

Between Motherhood and Violence: Women's Labor Challenges in Mexico

Entre la maternidad y la violencia: Los desafíos laborales de las mujeres en México

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Abstract: In Mexico, cultural norms reinforcing male dominance limit women's economic and physical autonomy. This study examines how the motherhood penalty and gender-based violence restrict income opportunities and increase vulnerability. Using state-level data from 2005 to 2023, findings show that motherhood reduces earnings, especially as the number of children increases. Moreover, between 2015 and 2023, efforts to close the gender income gap coincided with rising feminicides, signaling a backlash against successful women. The results emphasize that addressing the social structures perpetuating gender inequality is essential. Entrepreneurship emerges as a viable option for women seeking autonomy, though challenges like limited financing and machismo persist. Comprehensive policies are needed to support women.

Keywords: motherhood wage penalty, gender discrimination, feminicide, gender-based violence, gender labor conditions.

Resumen: En México, las normas culturales que refuerzan la dominación masculina limitan la autonomía económica y física de las mujeres. Este estudio analiza cómo la penalización por maternidad y la violencia de género restringen las oportunidades de ingreso y aumentan la vulnerabilidad. A partir de datos estatales de 2005 a 2023, los hallazgos muestran que la maternidad reduce los ingresos, especialmente a medida que aumenta el número de hijos. Además, entre 2015 y 2023, los esfuerzos por cerrar la brecha salarial de género coincidieron con un aumento de los feminicidios, lo que sugiere una reacción adversa contra las mujeres exitosas. Los resultados subrayan la necesidad de abordar las estructuras sociales que perpetúan la desigualdad de género.

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El emprendimiento se presenta como una alternativa viable para las mujeres que buscan autonomía, aunque persisten desafíos como el acceso limitado al financiamiento y el machismo. Se requieren políticas integrales para apoyar a las mujeres.

Palabras clave: penalización salarial por maternidad, discriminación de género, feminicidio, violencia de género.

Introduction¹

In Mexico, gender inequality in the labor market is deeply influenced by caregiving responsibilities associated with motherhood and the various forms of violence women face. Motherhood often results in wage penalties, as unpaid domestic work disproportionately falls on women, while violence further restricts their access to better job opportunities and higher incomes. In response, women turn to entrepreneurship as a strategy to regain income and secure greater flexibility in managing work and family responsibilities (Yang *et al.*, 2023).

According to INEGI (2023a), women in Mexico have been widely exposed to emotional, physical, sexual, or economic violence, with partners often identified as the primary perpetrators. In 2021, 41.8% of women aged 15 and over reported having experienced some form of violence during their childhood (before the age of 15). This violence has a profound impact on women's physical and mental health, threatens their economic stability, and disrupts their overall well-being. While this issue has multiple dimensions, this research focuses on gender-based economic discrimination, as the economic aspect provides the material foundation for women's independence and plays a crucial role in addressing the systemic inequalities that perpetuate gender-based violence.

In this regard, economic theories addressing these challenges vary in their treatment of gender discrimination: neoclassical theory focuses on human capital, while dual labor market theory and gender-based occupational segregation emphasize precarious working conditions that disproportionately affect women (Petrongolo and Ronchi, 2020).

This research argues that strengthening women's autonomy is essential for achieving gender equity. It focuses on identifying structural distortions that penalize motherhood through low wages and limited

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job opportunities, as well as addressing the extreme gender violence that undermines women's physical autonomy. Together, these factors deepen the gender gap and hinder women's empowerment.

It addresses the question: How do the motherhood wage penalty and extreme gender-based violence affect women's economic and physical autonomy in Mexico, and how might entrepreneurship mitigate these issues? Our hypothesis is that the persistent motherhood wage penalty and extreme gender-based violence significantly undermine women's economic and physical autonomy in Mexico by limiting their income opportunities and increasing vulnerability. In response, entrepreneurship emerges not only as a survival strategy but also as a pathway for women to assert greater control over their autonomy.

A key contribution of this study is the disaggregated analysis of the motherhood penalty by number of children and income level, and its connection to women's underemployment, domestic work, and income gaps. This approach allows for a more precise understanding of how structural inequalities shape women's labor conditions.

The study also includes a regression analysis linking income levels and specific gender labor gaps to extreme forms of gender-based violence, particularly femicides in Mexico. Both phenomena critically affect women's physical and economic autonomy, offering a basis for exploring entrepreneurship as a potential means to restore that autonomy.

We analyze state-level panel data from 2005 to 2023 to assess the impact of motherhood on women's income, using data from the National Occupation and Employment Survey (ENOE). A secondary model examines 2015-2023, focusing on the relationship between the narrowing gender income gap, underemployment among highly educated women, and rising femicides.

The shorter timeframe for the femicide analysis reflects the Mexican government's formal classification of feminicides, which began in 2015. Defined as killings of women due to gender-based violence, feminicides stem from a broader context of impunity and systemic insecurity (Lagarde, 2008). This approach highlights the links between adverse labor conditions and women's entrepreneurship.

Findings confirm that motherhood reduces women's income, with greater penalties associated with more children. Additionally, narrowing gender income gaps at higher income levels and increased

underemployment among educated women correlate with rising femicides. These results indicate that, despite some progress in income equality, women continue to face extreme risks in the labor market. Entrepreneurship thus becomes both a survival strategy and a pathway to economic and physical autonomy.

The document is divided into five sections. The first outlines the theoretical context of gender inequality in Mexico, focusing on the effects of motherhood and gender-based violence while underscoring the need to enhance women's autonomy. The second presents descriptive and inferential statistics from state-level panel data models analyzing income, motherhood, and femicides. The third discusses findings, highlighting entrepreneurship as a crucial strategy for autonomy. The fourth examines challenges facing women's entrepreneurship in Mexico. The fifth concludes the study.

Aspects of the challenges to women's full autonomy

Women continue to confront profound gender inequality, shouldering the primary caregiving responsibilities while facing violence simply for being women. Although the feminist movement has made significant strides and there have been legislative improvements, these advancements vary widely by region. As a result, the burdens of caregiving and the prevalence of violence against women remain largely unchanged.

To effectively tackle these persistent challenges in Mexico, it is essential to strengthen women's full autonomy across three interconnected dimensions: economic, physical, and political, as emphasized by Medina-Hernández *et al.* (2021). Autonomy encompasses the right to make free choices; however, in societies plagued by gender-based violence, this right is severely constrained. True equity demands the eradication of violence, the promotion of women's political participation, recognition of the value of domestic labor, and equitable access to the labor market.

In this context, we focus on two critical issues that illustrate the realities women face in Mexico: the caregiving burden associated with motherhood and systemic violence against women. Both factors significantly undermine women's autonomy and require urgent attention. The following sections will briefly explore these interconnected challenges and review existing literature that highlights their impacts.

The Motherhood Wage Penalty

The comprehensive theoretical and empirical review of the gender wage gap identifies several underlying factors contributing to this issue. Wage disparities between men and women are influenced by horizontal and vertical job segregation, lower accumulation of human capital among women, and direct discrimination in the labor market. These inequalities are closely tied to women's substantial involvement in the care economy, which includes unpaid responsibilities such as childcare, caregiving for dependents, and household management, as noted by Kalabikhina *et al.* (2024).

A critical factor that amplifies the effects of the wage gap is the income penalty associated with motherhood. The disparities in wages and employment between men and women are often rooted in a single biological factor—the potential for motherhood.

Examining this issue from an economic perspective is essential, as it directly influences the autonomy of women who become mothers while remaining active in the labor market. It is paradoxical that an economic system penalizes motherhood, a fundamental biological condition vital to human reproduction.

Cukrowska-Torzewska and Matysiak (2020) assert that the motherhood wage gap arises from various factors, including skill loss during career breaks, job choices prioritizing work-life balance, reduced effort, discrimination, and the influence of social policies and norms that affect how mothers juggle work and childcare responsibilities. In this framework, the orthodox perspective often attributes this penalty to human capital theory, framing it as a consequence of women's choices (Becker, 1985).

Furthermore, the relationship between motherhood and women's income is directly linked to unpaid domestic work. Multiple studies have examined this connection in the context of Mexico. For instance, Llanes and Pacheco (2021) investigated the dynamics of domestic and caregiving responsibilities amidst the adverse working conditions faced by women during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Various empirical analyses have been conducted, addressing motherhood and factors related to women's reproductive rights in relation to the labor market through lenses such as education, regional differences, social context, and the timing of the first child (Aguilar-Gomez *et al.*, 2019; Rentería and Tinoco, 2019; Bravo *et al.*,

2017; Vázquez *et al.*, 2012; Mendizábal, 2006; De Oliveira and García, 1990).

Exploring this scenario is valuable for recognizing the intersection between economic development opportunities for women and the barriers they face in the labor market due to gender-specific characteristics. Motherhood emerges as a key determinant of women's access to and retention in the labor market, both as employees and employers.

Gender-based Violence

The physical violence that women experience is a critical factor in analyzing gender inequality. This issue becomes even more pressing when considering the broader context of women's autonomy in Mexico. Research on the connection between the workplace and gender-based violence can be categorized into two primary classifications, following the criteria set by Velázquez and Díaz (2020).

Firstly, findings on sexual harassment in the workplace are particularly notable in the Mexican context. According to Torres *et al.* (2023), psychological and verbal gender-based violence adversely affects female workers' performance and increases their intent to quit. Numerous studies document instances of sexual harassment across various occupations in Mexico, highlighting the pervasive nature of this issue (Fiorini *et al.*, 2022; Pérez *et al.*, 2019; Elizalde, 2017; Maldonado and Carballo, 2016; Tena *et al.*, 2015).

Secondly, violence manifests through acts of discrimination and labor inequality, which include inadequate economic compensation, restricted access to healthcare services, and limited participation in social support programs. While addressing workplace conditions is vital, it is equally important to recognize that the type of violence we seek to analyze in this research extends beyond the workplace, encompassing the personal realm as well.

The literature on feminist criminology consistently highlights that structural gender inequality is a significant contributor to violence against women, particularly in extreme forms like femicide, as noted by Gu and Zhong (2024). The amelioration hypothesis posits that greater gender inequality restricts women's empowerment and fosters an environment conducive to violence (Levinson, 1988). Conversely, while increased social status and autonomy can offer protection,

attempts to reduce gender inequality may be perceived as a threat to male authority, potentially provoking backlash or retaliatory violence (Russell, 1975).

Despite these insights, critics argue that existing perspectives fail to fully address the complex causes of femicide. In response, Gu and Zhong (2024) propose a dynamic interaction between the forces of amelioration and backlash, which fluctuate based on the level of gender equality. In this context, the current research aims to investigate these dynamics at the state level, focusing specifically on how they manifest through women's economic autonomy and the labor conditions they encounter.

In summary, this study argues that in Mexico, gender inequality—expressed through income penalties linked to motherhood and persistent forms of violence—undermines women's economic and physical autonomy. These dynamics restrict women's access to opportunities and economic independence, both essential for empowerment and the elimination of violence. Addressing these interrelated factors is key to designing policies that effectively promote women's autonomy and safety across different regions of the country.

A Panel Data Analysis

The empirical study applied below consists of estimating a set of panel data models for the 32 federal entities of the country. The application of this methodology aims to control for individual heterogeneity and increase the efficiency of the available information through the double index, that is, the panel effect² (Baltagi, 2009).

The objective is to explore the link between specific labor market characteristics faced by women, particularly income levels, and extreme gender-based violence (femicides), as well as the motherhood wage penalty in Mexico. This is done in the context of evaluating the obstacles women encounter in achieving labor market participation and economic autonomy. The results are accompanied by a brief analysis of some relevant variables for each model.

² For a discussion of the advantages of this methodology, as well as the algebraic development of the estimation, see Baltagi (2009).

Income and Motherhood in Mexico

For the first model, four regressions are estimated that disaggregate the percentage of women based on their income level according to the number of minimum wages (up to one minimum wage, from one to two minimum wages, from two to three minimum wages, from three to five minimum wages, and more than five minimum wages), according to the number of children (no children, one to two children, three to five children, and more than six children).³

In general terms, we aim to explore the relationship between economic activity (*EA*), a set of gender-based labor income gaps (*Br*), domestic work as a key dimension in gender-based economic analysis (*TD*), and motherhood, measured by the number of children (*M*):

$$EA = f(Br, TD, M) \quad (1)$$

To closely examine the proposed analysis, Figure 1 presents the percentage structure of employed women's income according to the number of children. The trend is clear. The percentage of women with at least one child increases from 36.38 percent without children, progressively reaching 64.73 percent with six or more children. Conversely, the share of women earning more than five minimum wages declines sharply, from 1.09 percent among women without children to just 0.16 percent among those with six or more children.

The wage precarization experienced by women due to motherhood in Mexico can be disaggregated at the state level, as shown in Figure 2 at the end of the document. The income gap for the population earning up to one minimum wage, that is, those with the lowest incomes, is a widespread phenomenon.

A complementary and inverse pattern is observed among high income female workers—those earning more than five minimum wages—across the 32 federal entities, as shown in Figure 3 at the end of the document. In every case, men, represent a higher proportion of the employed male population earning more than five minimum wages than women do among the employed female population.

³ Endogeneity in the model is addressed by disaggregating the full population by income level, and the independent variables in each regression are grouped according to the number of children.

This global perspective is complemented by an analysis of income distribution between men and women from 2005 to 2023, as illustrated in Figures 4 and 5 at the end of the document. The dotted lines represent the 10th, 50th, and 90th percentiles for comparison. Data shows a decrease in the percentage of employed individuals earning more than five minimum wages, with a pronounced decrease on the female population (0.86 percent) compared to men (1.53 percent) in 2023. In general, distributional trends between men and women reveals that a larger proportion of women (42.5 percent) are employed earning up to one minimum wage, compared to men (28.4 percent) at the end of the period.

However, the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labor market, observed since 2020, have had a significantly greater impact on women. The overall data allow for the estimation of a short-balanced panel model that includes the 32 states as individual units over the period 2005-2023.

To avoid multicollinearity issues, four separate regressions are estimated, each incorporating the set of independent variables related to women's number of children. For instance, among women earning up to one minimum wage, the proportions of women without children, with one or two children, with three to five , and with six or more children are disaggregated. The same approach is applied to women earning two to three, three to five, and more than five minimum wages with each regression including the subset corresponding to each number of children category.

Equation 2 presents the model. The dependent variable is the annual average of the Quarterly State Economic Activity Index (*ITAE*). The independent variables are grouped into three categories. Using data from the National Occupation and Employment Survey (ENOE), the model includes the percentage of underemployed women (*UnW*) and domestic workers (*DomWork*). It also estimates the gender gap for individuals earning up to one minimum wage (*GapOneMW*) and for those earning more than five minimum wages (*GapFiveMW*). Lastly, the model incorporates variables capturing income levels in relation to the number of children (*Inc × Child*).

$$\begin{aligned}
 ITAE_{it} = & \alpha + \beta_1 Unw_{it} + \beta_2 DomWork_{it} + \beta_3 GapOneMW_{it} \\
 & + \beta_4 GapFiveMW_{it} + \beta_5 Inc_{it} \times Child_{it}
 \end{aligned}
 \tag{2}$$

Table 1, available at the end of the document, presents the results of equation (2)⁴. First, the percentage of underemployed women shows the expected negative relationship, indicating that a higher share of underemployed women adversely affects state economic activity. Conversely, among women with six or more children, the share of domestic workers exhibits a significant positive association with economic activity, highlighting the sector's relevance to the economy.

Furthermore, while the reduction in the low-income gap (up to one minimum wage) shows a negative relationship, we observe that, for women with more than six children, the high-income gap (more than five minimum wages) is positive. This suggests that the most detrimental effect on women's labor conditions occurs among those with a high number of children.

The model analyzes income levels in relation to the number of children included in each regression. The results indicate that women without children are positively associated with higher income levels, whereas working mothers with three to five children experience lower incomes.

Moreover, the relationship between having no children and earning low wages (one to two minimum wages) differs from that of women with one or two children in the same income range: it is negative in the first case and positive in the second. This change in sign underscores the significant effect that having at least one child has on women's income levels.

Furthermore, a similar pattern is observed among high-income earners (those earning more than five minimum wages). The relationship between high income and having no children is positive, whereas for women with three to five children, it becomes negative. This contrast further highlights the income penalty associated with motherhood, as the positive relationship with high earnings is significant for childless women but negative and significant for mothers with three or more children.

⁴ To determine the type of model, the Hausman test is used, followed by the Breusch-Pagan test to determine the presence of panel effects. The estimation for Random Effects with Driscoll and Kraay standard errors -xtscc- is applied to correct for autocorrelation and heteroscedasticity (Hoechle, 2007; Mehmood and Mustafa, 2014).

Extreme Gender-Based Violence

For the second model, the dependent variable is the number of femicides at the state level obtained for the Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System (SESNSP). This study period is limited to 2015 to 2023 due to the absence of earlier data on the formal classification of this crime.⁵

Thus, a short-balanced panel data model with 9 periods and 32 federal entities is constructed. The independent variables are income levels, measured by the number of minimum wages earned (*IncLev*). Additionally, the gender gaps between the number of employed women (x_F) and the number of employed men (x_M) are estimated:

$$Gap = \frac{x_M - x_F}{x_M} \quad (3)$$

Additionally, the underemployment gap according to the educational level (*GapUnd*) is included, followed by the unemployment gap based on its duration (*GapUn*). In general, the following relationship is obtained:

$$Fem = f(IncLev, GapUnd, GapUn) \quad (4)$$

In this sense, Figure 6, presented at the end of the document, provide context for the importance of considering the educational level in the composition of the underemployed population. Since 2005, the increase in the highly educated total underemployed population has been persistent, with the gender gap widening from 2020 onwards. Throughout the entire period, the percentage of women exceeds that reported by men.

From a state-level perspective in 2023, as shown in Figure 7 at the end of the document, only in Jalisco and the State of Mexico is the percentage of men slightly higher than that of women. However, a generalized trend is observed across the country, with women representing a higher percentage in these conditions.

⁵ For an in-depth review of the historical and legal context of classification, see Iribarne (2015).

In this regard, to capture the relationship in equation (4), the gap in the employed population (*GapEmp*) is first calculated, followed by the gender gap by income level (*GapInc*) according to the minimum wages earned (from one to two, from two to three, more than five, and not specified). The percentage of women employed in the informal sector (*Inf*) as a percentage of the employed population is also considered. For the underemployment gap (*GapUnd*), the criterion of educational level (higher education, incomplete primary education, and completed secondary education) is integrated. Finally, the unemployment gap (*GapUn*) is presented according to its duration (up to one month, from one to three months, and from three to six months).

$$Fem_{it} = \alpha + \gamma_1 GapEmp_{it} + \gamma_2 GapInc_{it} + \gamma_3 Inf_{it} + \gamma_4 GapUnd_{it} + \gamma_5 GapUn_{it} \quad (5)$$

Table 2 presents the results, showing a negative relationship between gender gaps and high income levels. The reduction in the gap between women and men earning more than five minimum wages to one or two minimum wages is related to an increase in femicides. Only the gap between two and three minimum wages shows a positive relationship. In general, the results indicate a negative reaction toward women who tend to earn high incomes.

The importance of the disaggregated study of the phenomenon is observed through the positive and significant relationship with the gap in the employed population, as it is true that greater labor market insertion of women reduces violence levels. However, the internal conditions and dynamics related to gender roles impact the precariousness they face in the labor market.

This precarization is reflected in the positive relationship with the percentage of women's participation in the informal sector. Conversely, the reduction in the overall gap in underemployment is negative. However, when disaggregated by educational level, a positive relationship emerges, particularly among women with higher education.

This can be explained by the fact that in contexts where social norms permit gender-based violence to sustain male control, highly educated women who challenge these norms may become targets of violence.

This violence serves to reinforce patriarchy and deter such women from setting examples. Thus, the positive relationship between the gender gap in underemployment among highly educated women and feminicides indicates violent resistance to social change and male dominance, aiming to preserve traditional gender hierarchies.

Finally, the findings show a negative relationship between the unemployment gap and the duration of unemployment, indicating that the reintegration of women into the labor market under precarious conditions contributes to the reduction of feminicides. These results highlight that the mere inclusion of women in the labor sphere is not enough.

It is imperative to address the social structure that precarizes employment and perpetuates gender inequalities. To achieve an effective reduction in femicides, it is necessary to profoundly transform labor conditions and promote true equality in the work environment.

Motherhood and Gender-Based Violence: The Challenges of Women's Entrepreneurship

The previous section examined how structural conditions that intensify gender-based violence intersect with women's labor opportunities, constraining their physical and economic autonomy. Labor conditions are shaped by entrenched patriarchal norms that permeate all aspects of life, forcing women to balance professional duties with domestic and caregiving responsibilities, which restricts their time for career advancement and entrepreneurship (Acevedo and Sampieri, 2021). Furthermore, motherhood in contexts marked by machismo and violence deepens these constraints, further diminishing women's income levels.

Empirical evidence for Mexico suggests that motherhood is associated with wage penalties arising from employer discrimination, which in turn motivates women to pursue entrepreneurship to offset these labor market disadvantages (Yang *et al.*, 2023). This aligns with the model results discussed earlier, where low incomes (from one to two minimum wages) are linked to the presence of children. While not having children is negatively related to economic activity, having children can reverse this relationship, worsening women's income and restricting their professional development.

The expanded framework on women's entrepreneurship, proposed by De Bruin *et al.* (2007), includes key factors such as markets, money, management, motherhood, and the meso/macro environment. It highlights how family responsibilities, particularly motherhood, influence women entrepreneurs' business decisions, emphasizing the need to consider multiple levels of influence in public policy discussions.

Promoting women's entrepreneurship requires addressing the balance between family and work. Cavada *et al.* (2017) emphasize that women are often attracted to entrepreneurship due to the flexibility it provides for managing both spheres. Family support is essential for women entrepreneurs' success in Mexico, as Acevedo and Sampieri (2021) emphasize the importance of balancing economic goals with fostering quality relationships.

Additionally, Leung (2011) notes that women often leverage their gender and maternal roles to strengthen their ventures. However, coercive control by men can negatively affect women's labor participation, linking this to the findings on extreme gender-based violence from the previous section.

The negative relationship between the reduction of the gap in the underemployed population with high educational levels, as well as the gap in the employed population with high incomes (more than five minimum wages), is linked to multiple hypotheses related to a negative male reaction to the need for control and superiority characteristic of a patriarchal order. These findings are consistent with the study by Liu and Fullerton (2015) for Mexico at the state level, which explores the presence of the so-called hypothesis of male backlash against women.

Thus, women in controlling relationships face lower labor market participation, greater susceptibility to violence, and income restrictions. While employment can reduce violence risk by providing economic independence (Villarreal, 2007), persistent gender inequality and violence hinder women's entrepreneurship. Cultural norms tolerating male power and violence further limit opportunities for women to start and sustain businesses (Acharya, 2011).

According to INEGI (2023a), women in Mexico face multiple forms of violence, most commonly emotional, followed by physical, sexual, and economic. Partners are frequently identified as the main perpetrators, leading to serious physical, psychological, economic, and social consequences. Despite its high prevalence, the report indicates that

women often refrain from reporting incidents due to fear of reprisals, distrust in authorities, and the normalization of violence. This underscores that, despite the existing legal framework for women's protection, violence remains a pervasive issue in Mexico.

Therefore, awareness programs in all areas, as well as reducing levels of impunity, are crucial to creating a violence-free context for women where the necessary institutions for developing businesses that exceed survival rates and integrate into high value-added sectors can be built.

The evidence for Mexico demonstrates that strengthening women's physical and economic autonomy requires addressing the broader social context. Patriarchal logic, ingrained in the family, fuels gender-based violence that limits women's rights and freedoms, affecting both domestic and public spheres.

Labor market gender roles penalize motherhood, hindering women's professional development and deepening wage disparities. Rather than being seen as a natural life aspect, motherhood is viewed as an obstacle to career growth.

In this context, promoting women's entrepreneurship is a viable strategy to overcome labor market challenges, offering income generation, economic independence, and work-family balance. Public policies must address and combat gender inequalities in all areas.

The Context of Entrepreneurship in Mexico: A Vehicle for Autonomy

According to INEGI (2023b), microenterprises are vital to the Mexican economy, not only due to their number but also do to their ability to generate employment. In 2023, 1,652,106 new microenterprises were created, making up 35.22% of all new businesses. However, they also face a high mortality rate, with 1,406,036 failing, or 29.98% of the total. Factors such as limited access to financing, business management challenges, and intense competition contribute to this.

However, to maximize their potential, microenterprises face significant challenges that require attention. Limited access to financing is one of the main barriers to their survival and growth. Policies that facilitate access to credit can reduce the mortality rate and support their development. Additionally, training programs in business management, marketing, and technologies can increase survival rates. Simplifying procedures and reducing regulatory barriers can also foster the growth of these businesses.

Microenterprises are fundamental to sustainable job creation in the Mexican economy. By generating employment opportunities across different sectors of the population, they contribute to social and economic stability. They also play a crucial role in the development of rural and semi-urban areas, helping to reduce regional disparities. Their dynamism promotes a culture of entrepreneurship and self-employment, which is essential for economic growth and innovation.

According to data from the “Censo Económico 2019” provided by INEGI (2020), women’s participation in economic activities in Mexico is significant and growing, although it presents important challenges. One in three establishments with fewer than 100 employees is owned by a woman; specifically, 36.6% of these establishments are owned by women, compared to 35.7% owned by men and 9.3% with mixed ownership. Of the establishments owned by women, 78.4% are informal, while 21.6% are formal, reflecting a high rate of informality among female entrepreneurs.

Women as employers show a strong presence in microenterprises. In these businesses, which employ 0 to 10 people, women represent 48.7% of the workforce. In small businesses, with 11 to 50 employees, this proportion drops to 39.2%. The female participation decreases further in medium-sized businesses, which have between 51 and 250 employees, where women constitute 35.2% of the workforce, and in large businesses, with more than 250 employees, where they represent 36.6%.

In terms of employment categories, women stand out in the category of owners, family members, and other unpaid workers, where they constitute 27.1% of the total. They also have a notable presence in administrative, accounting, and management positions, with a participation of 11.6% compared to 10% for men.

In the private and parastatal sectors, women occupy 41.3% of the total workforce, with their highest participation in the services sector, at 43.9%, and in commerce, at 47%. However, their presence is lower in sectors such as fishing and aquaculture, where they represent only 13.8%, and in mining, with 12.9%.

Women face challenges related to the high informality of their establishments and their lower presence in industrial and high value-added sectors. According to Figure 8, available at the end of the document, the percentage of women employed in the informal sector has consistently been higher than that of men between 2005 and 2023.

However, the high proportion of women in micro and small businesses indicates strong potential for growth and formalization if appropriate support policies are implemented. Strengthening support for women entrepreneurs through financing policies, training, and reducing regulatory barriers can enhance their contribution to the country's economic development.

On average, almost one-third of the employed female population is in the informal sector (28.26 percent), while for men, it is around one-quarter. Following the 2008 crisis, from 2009 to 2016, the gap reached its highest levels.

The reasons behind the creation of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) led by women are, according to Acevedo and Sampieri (2021), the pursuit of financial independence and work flexibility given the asymmetric caregiving burden women assume compared to men. In this process, social and family networks, as well as public and private support and financing programs, are crucial.

In the Mexican context, the challenges for developing an SME are mainly associated with the lack of adequate financing, coupled with bureaucratic aspects and high entry barriers in dynamic and innovative sectors (Potter and Marchese, 2013). The low use of information technologies affects the competitiveness of SMEs and their capacity to innovate and integrate into international markets (Perez-Soltero *et al.*, 2017; Rojas *et al.*, 2013; Castillo-Galván, 2023).

The challenges for developing women-led SMEs add to the previous obstacles the sociocultural norms and machismo that limit women's opportunities to undertake (Rajagopal, 2012). As mentioned, women face an asymmetric workload.

According to data from the National Care System Survey (INEGI, 2023c), in Mexico, 32% of the population aged 15 and over provides care to individuals within their own or other households. Women account for the majority of caregivers, representing about three-quarters of the total. Most caregivers—approximately 28 million—attend to members of their own household. On average, women devote 37.9 hours per week to caregiving activities, compared with 25.6 hours among men, reflecting a gender gap of more than 12 hours per week.

Under these conditions, women's entrepreneurship not only has the potential to contribute to the country's economic growth but also represents a crucial tool for women's inclusion and empowerment. The empirical results at the state level presented earlier demonstrate

that women face significant barriers to accessing equitable job opportunities. These barriers include the penalty for motherhood and the violence directly linked to gender discrimination.

There is a long way to go to fully uncover the positive effects that entrepreneurship has in the relentless fight against the inequality of job opportunities faced by women. Women's leadership must overcome the "glass ceiling"⁶ and, beyond gender stereotypes, play a determining role as a driver of social development.

Conclusions

Machismo and systemic violence in Mexico limit women's economic opportunities and participation in both the labor market and entrepreneurship. Rooted in patriarchal norms, machismo confines women to caregiving roles and reinforces gender stereotypes. Physical and gender-based violence, including coercive control and harassment, undermine women's autonomy, and negatively affect their health and well-being. These barriers prevent women from maintaining stable employment, starting businesses, or accessing essential resources such as education, financing, and support networks.

This work emphasizes the need to create an environment that supports women's autonomy by guaranteeing their right to make free decisions. Achieving this requires eradicating violence, promoting political participation, valuing domestic work, and ensuring equal labor market access.

We show that motherhood significantly reduces women's incomes, with the impact worsening as the number of children increases. As a result, women turn to entrepreneurship to compensate for income loss and gain greater work flexibility, adapting to childcare needs and labor market limitations.

The study also reveals that gender-based violence—physical, emotional, sexual, and economic—significantly hinders women's autonomy. Moreover, a troubling link between the narrowing gender income gap and rising femicides indicates that even women who overcome educational and occupational barriers still face extreme threats to their safety, reflecting violent resistance to social change and male dominance.

⁶ It is a term used to designate the barrier that prevents highly educated women from reaching high-level managerial positions with responsibility in organizations (Morrison *et al.*, 1992; Ramos *et al.*, 2003).

In this context, the caregiving burden associated with motherhood and the various forms of violence emerge as critical factors explaining gender inequality in the Mexican labor market. These factors limit women's opportunities to enter and thrive in the labor market. It was observed that inequality does not manifest uniformly across the country, so it is essential to adopt a specific and regional approach to designing effective policies that address these differences.

Entrepreneurship presents itself as a viable alternative for women to achieve economic and physical autonomy. However, women entrepreneurs face challenges such as limited access to adequate financing, bureaucratic barriers, and sociocultural norms that perpetuate machismo.

Addressing the challenges highlighted in this study requires comprehensive public policies that support motherhood, combat gender-based violence, promote women's entrepreneurship, and formalize employment. A coordinated, sustained approach is essential to dismantle the structural and cultural barriers limiting women's full potential in Mexican society and economy.

It is crucial to develop programs that promote work-life balance, such as paid and flexible maternity and paternity leave, along with affordable childcare services. From a business perspective, governments should offer tax incentives and subsidies to companies that implement policies supporting working mothers, in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals.

To protect victims of violence, legal safeguards against all forms of gender-based violence, particularly workplace violence, must be strengthened. Given women's mistrust in institutions, effective reporting and protection mechanisms should be established, to ensure a swift response from authorities. Additionally, investing in national educational campaigns on gender-based violence prevention and promoting gender equality should be prioritized as a central public security strategy.

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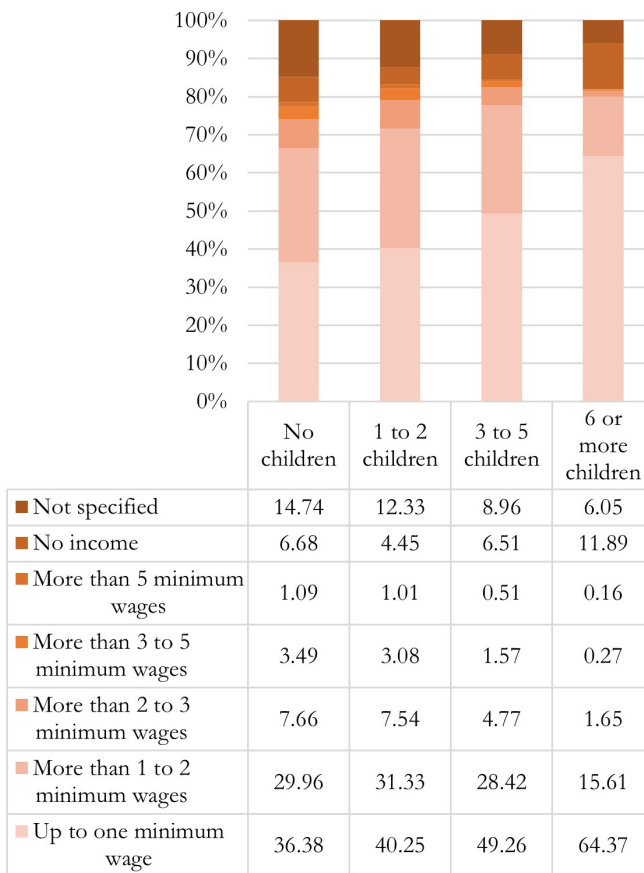
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Annex

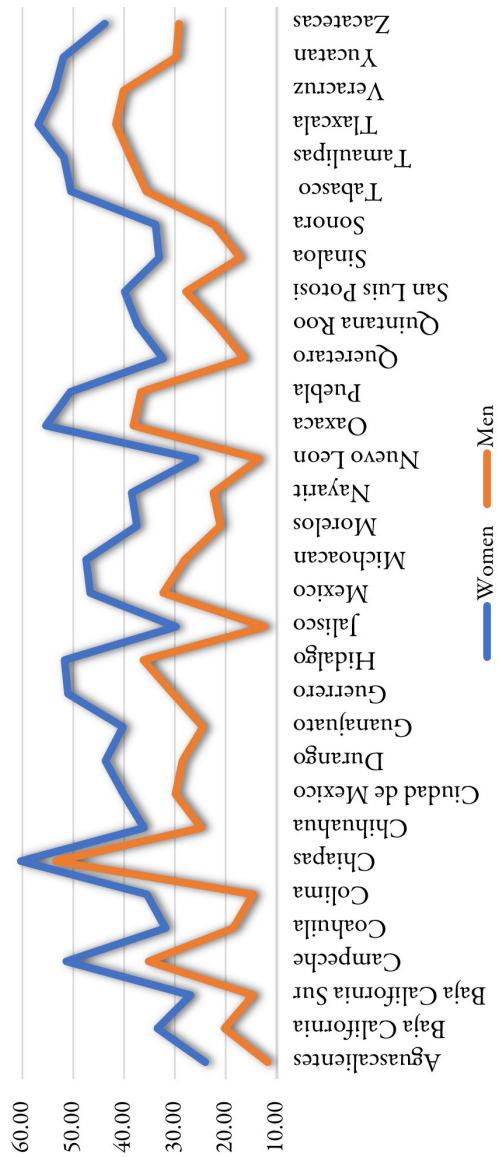
Figure 1

Employed Women by Income Level and Number of Children (2023)



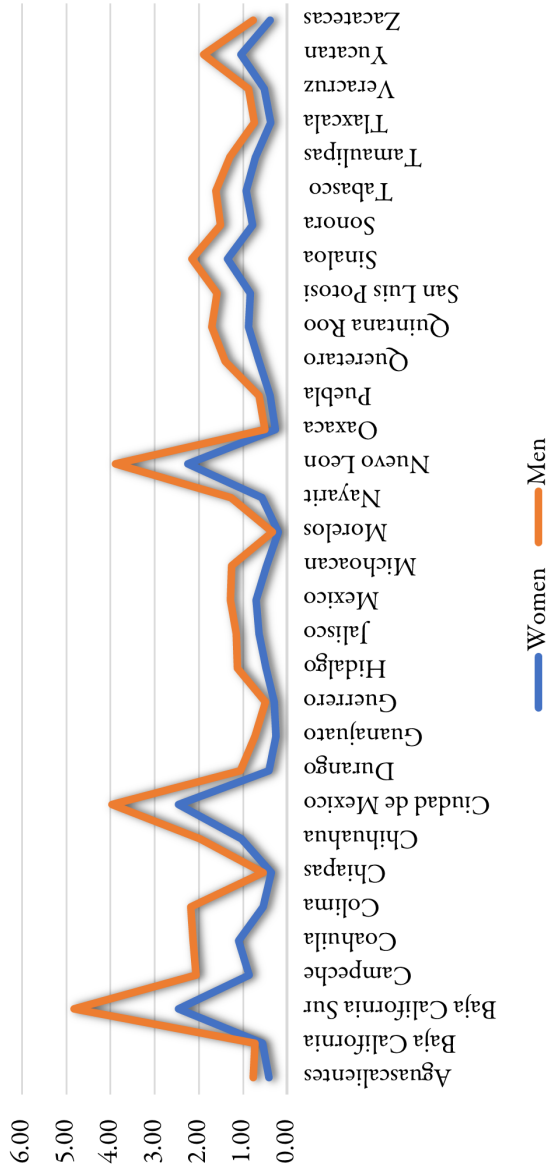
Source: INEGI (2024).

Figure 2
Employed Population Earning up to One Minimum Wage (2023)



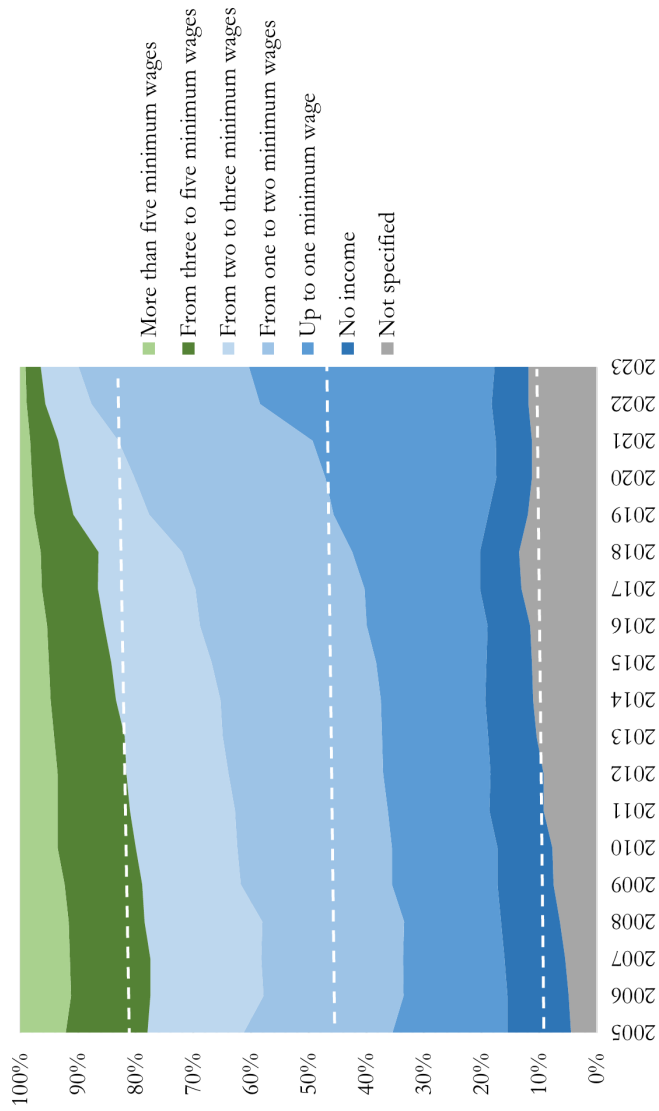
Source: INEGI (2024).

Figure 3
Employed Population Earning More Than Five Minimum Wages (2023)



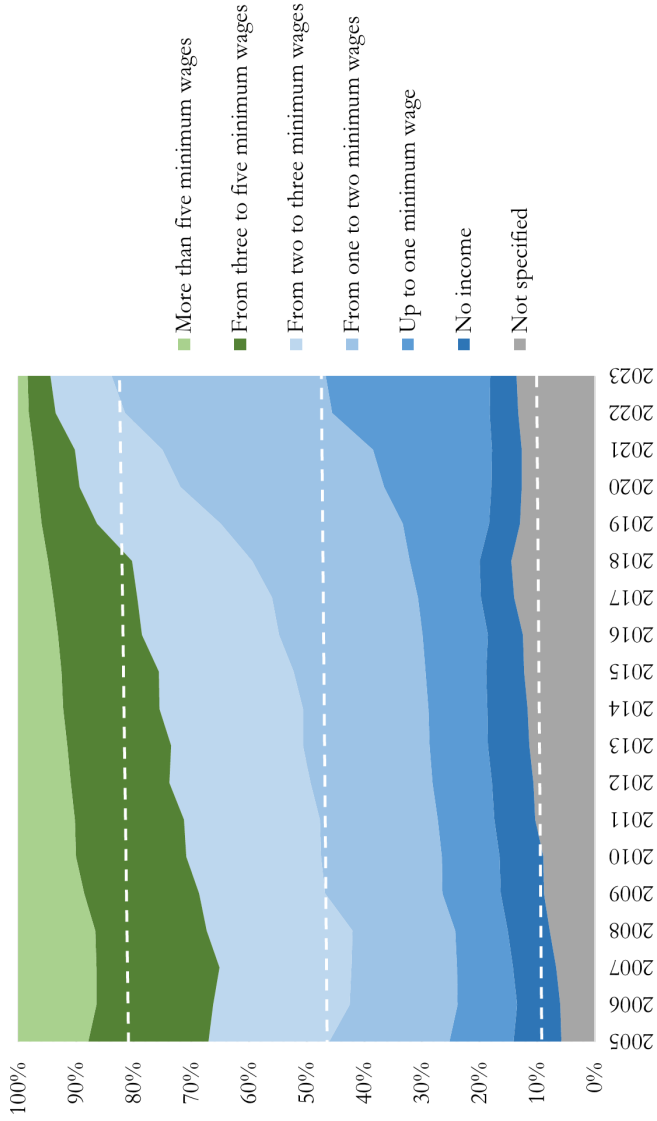
Source: INEGI (2024).

Figure 4
Employed Women by Income Level (2005-2023)



Source: INEGI (2024).

Figure 5
Employed Men by Income Level (2005-2023)



Source: INEGI (2024).

Table 1

Random Effects Model: Motherhood and Labor Market

		ITAAE			
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Employment Condition					
Underemployed Female Population (Percentage) (0.1582)		-0.5886*** (0.1623)	-0.8738*** (0.1977)	-0.5089* (0.1772)	-0.7796***
Domestic Workers (Percentage) (0.6278)		0.5042 (0.5202)	0.6751 (0.6315)	0.2731 (0.4112)	1.0113*
Gap					
Up to one minimum wage (0.1627)		-0.7016*** (0.1350)	-0.4424** (0.1816)	-0.7636*** (0.1383)	-0.3341*
More than five minimum wages (0.0327)		0.0368 (0.0511)	0.1209* (0.0515)	0.0620 (0.0429)	0.1254**
Number of Children		Income Level (Minimum Wages)			
	Up to one	0.7649*** (0.1946)			
	From 1 to 2	-1.3098*** (0.1988)			
Without children	From 2 to 3	-0.2784 (0.3092)			
	From 3 to 5	0.1150 (0.1288)			
	More than 5	0.2174** (0.0647)			
	Up to one		0.3885*** (0.0805)		
With 1 to 2 children	From 1 to 2		0.7680*** (0.1033)		
	From 2 to 3		0.1763 (0.1024)		
	From 3 to 5		0.1229 (0.1226)		
	More than 5		0.0467 (0.0732)		

		ITAE			
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
With 3 to 5 children	Up to one			0.3912*	
				(0.1481)	
	From 1 to 2			0.7559*	
				(0.2961)	
	From 2 to 3			-0.2865	
			(0.1924)		
	From 3 to 5			-0.6352***	
				(0.0917)	
	More than 5			-0.3877**	
				(0.1058)	
With more than 6 children	Up to one				-0.8360***
					(0.1212)
	From 1 to 2				-1.4652***
					(0.2619)
	From 2 to 3				0.6393
				(0.5373)	
	From 3 to 5				-0.5480
					(0.3575)
	More than 5				-0.2978
					(0.3049)
Constant		134.6262***	46.0411**	113.4765***	110.0708***
(11.0447)		(12.7138)	(15.8166)	(5.3589)	
Obs.		608	608	608	608
R-squared		0.0760	0.1677	0.0268	0.1183

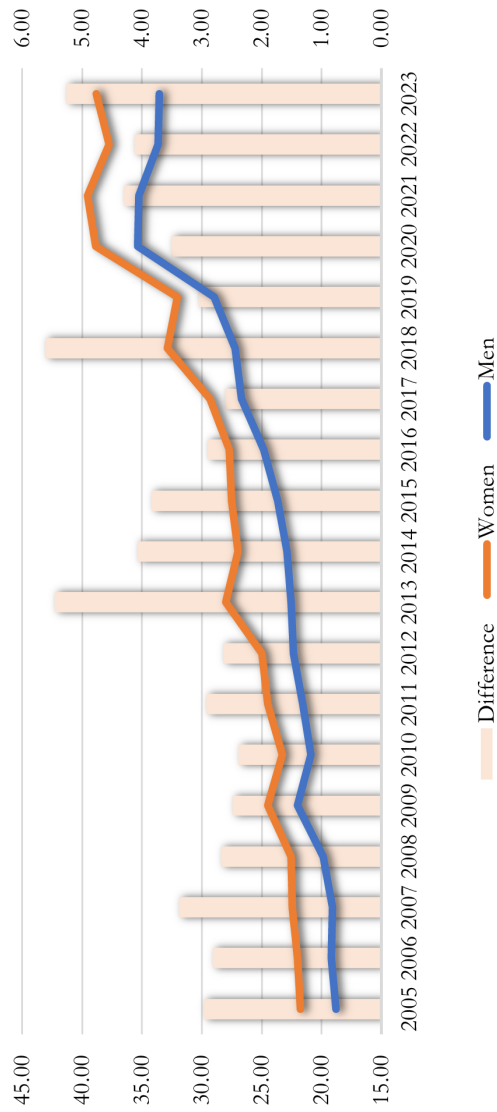
Source: Own elaboration with data from INEGI (2024).

Note: Values in parentheses indicate standard error

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

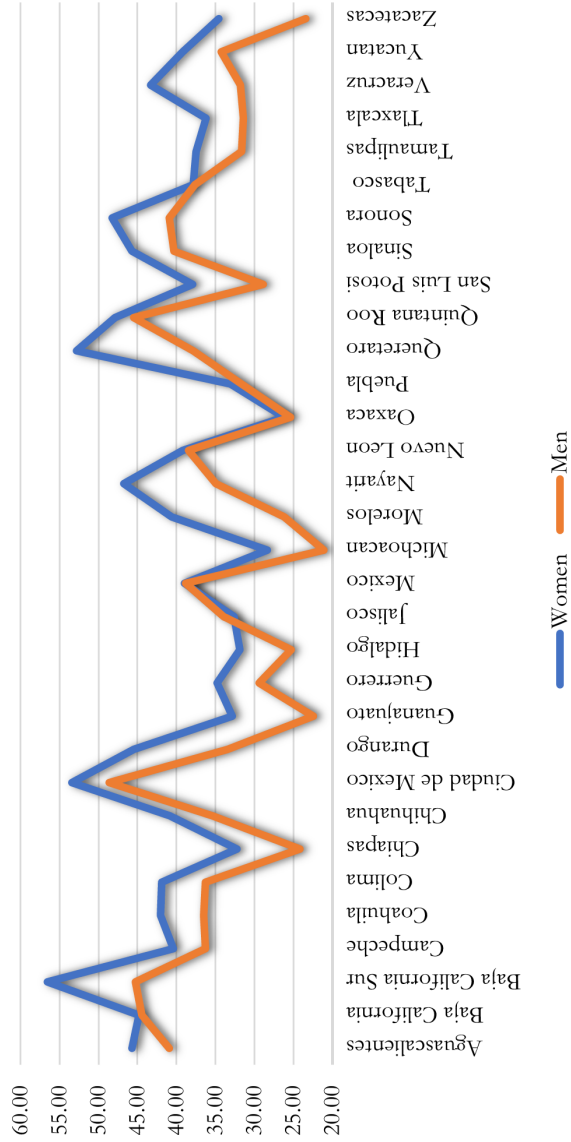
Source: INEGI (2024).

Figure 6
Underemployed Population with Higher Education (2005-2023)



Source: INEGI (2024).

Figure 7
Underemployed Population with Higher Education by Federal Entity (2023)



Source: INEGI (2024).

Table 2

Random Effects Panel Model: Femicides and Labor Market

		Femicides ¹
Gap in Employed Population	(0.3156)	1.0264**
	From one to two minimum wages	-0.1104*
	(0.0512)	
Income Level Gap	0.4044***	
	From two to three minimum wages	(0.0895)
	More than five minimum wages	-0.3757**
	Not specified	(0.1288)
		-0.0840**
		(0.0282)
Informal Sector (percentage of women's participation)	(2744)	0.5674*
	Total	-0.4937**
	(0.1757)	
Underemployment Gap	5.2684*	
Higher Education (L)	(2.4276)	
Incomplete Primary Education (L)	4.7733	
Completed Secondary Education (L)	(2.7071)	
	1.6796	
	(1.7973)	
	Up to one month	-0.5748**
	(0.2015)	
Unemployment Gap	-0.5518*	
	More than one to three months	(0.2335)
	More than three to six months	-0.5558
	(0.3298)	
Constant	(27.9225)	0.5741
Hausman		0.0964
Breusch and Pagan		0.0000
Normality	For e	0.0000
	For u	0.0854

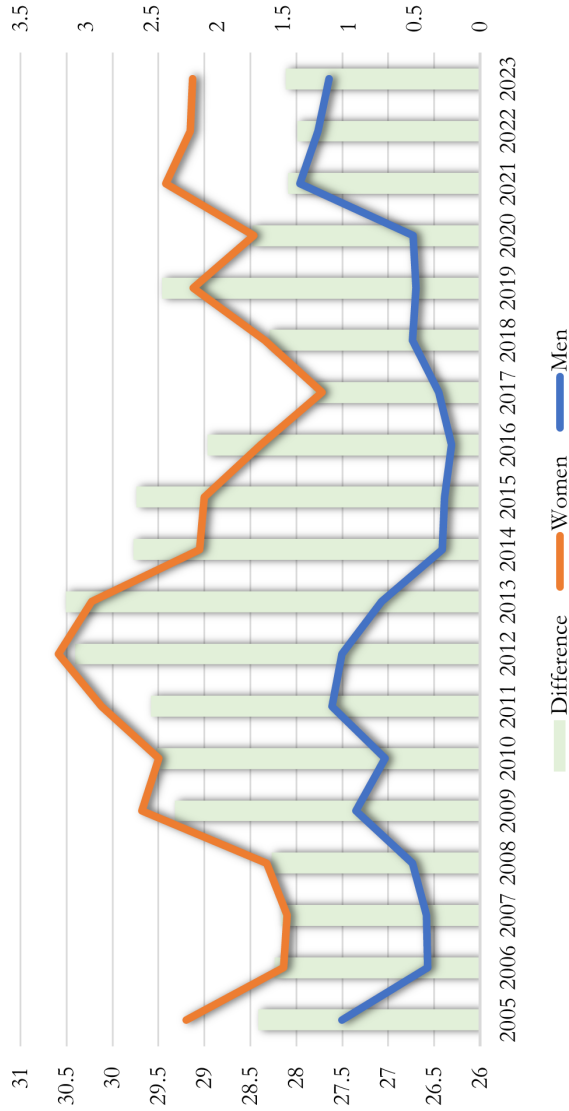
Source: Own elaboration with data from INEGI (2024) and SESNSP (2024).

L: Natural logarithm

¹Femicides of women of working age (over 15 years) are considered

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Figure 8
 Informal Sector (2005-2023) -as employed population percentage-



Source: INEGI (2024).

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