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MANUELA DE AZAMBUJA 

SÃO PAULO STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE, ARTS,  
COMMUNICATION, AND DESIGN  
SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL  
MANUELA.AZAMBUJA@UNESP.BR

FERNANDA HENRIQUES 

SÃO PAULO STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE, ARTS,  
COMMUNICATION, AND DESIGN  
SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL

# Seamstresses and Design's Social Responsibility: Understanding Local Practices (Bauru, São Paulo, Brazil)

*Costureras y responsabilidad social del diseño:  
Comprendiendo las prácticas locales (Bauru, São Paulo, Brasil)*

**Abstract.** In this investigation, we consider the work of local seamstresses as an essential point of resistance to the imposition of globalization in the city of Bauru (São Paulo, Brazil), a place shaped by industrial and patriarchal values. In particular, the lack of recognition of women in the sewing trades—especially in the interior of our State—and the neglect of seamstresses' work in design serves as a major impetus for our research. Thus, our aim is to understand how women engage in contemporary sewing trades to support the recognition of female sewing practices within the design field. Using a qualitative approach that incorporates both deductive and inductive methods, we pursued this goal in three steps: (1) exploratory literature reviews, (2) a field study in which seven semi-structured interviews with local seamstresses were conducted to understand their work in relation to its unique characteristics, and (3) the development of a critical discussion on how design can contribute to the appreciation of seamstresses and sewing through design's social responsibility. Gaining insight into these women and their professional practices is a significant step in portraying and understanding the individuals and processes involved in the clothing production chain.

*Keywords:* seamstresses, fashion design and gender, design's social responsibility, production chain, field study

**Resumen.** En esta investigación, consideramos el trabajo de las costureras locales como un punto esencial de resistencia a la imposición de la globalización en la ciudad de Bauru (São Paulo, Brasil), un lugar marcado por valores industriales y patriarcales. En particular, la falta de reconocimiento de las mujeres en los oficios de la costura—especialmente en el interior de nuestro Estado—y la negligencia ante el trabajo de las costureras en el diseño es un gran incentivo para nuestra investigación. Así, nuestro objetivo es entender cómo las mujeres se desempeñan en los oficios de la costura contemporánea para apoyar el reconocimiento de las prácticas de costura femenina en el campo del diseño. Utilizando un enfoque cualitativo que incorpora métodos deductivos e inductivos, abordamos este objetivo en tres pasos: (1) revisiones bibliográficas exploratorias, (2) un estudio de campo en el que se realizaron siete entrevistas semiestructuradas con costureras locales para comprender su trabajo en relación con sus particularidades, y (3) el desarrollo de una discusión crítica sobre cómo el diseño puede contribuir a la apreciación de las costureras y la costura a través de la responsabilidad social del diseño. Conocer a estas mujeres y la forma en que se desempeñan profesionalmente es un paso significativo para retratar y comprender a las personas y los procesos involucrados en la cadena de producción de la confección.

*Palabras clave:* costureras, diseño de moda y género, responsabilidad social del diseño, cadena de producción, estudio de campo

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## Introduction

Through a unifying discourse, globalization homogenizes products, processes, and information, internationalizing the precepts of the capitalist world. The stimulus for consumption and the deepening of inequalities are consequences of the adoption of competitive behaviors inherent to this process, “tornando mais distante o sonho de uma cidadania verdadeiramente universal” [making the dream of a truly universal citizenship more distant] (Santos, 2000, p. 19), since those unable to mobilize the *more advanced* and digital techniques become less important actors.

Design, as one of the areas responsible for the creation of the physical world and the consequent applications of techniques for its materialization, is directly involved in the discussion of social, cultural, and economic inequalities in Latin America, mainly because design also corresponds to the demands of the market and mass production (Escobar, 2016). This investigation (Azambuja, 2023) considers the impacts of the contemporary global fashion industry on local seamstresses, aiming to discuss *design's social responsibility* as a means of highlighting them as an essential part of commerce and valuing them as a point of resistance to the impositions of globalization in the city of Bauru (São Paulo, Brazil), a place also shaped by industrial and patriarchal values.

By globalization, the fashion industry unites creativity, technical production, and cultural dissemination, connecting designers, producers, and consumers from different backgrounds in a vast chain of production and consumption. It also enables unsustainable practices due to large-scale anonymous production. Since the rise of *fast fashion* in the late 20th century, the sector has contributed to environmental and social degradation by promoting overproduction, low-cost sales, and high consumption, often at the expense of natural resources and labor —especially affecting women. Thereby, it is widely needed to raise awareness about how design theory and practice have consequences on the appreciation of those who work in manufacturing services, since the field has the potential to create and enable counter-narratives (Fletcher & Grose, 2011; Mazzarella et al., 2019).

Our readings revealed that most of the studies analyzed apply *social design and gender* in fashion by considering visual aspects (how people appear visually) and economic factors (business models, market strategies, forms of consumption, and company well-being). In other words, the relationship between these themes primarily focuses on companies, marketing, and consumer behavior objectives. We observed that while fashion research is concerned with discussing gender, it often disregards the role of social design, thereby suppressing potential design actions that could bridge the gap between meeting market demands and fostering significant societal changes (Azambuja et al., 2022). In this study, we argue that design professionals and fashion production processes must take responsibility to address the social consequences of these issues. In particular, the work and life trajectories of local seamstresses, often working independently to attend to local market and personal income demands, and largely impacted by the global fashion industry conditions, such as anonymity and social devaluation.

Thus, the relationship between design, gender, and sewing is essential for fostering a more inclusive and diversified approach to design, as well as being a key area of focus for designers' social responsibility. Historically, women have contributed to society in numerous ways. The international trend of discussing women's trajectories seeks to expand and highlight historical facts, even as women's history remains obscured by social values that perpetuate female stereotypes and inequalities (Perrot, 2007; Safar & Dias, 2016). Despite their constant engagement, women's participation—as practitioners, theorists, consumers, or objects of representation—in design is rarely recognized. Within design's historical trajectory, female designers are seen as exceptions, as it was historically almost impossible for women to achieve success independently. They were generally confined to careers associated with male family members or disciplines directly linked to domestic activities, such as weaving and sewing. These types of handicrafts are doubly marginalized because they are both handmade and associated with domestic and female tasks (Buckley, 1986; Schneider, 2010).

Besides gender, according to Braverman (1981) and Contino (2019), the rise of industrial societies led to the emergence of professional qualifications and specific occupations. Previously, in artisanal production methods, for example, a seamstress was considered more skilled as she participated in both the creation and production of textile artifacts, possessing knowledge of the entire process—much like an artisan. However, with the process of decoupling the knowledge required to execute a product, the seamstress's role has been reduced to understanding only the tasks pre-determined by the industry. Today, knowledge and creativity are primarily reserved for those deemed qualified through formal education, such as designers.

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Design narratives can be transformed when women's participation becomes a central focus of design theory, practice, and education. Design practice can be understood as an activity involving the act of *doing or creating* things, enabling a reimagining of artifact production, including those traditionally developed in home or workshop environments. This perspective encourages greater consideration of the people and processes involved in the materialization of products or services (Almeida, 2022; Buckley, 2020; Safar & Dias, 2016).

In particular, the lack of documentation about women in sewing trades—especially in the interior of São Paulo State—and the neglect of seamstresses' work in design (history, theory, and practice) is a significant motivation for our investigation. Design literature has emphasized the importance of ethical design, where designers bear social responsibility toward people and the world. Engaging with users of products or services is essential in design and scientific practices, particularly when the goal is to develop real solutions that address contemporary challenges. However, little attention is given to the broader network of workers responsible for creating artifacts beyond the designers themselves. Seamstresses and sewing are indispensable in the history and industry of fashion. These professionals are simultaneously present and essential in daily human life, yet they remain under recognized due to the social, cultural, and historical stereotypes

associated with sewing as a profession. In Western societies dominated by patriarchal values, sewing is often dismissed as an insignificant domestic task rooted in feminine essence (Melaronka, 2007; Fletcher & Grose, 2011; Mazzarella et al., 2019).

In Brazilian scientific research, there is a tendency to emphasize sewing through the tailor's creative and manufacturing processes, whose work is typically more valued due to the professional's gender. Additionally, studies often investigate and document the work of seamstresses from the perspective of social and cultural devaluation and, consequently, precariousness. In our investigation, we broaden the discussion on the work and life trajectories of seamstresses, proposing it as a critical issue for the design chain and an integral aspect of designers' social responsibility.

Within this context, we question: how can design elevate women's participation in sewing trade in the Brazilian city of Bauru? Our aim is to understand how women engage in contemporary sewing trades to support the recognition of female sewing practices within the design's social responsibility. To achieve this, we examine the relationships between design, feminism and gender, fashion, and sewing; conduct a field study in the city of Bauru (São Paulo, Brazil) to document and analyze the work and life trajectories of seamstresses; and discuss how design can contribute to the appreciation of seamstresses and sewing through design's social responsibility.

## Methodological Proceedings and Results

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Using a qualitative approach that combines deductive and inductive methods, we addressed this goal in three phases aligned with our objectives (Table 1). As explained by Freitas and Provdanov (2013), we selected these methods because they allow us to use established principles and theories to understand the specific case of local women workers, and vice versa. Furthermore, according to Paschoarelli et al. (2015), our research is qualitative because it seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of how women engage in contemporary sewing trades through descriptive data collected from individual semi-structured interviews.

The first phase involved exploratory literature reviews, both systematic (SLR) and unsystematic (ULR), focusing on design, feminism and gender, fashion, and sewing. This phase covered 33 articles from the Web of Science,

Phase and aim	Method	Results
1. Relations between design, feminism and gender, fashion, and sewing	Systematic Literature Review	33 articles (Web of Science, Scielo, Scopus)
	Unsystematic Literature Review	46 others (books, PhD thesis etc.)
2. Field study to interview local seamstresses	Semi-structured interviews	7 narratives about the life of seamstresses
3. Design to seamstresses and sewing appreciation	Analysis and interpretation	Critical discussion on design's social responsibility

Table 1

*Methodological proceedings and results*

Note: Elaborated by the authors (2024).

1. Research's CAAE number:

530904215.0000.5663. It must be applied at the following link: <https://plataformabrasil.saude.gov.br/login.jsf>; in "Confirmar Aprovação pelo CAAE ou Parecer".

gov.br/login.jsf; in "Confirmar Aprovação pelo CAAE ou Parecer".

Scopus, and Scielo databases, as well as 46 additional items, including books, PhD theses, and articles sourced from libraries, scientific journals, and university repositories.

In the second phase, we conducted a qualitative field study involving seven semi-structured interviews with seamstresses in Bauru (São Paulo, Brazil). The semi-structured method, characterized by open-ended questions, allowed participants to provide spontaneous and detailed responses, adding valuable depth to the research. Candidate selection occurred in two steps: first, we distributed an online quiz via Google Forms in social network groups (Facebook and WhatsApp) composed of seamstresses; and second, we performed online mapping using Google Maps to locate additional seamstresses. Since the selection process took place during the first semester of 2022, we prioritized these remote methods due to the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The interviews were conducted in person in May 2022 and March 2023. The ages of interviewees ranged from 28 to 57 years old. Each interview lasted up to one hour and included data collection through audio recordings and manual notes. The interviews were structured into three main sections: first, professional trajectory (history, learning experiences, and current work); second, confection services (techniques, materials, and clients); and third, work records (notebooks, notes, photographs, and studio space). Following the interviews, individual reports were prepared for each candidate. The responses were then analyzed, interpreted, and discussed in conjunction with the findings from our initial literature review (Table 2, detailed in the next section of the article).

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It is important to note that the project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Architecture, Arts, Communication, and Design at São Paulo State University (FAAC/UNESP) in April 2022<sup>1</sup>. For all interviews, obtaining the candidate's signed agreement through the **Term of Free and Informed Consent/Consent of Data** was essential. To respect participants' health and comfort, the risks and benefits of the study were clearly explained, and participants were given the freedom to decide whether to allow their first and last name, age, and gender to be included in the research results.

Table 2

*Candidates' informations*

Note: Elaborated by the authors (2024).

In the third phase, we analyzed and interpreted the data, critically discussing design's social responsibility to support local seamstresses and their sewing practices.

Name	Age at interview	Started sewing	Learned sewing	Interview Month year
Ana P. Róvero	28	20 years old	Degree in fashion	May 2022
Lucélia Róvero	57	In childhood	Independently	May 2022
Camila Apolonio	29	20 years old	Degree in fashion	May 2022
Nayara Marque	31	25 years old	Independently	May 2022
Abia Marque	54	14 years old	With seamstress	May 2022
Juliana Souza	42	23 years old	With her mother	May 2022
Fátima Ramos	57	11 years old	With her mother	March 2023



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Figure 1

Bauri location at São Paulo state marked in dark red

Note: Adapted from IBGE (2023).

### Bauri's Seamstresses: Professional Trajectories, Confection Services and Work Records

Bauri is located approximately 210 miles from São Paulo capital in the western side of the state of São Paulo (Brasil) (Figure 1), with a population of 391.740 inhabitants (IBGE, 2024).

The city has a broad network of public and private universities recognized by the Brazilian Ministry of Education, attracting new segments of the population. This influx not only boosts the economy but also influences the city's culture and urban life. These educational institutions offer a wide range of undergraduate programs, including design and fashion design. Additionally, there are institutions providing professional and technical degrees, such as the National Trade Learning Service (SENAC) and the National Industrial Apprenticeship Service (SENAI), which offer courses in design and related fields, such as Interior Design Technician, Modeling and Sewing for Beginners, Graphic Processes, and Brand Design Technician.

This is particularly important because many of the interviewed women cited these types of institutions as teaching references, even if only for a brief period. For women, acquiring sewing skills and the resulting work opportunities have been empowering factors, increasing female



participation in trade. Sewing's empowering aspects stem from the ability to gain qualifications, secure employment or supplement income, and achieve financial independence. Furthermore, sewing enabled women to exercise control over their own bodies, appearance, and way of dressing. Biographical analysis highlights that even by examining a single case, it is possible to scale and interpret significant societal aspects related to politics, gender, history, and culture (Simili & Morgado, 2015; Gill, 2019; Grimshaw, 2013; Tamboukou, 2016, 2018; Azambuja et al., 2022).

The women interviewed presented a stable socioeconomic situation, i.e., they do not face challenges regarding Bauru's infrastructure on health, education and social services. According to Figure 2, the most experienced ones, aged over 40, revealed that their sewing careers began 10 to 15 years ago as apprentices to neighboring seamstresses or their own mothers or grandmothers. This highlights sewing as a family practice passed down through generations, particularly among female lineages. These early experiences were neither officially documented nor professional in nature. Typically, these women started sewing to address household needs, such as earning extra income or making clothes for close family members. Over time, sewing evolved into their primary professional role. Although they did not report other employment opportunities in different fields, these women expressed an almost intimate connection with the profession, working with dedication and genuine enjoyment for what they do.

Ana and Lucélia, a mother-daughter duo, jointly manage a women's tailor-made clothing atelier named *Anna Róvero Atelier*. Ana, 28 years old at the time of the interview, holds a degree in Fashion Design from Holy Heart University (Unisagrado) in Bauru. Her mother, Lucélia, 57 years old, has been sewing since childhood. Lucélia learned to sew at home and further developed her skills throughout her life through various jobs and courses (Figure 2, number 1).

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Figure 2

*Seamstresses' faces*

Note: Data collection (2022, 2023).

2. The analysis presents statements from all candidates, highlighted as direct quotations (APA style), informing its candidate's name in parentheses. The statements were translated to English. Original Portuguese statements and other photographs from field study are available at MsC Thesis (Azambuja, 2023).

Camila, 29 years old, is the founder and ambassador of *Apolonia*, a handmade and tailor-made lingerie brand. Although she graduated in Law, her passion for lingerie led her to pursue a Fashion Design degree at Unisagrado (Figure 2, number 2).

Nayara and Abia, another mother-daughter team, manage an atelier called *Ateliê Bia Marque*. Nayara, 31 years old, has a degree in Aesthetics but had to leave the profession due to a hand condition. This prompted her to join her mother in the atelier and begin sewing independently at the age of 25. Abia, 54 years old, learned to sew at the age of 14 from a neighbor who was a seamstress (Figure 2, number 3).

Juliana, 42 years old, is the owner of *Juliana Confecções*. She has been involved in sewing since the age of 13, initially learning the craft from her mother and later refining her skills under her first boss at a knitted clothing manufacturer (Figure 2, number 4).

Fátima, 57 years old, owns *Ateliê Mãos de Fadas*, where she works alongside her husband, who is a stitcher. She began sewing at the age of 11, learning both sewing and molding techniques from her mother, who was also a seamstress (Figure 2, number 5, pictured with her husband).

In general, time is an essential aspect of progress and organization in sewing trades. Being present at the atelier, maintaining a flexible schedule to accommodate clients at various times of the day, and strictly adhering to deadlines for order deliveries are crucial to ensuring the success of the establishment. Consequently, constant effort and dedication, combined with a passion for the craft, serve as drivers of effective organization and optimal time management.

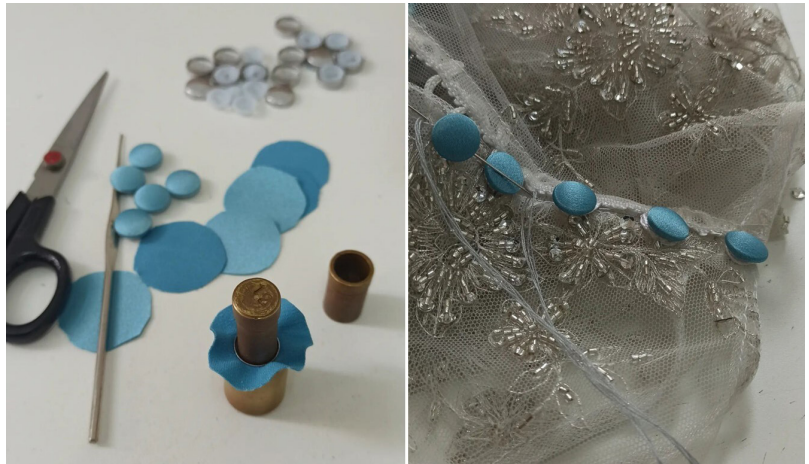
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Additionally, teaching plays a vital role in passing the craft to people across different generations. We observed that these professionals gained knowledge through specialized courses, as well as through everyday experiences. In all cases, sewing practices must be observed to be understood, but they can only be effectively memorized and internalized through hands-on experience:

You know, sewing is like that, you learn the basics, but you will have to be always [...] idealizing, training, testing. Because [...] it does not have a way «yeah, I will read a book and I will learn, it does not work like that». You must do it, train it, take it apart, do it again «you must think first “I have to do this, then this [...]”». (Lucélia & «Ana»)<sup>2</sup>

The ateliers exist solely because of the professional women interviewed. They are responsible for organizing the environment and ensuring the progress of activities. Their actions and relationships, both within and beyond these spaces, are fundamental factors that bring life to the workshops. The internal operations of these establishments rely entirely on the techniques employed by the seamstresses. These techniques range from hand sewing, lace application, and embroidery to flat molding, *moulage*, and *bourrage*. We



**Figure 3***Handmade buttons (Ana & Lucélia)**Note: Data collection (2022).*

frequently observed a semi-industrial production approach, which blends classic manual techniques with contemporary industrial methods (Figure 3).

Some women, with limited knowledge of molding, use pre-made patterns as molds, which can be adapted to meet customer demands. The techniques employed depend directly on tools and materials, in addition to the skills and expertise of these professionals. Essential items include sewing machines (both industrial and domestic), scissors, rulers, molding handouts, pins, kraft paper, fabrics, and other materials.

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**Figure 4***Details of the ateliers*

*Note: Data collection (2022, 2023). Details of the external part of the Juliana Confeções (Juliana) atelier and details of the internal part of the Ateliê Mãos de Fada (Fátima).*

Inside the ateliers, there are large tables for molding, ironing stations, shelves, and counters for storing supplies such as zippers, bobbins, thread, and needles. Additional features include mannequins and racks for supporting pieces in production or under repair, as well as dressing rooms with mirrors for customers to try on clothes. It is also common to find everyday amenities like a sink, coffee maker, bathroom, and refrigerator, as these women often spend the entire day in the workshop due to the volume of work (Figure 4).



Departures from the atelier are typically punctual and purposeful, such as purchasing out-of-stock supplies or visiting the bank to manage accounts. While some of the women interviewed operate domestic ateliers, meaning they work from home, most have opted to separate their workspaces from their living spaces. This separation helps distinguish work time from rest time and preserves the privacy of their home environments.

Sewing is associated with leisure activities, jobs possible to conciliate with domestic tasks or alternatives to unemployment for women. Historical studies highlight the consistent presence of women in these trades, though they were often overlooked because sewing was primarily linked to the female and domestic sphere (Kaipainen, 2012; Taylor, 2012; Weaver, 2012; Frasquete & Simili, 2017; Bueno, 2018; Mitidieri, 2018; Monteleone, 2019; Bendall, 2021; Azambuja et al., 2022). It is noteworthy that historically, insomnia and exhaustion have been emblematic of seamstresses —alas, as other women workers— reflecting gendered experiences and work memories. This occurred because many seamstresses worked late into the night at ateliers that remained open to *show service* or performed additional sewing at home to supplement their income due to low wages (Tamboukou, 2016).

I do not have any sewing machine [at home]. I work Monday to Monday [...] I rest just when I want, but it is very difficult, because there is a lot of work to do [...] every hour, I do not stop. Actually, I almost do not ever sit, because every hour I have clientele [...] it is a rush [...] Here we have a lot of work to do [...] I am nonstop. (Fátima)

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Regarding the external context of the ateliers, the city where these workshops are located shapes the commercial environment in which the seamstresses operate. According to the interviewees, Bauru is a city with high customer demand, allowing each professional to carve out a space in the local market. However, when discussing material suppliers, such as fabric and accessory stores, all agreed that Bauru lacks sufficient options. This scarcity often drives them to rely on the internet to stay informed about current fashion trends and to purchase essential materials: “Everything that we look for Bauru does not have [...] the most of things it does not have [...] it has only two knitting stores to attend to everybody” (Fátima).

Some seamstresses specialize in a specific type of service (for example, women’s party fashion); however, all of them currently perform or have previously undertaken a wide range of tasks. These tasks include the creation of tailor-made garments (such as party dresses, lingerie, lab coats, casual wear, and tailored pieces), general repairs (like hemming pants and adjusting waistbands), and even teaching cutting and sewing classes. Due to the variety of services offered, prices also vary, remaining between R\$20,00 to R\$30,00 for a pant ham, R\$450,00 to a party dress or R\$600,00 to a wedding dress, R\$200,00 to rent a suit and R\$110,00 to a lingerie set (panties and bra or bodysuit).

We highlight that during the period of COVID-19 (especially between 2020 and 2021), they dedicated themselves to fabric mask production to keep

business active. At the beginning of the crisis, the ateliers stopped, and these masks were temporary solutions. The demand was high enough to cover the house bills and face momentaneous obstacles.

Regarding their perception about the value of these services, it all depends on the customer. In general, those who go to the ateliers, looking for tailor-made clothes, are precisely the public that values this kind of confection, i.e., values attentive and quality work, with good finishing, good fabric, good sewing, and that fits the body perfectly. People not familiar with this kind of confection quit ordering when they learn the prices: "No artisanal work is valued" (Lucélia).

Prices largely depend on the client's choice of service and the type of fabric used. Some requested services are straightforward, while others are more complex. For example, certain repairs may appear minor but require dismantling the entire garment to complete, making the process more time-consuming and, therefore, more expensive. Repairs and small adjustments are often undervalued. To address situations where customers fail to appreciate the effort involved, the seamstresses emphasized the importance of politeness, patience, and calmness, combined with the ability to confidently defend the quality of their work and the prices charged.

Today, clothing manufacture is increasingly competitive. With the rise of the fast fashion system —offering cheaper yet stylish options— people often choose ready-to-wear garments, despite their poor material and workmanship quality. Some of the seamstresses reported that they have already reduced their prices to compete with this type of industry:

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I think that sometimes sewing and molding is devalued, for example, a seamstress, sometimes we see a person saying "oh, a seamstress charged me R\$300,00 to sew a party dress". And we know the difficulty of sewing a party dress, R\$300,00 is not expensive. (Nayara)

Regarding approximately 20 years ago, when her mother Abia worked as a seamstress full time, Nayara complements:

I think that, in her time, it was more valued, she used to like to work with sewing [...] So, she says it was more valued, now we almost do not find a seamstress that sews tailor-made clothing. This happens because people that look for seamstresses do not want to pay dearly, I am not generalizing, but most of the people are like that. So, I think that even seamstresses are demotivated. Sometimes, those who sew party dresses that are already well known, they can charge well for the service. But, for those who must charge low prices just to survive, I think it must be discouraging (Nayara).

[...] they do not understand, they think you are available to do that service for them that exact time. People come here early and say: "Can you do it to me for this afternoon?". If I am low on things, it might be possible, but it is difficult, right?! Being low on things, but, in general, I stop what I am doing to attend to the client. So, our work is very complex. Sometimes there are

clients [saying]: “Oh, because I will travel, so I need this clothe, is there time to do it?”. No, but we make time, even if it is after work we do it, we do it at night, so we do not lose customers due to lack of time (Fátima).

Customers are one of the main driving forces behind the functioning of the establishments studied. Patience and the ability to interact with a diverse range of people are highly valued skills among sewing professionals, particularly those with more experience. Tasks in ateliers are typically organized in a strictly hierarchical and linear manner. Historically, this structure ranged from children apprentices at one end to the seamstress, dressmaker, or tailor responsible for coordinating the workshop at the other. Within these frameworks, female seamstresses who performed third-party services for the ateliers are not accounted for. Interestingly, in this hierarchy, male professionals bore greater prestige than female (Dimitrio, 2016; Kaipainen, 2012; Mitidieri, 2018).

In the ateliers studied with more than one employee, there is a profound respect for the trade's hierarchy. Typically, the most experienced professional is responsible for attending to clients. This is not only because of their advanced skills in catering to individual customer needs but also due to their expertise in observing body shapes and, more importantly, respectfully touching clients to perform their work. The only atelier with a male professional presence was Fatima and her husband's. Curiously, to attract clientele, they displayed a sign in front of the atelier indicating that her husband was a tailor, and she was a dressmaker. However, Fatima is the main driving force of the atelier and sews all types of garments, while her husband acts as her assistant.

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The ateliers are powered by clients that recommend the services provided to friends and family. Social networks are used by all the candidates to broadcast their work. Registering the work both for social networks and for personal files is highly relevant, and they do so by taking pictures of the processes and clothes, saving the clients' kraft paper models, and keeping notebooks with customers, financial, and order information.

They engaged themselves directly in maintaining their business through the recommendations, internet disclosures, and the management of everything that happens inside the atelier. In some cases, male customers are present, but most of these women's clientele are other women. Thus, the preference for serving women of all ages exists for two reasons: first, women are usually more interested in making tailored clothes, a commonly provided service. Second, the techniques and environments of the ateliers are mostly prepared to serve women.

The service and production process —mainly of a tailor-made garment— objectively happens as follows: first, the client brings the fabric and the body measures are taken by the seamstress; second, the professional dedicate herself in molding and sewing; third, the customer comes to the atelier to try the piece and see if it fits; fourth, final adjustments are made and the apparel is finish.

Fittings are usually in front of a mirror and at these moments, it is important to preserve the client's comfort and privacy. Thus, the environment is purely feminine, the presence of only women makes the workshop comforting and safe, in which clients take off their clothes. They need to talk about body changes, measures and what needs to be done to make the outfit perfect.

There was a concern with the client's expectations, it is evident that, besides observation, the seamstresses question customers if the clothes are according to her taste; in such moments —or even when it is just for garment repair—, when the professional need to note the particularities of a body, it is essential the face-to-face contact between the client and the professional. The interviewees comment that the garment must be tried by the clients aiming for better results and materialization of expectations.

### **Design's Social Responsibility and Bauru's Seamstresses**

Design is a field with strong political consequences and plays an important role in social change. Topics such as education, social justice, equality, and work constantly redefine design problems and practice (Cardoso, 2017; Fry, 2017a, 2017b). Designers, positioned at the top of the production chains (Contino, 2019), occupy a privileged space to catalyze transformative changes through their perceptive sensitivity and social responsibility. By creatively intervening in design practices, they can not only drive societal transformation but also recognize and value individuals connected —directly or indirectly— to the production of artifacts, such as seamstresses.

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Local communities offer valuable opportunities for social reflection and activist action, which can drive meaningful change toward a society grounded in civic engagement and democratic values. These spaces enable both social and individual interventions, fostering collective progress and empowerment. Interventions occur when individuals, such as designers, develop innovative and creative projects that, over time and with effective management, evolve into common practices. These practices form a way of life that the local community embraces and integrates into daily routines, disrupting unsustainable global systems (Manzini, 2023; Margolin, 2006). Manzini's (2023) emphasizes that “as ações cotidianas podem desempenhar um papel político na transição para a sustentabilidade” [everyday actions can play a political role in the transition to sustainability] (p. 80) and that “só podemos pensar ou fazer de onde nos encontramos” [we can only think or do from where we find ourselves] (p. 81), highlighting the importance of local context in fostering meaningful change.

Throughout western fashion's history, mechanisms were created to divide women and men according to their social roles. Materialized by social relations, fashion is a gender technology, broadcasting cultural values and representations. For example, high fashion is often associated with women, and is largely produced by women. Likewise, tailoring is overwhelmingly linked with men (Hollander, 2003; Lauretis, 1987). Tailors work in public spaces, as their clients are other public men (politicians, intellectuals, workers), and they are frequently praised for the high quality of their work following a very logical and rational way of thinking. In general, tailors



produced several types of clothing over time, but *the male suit*, which reflects the characteristics of male activities such as rationality and sobriety, is considered their principal product. In contrast, women are seamstresses or dressmakers, their clients are other women, and their work is typically considered simpler than tailors' as it reflects social aspects attributed to women such as beauty and frivolity (Hollander, 2003; Gill, 2019; Kaipainen, 2012; Taylor, 2012).

Sewing is constantly seen as a female and domestic practice employing mainly handmade techniques, while the use of sewing for the design of artifacts for commercialization, which deals with market competitiveness, is portrayed as a male and industrial practice. However, high fashion and tailoring are both produced and used by both men and women. Therefore, we argue that the contributions of female sewing practices are not yet fully known and recognized, as registering domestic environments has not received the same focus by historians compared to public life, making women's contributions to remain hidden and overlooked in its relevance.

Feminist and gender perspectives on design practices and theories are essential to rethink women's participation in the design field. As subject and object of studies, women are transforming **traditional, legitimate and universal Science** centered on white western men into a more diverse one. Since the 1960s, feminist studies grew to discuss male oppression over females to make women's participation in societies visible, leading to the concept of *gender* to address how human sexual characteristics are represented and valued in a given society and historical moment (Buckley, 1989, 2020; Louro, 2003).

14

Sources about Bauru's history and symbols available from the city's administration (Prefeitura Municipal de Bauru, 2023) refers disproportionately to male names and events such as church foundations or soccer teams victories. This evidences a predominant conservative bias in the values surrounding the city's history. Such scenario is also present in other parts of Brazil, supporting social inequalities, slavery, colonialism, and other forms of subordination in Brazilian society. The written history of the city has no mention of female participation in the development of the region, especially when it comes to sewing crafts. The interviewed women are part of the local fashion production chain but remain excluded from official city records, providing an excellent case to implement an analysis from feminist and gender perspectives.

This lack of records contributes to both society and the interviewed themselves to confuse in classifying their jobs and types of profession. Some women recognize that their work is not as qualified as the work of a male tailor or even hide their name and profession under their husband's to provide more business opportunities. When they are experienced professionals, they are usually called by names such as *general seamstress*, meaning they have superior technical knowledge when compared to other professionals. However, these women are also part of society and, consequently, are influenced by patriarchal and capitalist cultural values that dominate structures and collective thinking.

Within the limitations of the study, we have found women in different functions, such as seamstresses, dressmakers, tailors, and designers. Currently, they face the challenges of positioning themselves in a competitive market marked by patriarchal values in a city that hardly will contribute to this appreciation due to its historical background. Despite the difficulties, they have an extensive clientele and demand for orders, as they offer services needed by the population, such as making tailor-made clothes, general repairs and third party services to other companies. Frequently impacted by precepts of global fashion and fast fashion industries, these workers create mechanisms for the survival of their business, such as low service prices and more working hours to meet income needs.

The disregard of the public for their work is generally met with a decisive and categorical attitude towards those who seek their services, and the professionals tend to not accept cheap services. They have full control over their time and organization as well. Even if there are obstacles —such as lack of money or the need for constant dedication to business—, the jobs and places are not precarious, and they are able to maintain a stable socioeconomic situation. The spaces are designed and prepared for professional performance, being spacious and properly equipped with sewing machines, tables, and other required utensils and materials.

Some of these women are also designers, even without a degree in the area. In their daily work practice, they use empirical design concepts for the construction of clothing. There are several types of knowledge about the techniques used, and the field study showed that they learn and use different techniques and skills as they need them. In addition, there are some women with a clear technical superiority due to their longer experience, which allowed them to become quite skilled in different sewing techniques. Interestingly, less experienced ones are usually not devalued. In these crafts, it is commonly recognized that advancing the practice of sewing takes time and experience, constantly evolving from one's own mistakes to achieve the profession's totality.

15

The seamstresses are aware that a fashion designer or other type of graduated professional does not always have more knowledge about the conception and execution of fashion products. As Contino (2019) stated, from a capitalist perspective of work relations, design is seen as immaterial —associated with intellect and talent— since it deals with the conception of products or services. Meanwhile, other professions essential for the functioning and execution of design products or services (like seamstresses in the fashion industry) receive little recognition and are considered inferior to designers. Particularly in the current fashion system, workers are constantly undervalued by the public in general. “Essa dimensão ideológica interfere diretamente na função que o design desempenha na sociedade e na cultura, assim como no modo que a força de trabalho atuante no campo, os designers, se vê” [This ideological dimension interferes directly in the social function of design and its culture, as well as in the way that the workforce and designers see themselves] (Contino, 2019, pp. 66-67).

Defining design as immaterial hides means of production and workforce present throughout production chains of fashion design. As *immaterial design* is connected with the idea of creativity—an aspect considered superior, mythic and special by societies—it contributes to a constructed perspective that a designer is a genius and a lonely worker despite abundant literature proving all human beings are creative, or that creativity is something to be stimulated and practiced, and that the vast majority of projects are carried out by teams, leaving only a few occasions for designers to operate by themselves. In addition, design history overemphasizes male designers' individual biographies, creating a misleading support for this notion of a *creative and lonely genius* (Contino, 2019). Thus, we argue women in sewing trades are devalued by both gender ideology—sexual division of labor—and by the perception of work relations originated from capitalism—social division of labor.

According to Escobar (2016), knowledge and information are critical for transforming contemporary societies influenced by the prevailing economic system. Beyond the functional and commercial aspects of design products and services, social and cultural contexts are essential for rebuilding community and local well-being. The author identifies patriarchy as an initial manifestation of power, rooted in the systematic destruction of diverse modes of existence, with capitalism as a subsequent phase and globalization as its culmination (Santos, 2000). Therefore, Escobar (2016) advocates for a policy supporting alternative forms of civilization, based on the interconnection of life systems, collaboration, respect, and the recognition of emotions as foundational elements in the construction of spaces for knowledge, empathy, and coexistence, as exemplified by the matristic model present in love relations, science, and democracy.

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Overcoming patriarchy and industrial values means finding experiences that promote autonomy and resistance to globalization, as exemplified by the seamstresses in this study who develop and maintain a network of local relationships at Bauru. Thus, we achieved our aim by understanding how women engage in contemporary sewing trades in the city and how to support the recognition of female sewing practices within the design's social responsibility. It is important to comprehend local situations to then empower and acknowledge design and designers with sufficient information to act for social change (Manzini, 2023). As Escobar (2016) points out, autonomy entails creating conditions to defend, transform, or invent practices. It requires new sociability principles based on cultural *pluriverses*, where design practices assume that “toda persona o colectivo es practicante de su propio saber” [every person or collective is a practitioner of their own knowledge] (Escobar, 2016, p. 318), enabling an understanding of how individuals perceive their realities.

Thus, this research advances shed light over the works of seamstresses, raising essential awareness in the local community. Studying Bauru and its sewing trade is crucial for constructing local knowledge and, thereafter, applying social design projects. The seamstresses interviewed face difficulties not because they live in precariousness, but because the public in general do not recognize sewing challenges and—even if

unconsciously— women as proper workers and contributors to the fashion production chain. Therefore, they do not want to pay correctly nor respect time required to perform the services. We highlight the importance of creating spaces for appreciation and the rise of awareness of the public about the local fashion production chain, including the anonymous work of seamstresses, the effort required in the manufacturing processes and gender inequalities in sewing practices.

## Conclusion

Even with a small and qualitative sample, the registration of professionals in the region was important to verify aspects of the literature studied. We argued that seeing and listening to workers in the fashion industry is highly significant to go beyond theories and understand what happens in the realities of different situations and places. The practice of design was found in spaces outside universities or places occupied by graduated designers, which is clearly a consequence of the applied nature of this research. The way in which the data collected was interpreted is interesting to understand in detail how and where these other professionals work in the production of clothing. We anticipate this study could serve as a basis for future research, contributing to supporting the importance of knowing and talking about these women sewing workers, especially in the field of design. Our most recent research is applying *vernacular and artisanal fashion design* as an essential term to theoretical foundation, which considers informal design processes frequently present in popular daily life and not properly recognized by the formal market.

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We had some limitations, such as to consider the gender *woman* from the perspective of what the patriarchal society considers as a woman. This is likely a consequence of the theories used in the investigation to conceptualize men and women according to the sex-gender binary system, as in the fashion history sources employed, whose narratives largely follow this perspective. However, the male-female relationship creates a simplistic notion of the existence of only two opposite poles, obscuring the fact that the exercise of power and domination takes place in different directions and considers aspects such as classes, races, and religions. In sewing trades, we observed that in addition to gender inequality, there are class and racial inequalities either. Also, the study emphasizes a western historical context (Europe and America), even though other perspectives and other paths could be followed. Expanding bibliographic research to different authors is essential in future studies.

Another limitation was the COVID-19 pandemic. The women were selected through online research on Google and social networks. Different ways of selecting participants for a field study are needed. While collecting data, some women resisted both in accepting to participate and during the interviews. At the beginning of the conversations, there was a certain estrangement, eased as the chat progressed, becoming more fluid and spontaneous. Thus, other means to approach the candidates will be tested. In addition, aspects of the formality or informality of these seamstresses' work were not considered in the interviews. In

future research, we aim to consider the labor's irregularities and the women's perception of their rights, also regarding detailed aspects about socioeconomic situations (i.e., economic classes, races, access to health and education, among other topics).

The discussion between design's social responsibility, globalization, gender, and fashion in favor of the recognition of women's work in the sewing trade at Bauru is a thought-provoking starting point of our research trajectory. It encourages us to discuss how the homogenization of clothes supported by the global fashion industry is not entirely possible. In addition to cultural diversity, human bodies are extremely different, providing seamstresses an important role in individualizing the process of sewing, mending and adjusting clothes to each person's reality.

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### **Conflict of interest**

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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### **Authorship contribution statement**

Manuela de Azambuja: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, project administration, resources, visualization, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing.

Fernanda Henriques: conceptualization, supervision, writing – review & editing.

### **ORCID iD**

Manuela de Azambuja  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7133-5527>

Fernanda Henriques  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4303-9274>



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