told lives and tell stories about those lives, while narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell their stories, and write narratives of experiences” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1995, p. 2).

Therefore, we followed Czarniawska (2000) analytical path, which consists of three phases: (1) explanation, where we observed how the stories were being constructed; (2) explication, where we interpreted, analyzed, and deconstructed the stories; and (3) exploration, where we constructed the narrative through the stories. In each step, the most significant excerpts from the stories associated with codes related to the structural themes were chosen, and using this selection, we conducted the content discussion.

RESULTS’ ANALYSIS

Interviewees and their businesses’ profiles

The surveyed individuals ranged in age from 25 to 64 years old, with the majority being married or in a stable relationship, accounting for 16 out of the 23 business owners. All participants had children ranging in age from eight months to 41 years, with 13 of them having children who were still in their childhood.

The educational attainment of the business owners is low, with 12 having only completed elementary school, one having completed elementary school, three having incomplete high school education, six managing to complete high school, and one having no formal education at all, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Sociodemographic profile of the business owners.

Sociodemographic profile	Quantity
Panel A: Age range	
25 years	1
26 to 33 years	5
34 to 41 years	5
42 to 49 years	5
50 to 57 years	3
58 to 64 years	4
Total	23
Panel B: Marital Status	
Single	4
Married	15
Stable union	1
Widow	1
Divorced	2
Total	23
Panel C: Education	
No formal education	1
Incomplete elementary	12
Completed elementary	1
Incomplete high school	3
Complete high school	6
Total	23
Panel D: Number of children	
None	
One or two	14
Three or more	9
Total	23

Note. The Quantity column refers to quantity among the interviewees. Source: Compiled by the authors.

Regarding the origin, 12 women live and operate their businesses in Santa Cruz do Capibaribe, with entrepreneurs from other cities in the region such as Brejo da Madre de

Deus, Caruaru, Jataúba, Pão de Açúcar, Surubim, Toritama, and rural areas like the Tabó farm located in Pernambuco. There are also participants from Campina Grande, a municipality in the state of Paraíba.

The majority of them have been involved in the garment industry for over ten years, with the shortest tenure being two months in the sector and the longest being 30 years. The products they sell are diverse, including women’s, men’s, and children’s fashion, beachwear, fitness wear, as well as items for bedding, table, and bath. Out of the 23 participants, 20 are responsible for both manufacturing and selling the pieces, while the others work solely in product sales.

Despite the fact that formalizing their businesses provides access to various government-granted rights, such as issuing invoices, labor benefits, and lower-interest credit lines for business expansion (Wissmann, 2021), it is noted that 14 interviewees do not have a National Registry of Legal Entities (CNPJ), one of the characteristics of formalization. Among the nine who do have CNPJ, five are individual microentrepreneurs (MEI), as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2. Business profile.

Business profile	Quantity
Panel A: Time in business	
Up to 1 year	2
More than 1 to 5 years	6
More than 5 to 10 years	8
More than 10 years	7
Total	23
Panel B: Business regulation	
With CNPJ	9
Without CNPJ	14
Total	23
Panel C: Manufacturing city	
Brejo da Madre de Deus (PE)	1
Caruaru (PE)	2
Campina Grande (PB)	1
Jataúba (PE)	2
Pão de Açúcar (PE)	1
Santa Cruz do Capibaribe (PE)	13
Sítio Tabó (PE)	1
Surumbi (PE)	1
Toritama (PE)	1
Total	23

Note. The Quantity column in the table refers to quantity among the interviewees. Pernambuco (PE), Paraíba (PB), and National Registry of Legal Entities (CNPJ). Out of the nine businesses that have CNPJ, five are individual microentrepreneurs (MEI). Source: Compiled by the authors.

The lack of regulation is just one aspect of informality that is evident in the businesses under study. Other parameters

of informality are also present, such as the organization of production on a small scale, the use of simple technologies, engagement in competitive markets like the clothing and fashion industry, and the absence of formal employment contracts, with a notable reliance on family labor (Fauré, 2007; Neri, 2005).

Another characteristic of the informal sector is the concentration of management and production roles, with employers and employees often being the same person, avoiding the hiring of additional staff. Informal work is often associated with self-employment, which allows individuals to generate income through independent work (Dornelas, 2008). With this understanding, people view their businesses as individual pursuits aimed at sustaining their economic well-being rather than aspiring to grow into larger companies. Consequently, they may not prioritize formalization. This approach aligns with what Carrieri et al. (2014) describe as ordinary management, where ordinary people manage their own businesses. Organizational routines are developed in the day-to-day operations of small enterprises with the support and participation of family members.

(Re)organization of work through the integration of public and private spaces

The daily routine of these women is comprised of an extensive list of activities related to their businesses. These activities include everything from purchasing raw materials, producing the pieces, paying suppliers, to selling the products, which takes place once a week at the Miguel Arraes Pedestrian Mall. The process of creating these pieces is often carried out in their homes, where production units and subcontractors are located, for the most part.

Throughout the day, there are breaks dedicated to household chores. This is because they perform productive work in their home spaces, where both activities inevitably blend. As one interviewee, M6, describes it: “I wake up at 6:30, go to work, then make coffee, sometimes my daughter does it, and then I wait for her to call. I work until noon and take a nap. I return at 1:30 or 2:00 and stay until 10:30 or 11:00 at night.” This situation corroborates findings by Bezerra (2011), which describe the exhausting workday of women, often exceeding 15 hours daily, involving both garment production and family care.

Similarly, women who choose to outsource part of the process to subcontractors, such as sewing, also have busy routines. They handle tasks related to material procurement, cutting, payments, packaging, organization, and sales. Even when outsourcing some stages of production, economic activity remains present in their homes. Their time is divided between domestic tasks and those related to business

management, all within a single location and without clear separation, as described by interviewees M3: “I take care of my daughters, manage household tasks, and then the pieces start arriving on Thursday. That’s when we start preparing. We work on Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday,” and M7: “I tidy up the house, gather things to buy materials and take them to the seamstress to cut and prepare. We start preparing on Thursday and Friday.”

On the one hand, working from home allows women to balance productive and reproductive activities. This scenario is seen in society as the ability of female business owners in the garment industry to reinvent themselves and maintain both paid and domestic activities without needing to give up one or prioritize one over the other. It is important to emphasize that productive work is essential for maintaining identity, empowerment, and emancipation for women.

On the other hand, this mode of (re)organizing work centered on the home can create a false sense of flexibility for women. This, in turn, results in an accumulation of tasks, contributing to the existence and intensification of the ‘triple workday,’ along with the precariousness of informal employment.

This overload of responsibilities can be observed in the statement of M8: “I wake up, take care of things at home, prepare lunch, and then I sew. I do this almost every day. Yes, almost every day. I also work on Sundays, Saturdays...” This highlights the double workday experienced by the interviewee throughout the week and the absence of moments for rest, as when one set of activities ends, the other begins, leading to the constant cycle of work. Thus, according to [Furno \(2015\)](#), women become doubly exploited, as they accumulate more responsibility and tasks.

At all times, these women are working; there is merely an alternation of tasks. They switch between productive work, which provides income, and reproductive work, which is unpaid and undervalued but equally demanding in terms of time and effort. Many of the interviewees mentioned difficulties in reconciling productive and reproductive activities, as expressed by M12: “Just being a housewife, right? Because it’s a challenge to separate work, home, children, and husband. It’s complicated.” In this context, [Saffioti \(1976\)](#) has pointed out since the 1970s that the two roles played by women are complex and influence their decisions about job satisfaction. Often, reproductive work in the private sphere takes precedence in favor of family integration, making it difficult for women to engage in the labor market, and creating a hierarchy when there should be equality.

Lastly, another issue is the lack of leisure. [Carvalho \(2007\)](#) states that women involved in the sewing process in

the garment industry do not engage in leisure and cultural activities due to a lack of time. Their routines are solely focused on work. This is confirmed by the statements of M4: “I feel bad saying this, but I have no leisure once I finish; it’s just household chores,” and M20: “No leisure at all.” The research findings reinforce the issue of the exhausting workday related to the accumulation of work in garment production and household services, which leads to a lack of or very little leisure time for these women.

The situations described above create disadvantages that can lead to physical and emotional exhaustion for these women. According to [Andrade \(2016\)](#), this occurs due to the pressure to handle everything around them, without having time for rest or self-care. The autonomy generated by self-employment can bring with it insecurities not only related to labor issues but also to professional advancement. This is because, due to the lack of sharing of reproductive activities with their partners, they need to juggle between professional and domestic tasks, often having to choose which one will receive their attention and time, leaving their own business in the background ([Silva et al., 2016](#)).

Gender inequality in the public and private spheres

It is observed that society imposes on women the responsibility for taking care of the home, cooking, family members, and children’s education, which makes the reality of women who work in the clothing business in the Pernambuco countryside more challenging. This was reported by M10: “Oh, my life is crazy. I take the children to school, then I sew at home, then I have to pick them up from school, cook, you know? Only on market day [selling products] does my mother help me.” These responsibilities have been attributed socioculturally and historically to women, demanding time and great physical effort. Although they are considered indispensable for the social and economic reproduction of capitalism, these activities remain invisible to many, as stated by [Zart \(2019\)](#).

In this regard, when some women need to take their young children to work, they rely on the help of a family member, usually another woman, to take care of the child on market day at Miguel Arraes Boardwalk. Those with older children reported that they had to give up working when their children were younger because they had to take care of them. One of the interviewees mentioned: “The biggest difficulty is because I have my child. So I have to leave it to others, you know? But besides that...” (M10). According to [Carloto \(2002\)](#), the consequences of motherhood still influence women’s access to the job market and employment conditions. They are directed by social structures to combine

domestic and work practices, often limiting their possibilities for job qualification.

From another perspective, M9 highlights how she managed to balance the production of pieces at home and taking care of the children: “I work, and when it’s noon, 1:00 pm, the boys come back from school, and in the afternoon, I work. At 6:00 pm, I go for a walk until 7:00 pm, then they do their homework, and I work until around 10:00 pm and then go to sleep.”

The interviews also revealed that when domestic tasks are not performed by the owners, they are performed by other women, as M7 points out: “My mother cooks lunch.” In this case, the burden of work is emphasized, as it requires sharing domestic activities with the interviewee’s mother, such as preparing lunch, so she can focus on the clothing business. On the other hand, those who do not receive support use breaks in productive tasks to perform domestic chores and take care of their children.

There is also the presence of older daughters in sharing reproductive activities, as M22 explains: “Yes, my daughters always give me a hand when they are at home.” The presented accounts reinforce the importance of a support network, composed of their mothers or daughters, to assist with domestic tasks, allowing them to focus on productive activities. In this context, [Manente and Rodrigues \(2016\)](#) point out that women who lack a support network, especially in the early years of their children’s lives, face even more difficulties in balancing their professional and family lives.

However, the involvement of older daughters, starting as assistance, turns into a collective activity, becoming more complex and even involving remuneration, a common situation in the households of families involved in the clothing business in the region, which, according to [Rios \(2019\)](#), may indicate another scenario of exploitation. For [Bruschini and Ricoldi \(2009\)](#), the early involvement of daughters in domestic tasks reflects more traditional gender representations, with the family being a conducive area for the reproduction and development of inequality.

There is a stark difference in the burden of tasks assigned to women and men in the Pernambuco countryside, caused by the minimal or complete lack of participation of men in domestic activities. This is coupled with the pressure women receive to handle all their daily tasks, as noted by M1: “Some men don’t do anything. My husband sometimes cooks lunch,” and M22: “I think men have responsibilities, they do! Not all, but they do! Men have responsibilities, but not like women. Women have more to do, many things to do all at once, and everything has to be ready, and no one cares.”

There is a stance of inertia on the part of men when it comes to daily household activities necessary for maintaining

the home, which is usually carried out by women, who end up with multiple responsibilities at the same time due to the absence of task sharing, as stated by M23: “I think that if I were a man and did what I do, I wouldn’t do it. I couldn’t handle it. Because men can’t handle the pressure women face. Women are making lunch, dinner, breakfast, while they’re also working in clothing production. Men can’t handle the pressure of women who are homemakers, work outside, in clothing production, or any other field. Because when a man comes home from work, he takes a shower and rests. A woman who works outside comes home and has to make lunch, take care of the kids, give them a bath, have lunch — it’s not the same thing.”

These scenes repeat among women, whether financially dependent or independent, reflecting the influence of local political bosses (colonelism) and the capitalist-patriarchal model present in the Brazilian Northeast ([Bezerra et al., 2020](#)). Machismo, which persists in the region, shapes the discourse on masculinity and socially established roles of what it means to be a man or a woman ([Medeiros & Cabral, 2019](#)). Patriarchal principles reaffirm the dominant male position and function ([Medrado et al., 2019](#)), attributing power to men, which contributes to a rigid division between men and women in public and private spaces ([Couto & Schraiber, 2013](#)), resulting in daily inequalities in which women submit to male power and even tyranny ([Medeiros & Cabral, 2019](#)).

In general, men benefit from women’s involvement in productive activities because their income, for the most part, is also used to improve their households, where they share their living space with everyone. This allows men to fully dedicate themselves to their careers.

In the way they organize their activities as presented in this study, women go out only once a week to sell their products at the Miguel Arraes Shopping Center, the focus of this research. This work pattern allows them to focus on the garment manufacturing process for most of the week in their own domestic environment, eliminating the need for intermediaries between the production and commercialization of the final products ([Lira, 2008](#)).

When working in the public space, they face problems not only related to gender inequalities but also various difficulties related to infrastructure, hygiene, security, and oversight, which impact the quality of their work.

Regarding infrastructure, the research participants complain about electrical connections, such as a lack of outlets, which affect the use of technological devices, as well as the lack of cleanliness in bathrooms, dirt in the corridors due to the absence of trash bins or maintenance of the space, in addition to the foul smell from the sewage canal, among other factors. “We only have electricity up there

[Moda Center Santa Cruz]. Here we can't put, for example, an outlet to connect a fan, to charge a cell phone; it has to be portable, and then it runs out of battery. So, all of this, right? Lack of better infrastructure. The bathrooms are not cleaned, but we go to Moda Center, and it's clean. It's different, I think! But it's good because we earned this space here. Before, where we worked? On the ground. It was in the tent, wooden benches covered with canvas. So, it was very difficult, but not anymore. But since we pay condo fees, I think it could be improved more (M13)."

The interviewees also pointed out security issues related to leaving their merchandise in the stalls and during their commute from home to the shopping center, making them susceptible to robberies along the way. These women need to leave their homes in the early hours to arrive in time to set up their stalls and wait for customers. "I live far away, in the countryside of Brejo de Madre de Deus. So it's difficult to come; it's bad, leaving home early in the morning, and it's very risky. Many things have been happening, there are robberies, those things. It's like this, without security (M8)!"

The presence of street vendors selling goods within the shopping center and the lack of supervision regarding this commercialization are also obstacles identified on site. These situations are considered unfair by women because street vendors do not pay condo fees, which makes their merchandise more attractive to customers: "There is a lot of competition because people sell on the street. We pay for our space here to come and sell, and they come selling the same merchandise. They come right in front of our stalls here, I'm tired. Tired of seeing people arrive here with the same merchandise; they've already copied mine (M18)."

It is observed from the interviews that some of these women do not perceive that the difficulties they face in their work are also associated with gender relations. They tend to consider unequal actions and attitudes present in the workplace as something common.

Finally, it is noteworthy that sewing is no longer an exclusively female activity and has become a means of survival in the region with the inclusion of men in clothing production: "We work, my husband, and my children. It's all family, only people from home. I sew, my husband does the finishing and cutting. My children handle the preparations: ironing, folding... (M19)."

Despite the mentioned difficulties, business owners recognize the value of their work and the positive results achieved, especially in terms of financial independence and personal fulfillment (Melo, 2011).

It was also observed that the majority of them feel satisfied and fulfilled, enjoying what they do and not wanting to change professions. Considering that people in the agreste region of Pernambuco are heavily influenced

from birth to work in the clothing industry, one interviewee mentioned that she wouldn't know how to do anything else but activities related to this sector: "No, I never thought about [changing professions]. I also don't know how to do anything else, I don't know if it would work out, I'm already used to it. When it's a bad season, we already know it will be tough, and when it's good, we know it will be good. Every business has its ups and downs (M9)."

In conclusion, the tensions related to gender inequalities experienced by women working in the clothing business in the agreste region of Pernambuco, as presented here, have their local specificities but are not significantly different from the global reality regarding the division of labor by gender. This emphasizes the urgent need to continue the fight for gender equality.

FINAL REMARKS

This research aimed to analyze how women who own clothing businesses in the Pernambuco countryside have (re)organized their productive and reproductive work in the private space of their homes, considering gender relations.

It was found that these women work in their homes to create clothing items and only go to the public space of the shopping center once a week to sell their products during the fair. Few of them have chosen to outsource part of the garment manufacturing process. Those who use this service do not seem to have a clear division of time between household chores and work in clothing production, similar to those who produce the items themselves.

Furthermore, it was observed that the work routine of business owners is extensive and involves overlapping productive and reproductive activities in the same space, resulting in a triple workday where domestic tasks and childcare overlap with business-related activities. These women handle household chores almost alone, as their spouses rarely share these responsibilities. This leads to physical and mental exhaustion and a lack of leisure time. However, a support network composed of other women, such as mothers and daughters, often helps with these tasks. When no help is available, women tend to put their careers on hold while their children are young.

Additionally, it was noticed that even though they face difficulties and gender inequalities in the division of labor, these women did not seem to have a clear perception of this fact. On the other hand, they easily identified issues not related to gender, such as poor working conditions in the public space of the shopping center due to inadequate infrastructure, lack of cleanliness, a lack of oversight, and

safety concerns related to their commute from home to the sales location.

Another significant finding of this study is that the intertwining of productive and reproductive work in the private space of these women's homes helps them achieve emancipation through their work in the clothing industry. This differs from what is often portrayed in the literature, where women supposedly gain more autonomy through participation in the public sphere. This rearrangement within the domestic environment was a solution found by women in the region to more easily balance their paid and reproductive work, avoiding the need to choose one over the other or prioritize one over the other, recognizing the importance of both.

In conclusion, this research sheds light on the condition of women business owners in the Pernambuco countryside's clothing industry. It highlights both the local characteristics and the global similarities of their situation concerning gender roles, work, and family responsibilities. It emphasizes the need to address these gender inequalities, provide better support and infrastructure, and promote a more equitable division of labor. Ultimately, this can help improve the quality of life and work for these women.

Furthermore, this study provides managerial insights by highlighting the local reality and urging public and

private stakeholders to consider the conditions of dignified work, appropriate working hours, fair compensation, formalization dynamics, and the guarantee of labor rights. It underscores the importance of creating organizational benefit packages and public policies that ensure women's access to paid work, with initiatives that include access to healthcare and childcare, among others, to enhance the quality of life and well-being of families.

One way to bring about change in the analyzed scenario could start with the government creating public policies addressing gender inequality. The use of television, radio, social media, and educational materials could help break the socially constructed idea that men should not perform caregiving activities and increase awareness of existing gender equality policies. The importance of public policies addressing safety on the roads and in the clothing fair, as well as active government intervention to improve the quality of life and working conditions for traders, is also emphasized to promote social well-being.

For future research, it is suggested to delve deeper into topics such as women's empowerment through work, the dynamics of the new generation of women in the clothing industry, women's support networks and their impact on productive work, public policies for women in this region, and the violation and protection of women's rights in the studied segment.

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1st author: conceptualization (lead), data curation (lead), formal analysis (lead), funding acquisition (lead), investigation (lead), methodology (equal), project administration (lead), resources (lead), supervision (lead), validation (equal), visualization (equal), writing – original draft (equal), writing – review & editing (lead).

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Data Availability

The authors claim that all data used in the research have been made publicly available through the Harvard Dataverse platform and can be accessed at:



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