

SLAVE WORK IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY IN SPECIALIZED PUBLICATIONS

*O TRABALHO ANÁLOGO AO DE ESCRAVO NA INDÚSTRIA DA MODA EM  
PUBLICAÇÕES ESPECIALIZADAS*

*EL TRABAJO ESCLAVO EN LA INDUSTRIA DE LA MODA EN PUBLICACIONES  
ESPECIALIZADAS*



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**ABSTRACT:** This study contextualizes the phenomenon of contemporary illegal slavery in the fashion industry, in academic works published after the sanction of Law n. 10,803, in 2003. This legal framework, guided by the principle of dignity, overcame the idea of restriction of freedom, typifying work in conditions similar to slavery. However, in academic research, the phenomenon is polysemic, depending on the multiplicity of situations and their specific characteristics. This justifies this work, whose objective is to examine the manifestations of contemporary slavery in the fashion industry, based on relevant academic literature. Bibliographical research was carried out in two stages, considering publications between the years 2003 and 2023. Initially, a Narrative Literature Review explored the field of knowledge, surveying publications of different natures and selecting those that had as their research object “slavery in the fashion industry” for analysis. A non-systematic but general balance was obtained, highlighting the main categories found. Next, there was a Systematic Literature Review that sought a specialized set with a more cohesive thematic focus, resulting in a more in-depth analysis. 266 texts distributed across 12 books were identified. After reading the metadata, identifying the descriptors, and analyzing the objectives, 10 chapters were selected that inserted the phenomenon in the context of the fashion industry. The results highlight the vulnerability of social groups, the “externalization” of production, and the precariousness of working conditions as central problems to be considered by public policymakers to combat work analogous to slavery.

**KEYWORDS:** Slavery. Fashion industry. Social vulnerability. Corporate responsibility. Consumer awareness.

**RESUMO:** *O presente estudo contextualiza o fenômeno da escravidão contemporânea ilegal na indústria da moda, em trabalhos acadêmicos publicados depois da sanção da Lei n.10.803, em 2003. Esse marco legal, orientado pelo princípio da dignidade, superou a ideia da restrição de liberdade, tipificando o trabalho em condição análoga à de escravo. Contudo, na pesquisa acadêmica, o fenômeno é polissêmico, conforme a multiplicidade de situações e suas características específicas. Isso justifica este trabalho, cujo objetivo é examinar as manifestações da escravidão contemporânea na indústria da moda, a partir da literatura acadêmica pertinente à temática. Foi realizada uma pesquisa bibliográfica em duas etapas, considerando as publicações entre os anos de 2003 e 2023. Em um primeiro momento, uma Revisão Narrativa da Literatura explorou o campo de conhecimento, levantando publicações de diversas naturezas e selecionando para a análise, as que tinham como objeto de pesquisa a “escravidão na indústria da moda”. Obteve-se um balanço não sistemático, porém geral, destacando-se as principais categorias encontradas. Em seguida, houve uma Revisão Sistemática da Literatura que buscou um conjunto especializado e com enfoque temático mais coeso, resultando em uma análise mais aprofundada. Foram identificados 266 textos distribuídos em 12 livros. Após a leitura dos metadados a identificação dos descritores e análise dos objetivos, foram selecionados 10 capítulos que inseriram o fenômeno no contexto da indústria da moda. Os resultados destacam a vulnerabilidade de grupos sociais, a “externalização” da produção e a precarização das condições de trabalho como problemas centrais a serem considerados por formuladores de políticas públicas de combate ao trabalho análogo à escravidão.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Trabalho escravo. Indústria da moda. Vulnerabilidade social. Responsabilidade empresarial. Conscientização dos consumidores.*

**RESUMEN:** Este estudio contextualiza el fenómeno de la esclavitud ilegal contemporánea en la industria de la moda, en trabajos académicos publicados después de la sanción de la Ley n. 10.803, en 2003. Este marco jurídico, guiado por el principio de dignidad, superó la idea de restricción de la libertad, tipificando el trabajo en condiciones similares a la esclavitud. Sin embargo, en la investigación académica el fenómeno es polisémico, dependiendo de la multiplicidad de situaciones y sus características específicas. Esto justifica este trabajo, cuyo objetivo es examinar las manifestaciones de la esclavitud contemporánea en la industria de la moda, a partir de literatura académica relevante al tema. Se realizó una investigación bibliográfica en dos etapas, considerando publicaciones entre los años 2003 y 2023. Inicialmente, una Revisión de Literatura Narrativa exploró el campo del conocimiento, relevando publicaciones de distinta naturaleza y seleccionando aquellas que tenían como objeto de investigación “la esclavitud a la moda”. industria” para su análisis. Se obtuvo un balance no sistemático sino general, destacando las principales categorías encontradas. A continuación, se realizó una Revisión Sistemática de la Literatura que buscó un conjunto especializado con un enfoque temático más cohesionado, resultando en un análisis más profundo. Se identificaron 266 textos distribuidos en 12 libros. Luego de leer los metadatos, identificar los descriptores y analizar los objetivos, se seleccionaron 10 capítulos que insertan el fenómeno en el contexto de la industria de la moda. Los resultados destacan la vulnerabilidad de los grupos sociales, la “externalización” de la producción y la precariedad de las condiciones de trabajo como problemas centrales que deben considerar los responsables de las políticas públicas para combatir el trabajo análogo a la esclavitud.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Trabajo esclavo. Industria de la moda. Vulnerabilidad social. Responsabilidad Corporativa. Sensibilización de los consumidores.

## Introduction

In the year that Brazil hosts the Group of 20 (G20) meeting to discuss the international economic landscape, it is pertinent to remember that, within this global system, contemporary slavery persists. Thus, a global challenge remains the reduction of inequalities in access to the human right not to be enslaved. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2022) reports that approximately 27.6 million people worldwide were victims of this phenomenon in 2021, encompassing a wide range of contexts.

However, the lack of a uniform concept that encompasses all its manifestations makes understanding the phenomenon and addressing its causes and consequences even more complex. In the Brazilian context, the amendment of Article 149 of the Brazilian Penal Code by Law No. 10,803 in 2003 marked a significant change by removing the requirement of physical restraint of liberty to characterize contemporary slavery, as noted by Guilherme Nucci (2014). This legislation criminalized various forms of subjugation, including forced labor,

exhausting work hours, and degrading working conditions, as well as restrictions on mobility due to debts incurred by the employer.

Despite legal advances, the diversity of contemporary slavery manifestations complicates achieving consensus in the literature. Initially concentrated in areas such as the Amazon and rural zones, where factors like geographic isolation played a significant role, the phenomenon has now expanded to urban centers, driven by online commerce, particularly in the fashion industry. The relentless pursuit of design innovations at competitive prices has led parts of this industry to rely on an unskilled and undervalued workforce, as denounced by Alice de Paiva Abreu (1986).

Between 2010 and 2022, hundreds of cases of work conditions analogous to slavery were identified, primarily in the textile and garment industry, according to reports from the Labor Inspection Secretariat (SIT, 2022). However, the number of companies inspected during this period was substantially lower, highlighting gaps in the enforcement of legislation. Nonetheless, Natalia Suzuki and Thiago Casteli (2022) emphasized that seamstresses, especially dark-skinned and black women with low education levels, are the most vulnerable Group to this exploitation.

The fashion industry plays a significant role in the Brazilian economy, employing millions of people directly and indirectly. However, according to Flora Oliveira da Costa and Luciana Paula Conforti (2018), Brazilian entrepreneurs lack awareness of the United Nations (UN) Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, raising concerns about the social responsibility of companies in the sector.

Upon assuming the presidency of the Group of 20 (G20) international forum in 2024, Brazil faces the imperative to take a leading role in the discourse on socio-environmental and governance issues. This includes the governance of the globalized supply chain in the textile and garment industry, with a focus on socio-environmental responsibility.

In this context, this study aims to examine manifestations of contemporary slavery in the fashion industry, based on relevant national academic literature. To achieve this, two literature reviews were conducted: a narrative review, exploring diverse productions without a defined thematic focus, and a systematic review, delving into the state of knowledge through publications by experts on the topic.

This proposal is significant because it seeks to systematize approaches to the flagrant violation of human rights: contemporary slavery in the fashion industry. The article is structured into four main sections, in addition to this introduction. The methodological procedures adopted

are described in the following section, followed by the presentation of the results from the narrative and systematic reviews. Finally, some considerations are offered.

## Method

The qualitative research was developed through two literature reviews to determine the state of knowledge on this topic. It is known that review studies can be divided into two broad categories: those that map and those that evaluate and synthesize specific productions. In the analysis by Jacomini *et al.* (2023), the authors acknowledge that mapping studies primarily aim to identify and catalog existing academic production on a given topic, while evaluation and synthesis studies aim to critically analyze this production, seeking to draw conclusions and syntheses from individual studies.

However, they understand that the authors mention that evaluation and synthesis studies, such as systematic reviews, also end up mapping academic production, although this is not their primary goal. This is because, to evaluate and synthesize individual studies, it is necessary first to map and catalog these texts. Therefore, it is advisable to articulate the realms of mapping, evaluation, and synthesis. This means that, when conducting a systematic review, they not only identify relevant studies on the topic (mapping) but also critically analyze and synthesize their findings to draw meaningful conclusions. This integrated approach allows for a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the current state of knowledge on the investigated topic (Jacomini, *et al.* 2023).

First, a narrative review was conducted, seeking works related to the topic within the temporal scope (2003-2023) from various databases such as the *Portal de Periódicos* of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES), Google Scholar, and the Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (BDTD). The selected works were those focusing on labor analogous to slavery in the fashion industry. This stage aimed to provide a non-systematic, yet general overview of the subject. During this exploratory phase, the multidimensionality of the phenomenon in its contemporary form was noted; thus, integrating knowledge from diverse disciplinary perspectives, Philosophy, Law, Anthropology, Social Work, and Sociology, became pertinent.

Subsequently, the second review sought to identify, select, and analyze studies systematically, integrating texts that focus on labor analogous to slavery in the fashion industry from various perspectives and empirical and theoretical approaches. Rather than broadening

the search across various databases, a focus was chosen to allow publications from different disciplines but centered on a common point. Thus, the systematic review included: a) all publications from the Scientific Meetings on Slave Labor and Related Issues; b) those that included the terms “fashion,” “garment,” “clothing,” “sewing,” “textile,” “immigration,” “manufacturing,” and “supply chain” in the title or introduction, referring to slave labor in the fashion industry. The qualitative analysis of the texts, in light of the aforementioned Article 149, revealed challenges and pathways for addressing the issue, as well as providing a theoretical understanding of the current conditions surrounding slavery in this industrial sector.

### Aspects of Labor Analogous to Slavery in the Fashion Industry

Although the United Nations recognized the conceptual breadth of this typification as a bold step, Brazil faces significant challenges in monitoring compliance with the law. This is evident when comparing the number of establishments inspected in Brazil to the 22,000 productive units in the sector, according to data from the Brazilian Textile and Apparel Industry Association (Abit, 2023). Despite significant advances in labor legislation, notable setbacks are also reported, as highlighted by Maíra Etzel (2017).

A clear instance of such a setback in public policies occurred in 2017, during Michel Temer’s government, with the suspension of a public information document popularly known as the “Dirty List.” The Employer Registry, which documents companies involved in slave labor, is a political measure considered central to combating contemporary slavery. At that time, the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) *Repórter Brasil* requested the right to access information. Consequently, access to the document was granted and subsequently disclosed.

Since the late 1990s, some companies have sought ways to transform fixed costs into variable ones, available to meet immediate demand. The garment industry has been no exception. Ricardo Antunes (2014) assesses that outsourcing aims to reduce costs and increase production. Consequently, home-based work has risen, leading to practices that undermine labor conditions and violate workers’ rights. Fashion companies, “in the era of the capitalism of signs, packaging, the superficial, and the redundant [...]”, reduce manufacturing costs, increase unemployment, and disrupt labor mobilization (Antunes, 2014, p. 19, our translation). The capitalist game rule is clear: the relationship between supply and demand is reflected in the powers and actions of individuals within a social field. Thus, flexible capitalism has exacerbated asymmetry in interpersonal relationships within the garment production sector.



This described context provides the affordances to labor activities, as proposed by Gibson (1982). These conditions either facilitate or hinder the construction of decent work, as proposed by the International Labour Organization (ILO) (1999). The dynamics of garment production within unrestricted outsourcing chains, nationally and internationally, have challenged union leadership in recent decades. The structure of the fashion production chain is fragmented, with some suppliers being informal micro-entrepreneurs. This complex configuration is reflected in the task of studying the enslavement of individuals within this global macrostructure. Consequently, the literature presents various factors associated with this structural organization in the Brazilian fashion industry. This section synthesizes the results of the narrative review, based on themes that span most of the selected works<sup>3</sup>.

Since the 1990s, with Brazil's international trade liberalization, its domestic textile and garment industry has faced significant issues, such as the transformation of large factories into smaller production units, some of which are informal. The business competition for consumers in a globalized market demands accelerated and multiplied production to reduce costs and increase productivity. The disorganization of the sector and hypercompetition have impacted both large and small enterprises. Many, as assessed, have closed their doors or transformed into precarious production arrangements, some even in home settings (Amador, 2014). Authors like Antunes (2014) examine this process, which has led to unemployment and intensified social inequalities.

Thus, there was a "premature collapse" of part of the industrial sector, followed by its fragmentation. Many factory workers became "entrepreneurs," opening workshops to provide the services they previously performed in factories. The informality and weakening in the garment labor market have intensified workers' insecurity in this sector (Amador, 2014). In Brazil, while there are regulations for minimum wages, there is no regulation for the minimum amount paid from company to company. Consequently, the relationships between large and small actors in the country have suffered from asymmetry. If there are pressures and injustices, they are unlikely to be identified due to the lack of quantitative and qualitative data that would make the production chain transparent. This is particularly true when some of these chains are international. Such conditions may lead to price compression for outsourced workshops, causing a progressive reduction in rights, and contributing to subcontracting, informality, and forced labor (Jacques, 2015).

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<sup>3</sup> Other topics are also relevant and are considered throughout this text, such as: outsourcing, supply chains, precariousness, immigration, the impact of global capitalism, and organizational governance and responsibility.

The acceleration of fashion collection release cycles is another factor contributing to forced labor. According to Los *et al.* (2021), this acceleration is driven by the “fast fashion” phenomenon. This type of production requires high turnover in a short time and at low costs, as it involves creating nearly disposable clothing (Refosco; Oenning; Neves, 2011). Using the “*Moda Livre*” app, Los *et al.* (2021) reveal that 400 workers have been freed from conditions analogous to slavery since 2010. They also note that, historically, these workers are clandestine migrants or trafficked individuals from other countries providing slave labor for “fast fashion.”

The selected literature centers on “social relations” as a critical factor in the problem. Women and immigrants are reported as the primary victims of slavery in the production chain. Regarding global female participation, Pasqua (2021) states that women make up the majority of those subjected to forced labor, and the garment market is the second most exploitative sector for them. Externally, Pasqua (2021) asserts that 85% of textile industry workers are women. Within the Brazilian internal sector, women comprised 75% of the workforce. Considering that these female workers earn less and are also subject to moral harassment, Pasqua (2021) argues that gender violence is a significant factor in analyzing working conditions in this productive sector.

Regarding immigrants, Etzel (2017) notes that several cases of contemporary slavery in fashion have been reported in Brazil, such as the case of Bolivians in São Paulo. Pasqua (2021) warns that the use of this labor is rising in São Paulo. According to the researcher, the “*Moda Livre*” app from the *Repórter Brasil* website recorded, between 2010 and 2020, that the vast majority of victims exploited are immigrants from Bolivia, Paraguay, and Peru. Many people fleeing poverty and violence in their countries end up being entangled by criminals. On their journey, they incur debts with Brazilian and foreign recruiters. Thus, criminal recruitment is generally followed by debt bondage (Los *et al.*, 2021). Since some remain undocumented in Brazil, they live marginalized, fearing deportation.

In conclusion, the situation is complex. The sector has been marked by significant challenges and alarming setbacks. The weakening of public policies, exemplified by the suspension of the “Dirty List” during Michel Temer’s presidency, and the growing trend of outsourcing and informality exacerbate conditions conducive to labor exploitation, particularly among vulnerable groups such as women and immigrants. The phenomenon of “fast fashion,” with its pressure for rapid and cheap production, has contributed to the intensification of labor conditions akin to slavery, while the lack of transparency due to the absence of data on the supply chain hinders the identification and accountability of offenders. This scenario suggests

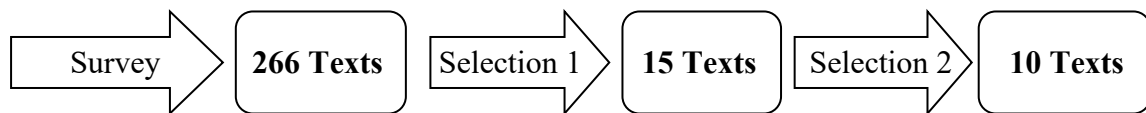


the need for interdisciplinary approaches that contribute to reflections on improving the legal framework, strengthening enforcement actions, and raising consumer awareness. This could lead to offering more dignified working conditions for the most vulnerable links in the sector.

### Forced Labor Conditions in the Fashion Industry in Scientific Meeting Publications

In the literature mapping from the file of the Contemporary Slave Labor Research Group (GPTEC) linked to the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), 266 texts emerged from 12 books derived from the Scientific Meetings (Figure 1). Through the reading of metadata, 15 texts containing the aforementioned terms in their titles were selected (Chart 1). Following a full reading of these, 10 texts were chosen for this analysis.

**Figure 1 – Results of the Systematic Review**



Source: Authors' elaboration (2023).

**Chart 1 – Authors Selected in the Systematic Review**

WORK	AUTHORSHIP	YEAR
1	André Junqueira Caetano and Bruna Fernanda Campos Alves	(2022)
2	Flora Oliveira da Costa Flora and Luciana Paula Conforti	(2018)
3	Natália Suzuki	(2016)
4	João Paulo Cândia Veiga and Katiuscia Moreno Galhera	(2016)
5	Camila Rodrigues Neves de Almeida Lima	(2022)
6	Lorena Fernanda de Oliveira Silva	(2022a)
7	Lorena Fernanda de Oliveira Silva	(2022b)
8	Ana Elisa Brito Segatti, Dirce Trevisi Prado Novaes, Christiane Vieira Nogueira, João Sabino, Mariana Flesch Fortes	(2016)
9	Lília Carvalho Finelli and Clara Oliffson Kamphorst Leal da Silva	(2018)
10	Maíra Etzel	(2017)

Source: Authors' elaboration (2023).

In recent years, the "*Reunião Científica sobre Trabalho Escravo Contemporâneo e Questões Correlatas*<sup>4</sup>" has provided a platform for the dissemination of research aimed at elucidating the various dimensions of slave labor in the textile and apparel industry from multiple perspectives. For an intelligible organization of the collected data, the results will be presented in summaries that group the information by semantic proximity of the contents, while still respecting the interdisciplinarity proposed by each material.

### **Immigration and Slave Labor**

A set of authors links immigration to the enslavement of labor in the textile and apparel sector. Natália Suzuki (2016) analyzed the relationship between housing and slave labor among Bolivian immigrants newly arrived in Brazil, specifically within the textile sector. She also highlighted the intrinsic connection between living in workshops/abodes and the exploitation of these workers.

The author divided the group of Bolivians into two main categories: the self-employed worker, who produces for themselves and may have previously been a victim of enslavement; and the subcontracted worker, who produces items for others and does not own their own business. Suzuki focused on the latter group in her study. Common to both is the precarious housing at the workplace. Family income can vary from more than three minimum wages to none at all. Many of the workshops under inspection were run by Bolivians who had achieved socioeconomic advancement, suggesting the complexity of the relationships between work, housing, and social mobility.

On one hand, according to Suzuki (2016), poorly paid workers have limited affordances to pay for decent housing, forcing them to remain close to jobs in the central region of São Paulo. On the other hand, newcomers are compelled to live in the housing provided by the recruiters. Thus, the issue of housing is crucial for the exploitation of this group, transcending the realm of work. The precarious housing situation perpetuates degrading working conditions, with employers controlling both work and living conditions (Suzuki, 2016).

This author acknowledges that many residents of São Paulo subject themselves to precarious housing in the city center, closer to their workplaces. The perception that living in the center means being 'close to everything' can mitigate the view that living in tenements is intolerable or, at the very least, offers some form of compensation. This reveals the magnitude

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<sup>4</sup> In English, the name would look like: *Scientific Meeting on Contemporary Slave Labor and Related Issues*.

of inhumane precariousness, which, due to its scale, is accepted as a new normal, pushing the boundaries of dignity.

For the researcher, enslavement is not confined to the world of work but also fits into an urban dynamic that facilitates its presence. Suzuki (2016) argues that certain groups enable their exploitation in specific economic activities under certain conditions and by particular recruiters. Not coincidentally, the enslaving scheme is reproduced, including the strategic location of housing in the northern zone and the use of the “truck system,” a system of retaining part of the wage as payment for housing and food, aimed at controlling the worker and their family (Suzuki, 2016).

The discussion of the precarious conditions of housing/workshops continues in the study by Lorena Fernanda de Oliveira Silva (2022a), which investigates the inspection criteria to detect workers in conditions analogous to slavery. She highlights the poor conditions in sewing workshops, emphasizing irregularities and the precariousness of living and working conditions. The protection of human dignity is emphasized in the interpretation of the law, particularly in the definition of “exhaustive work hours.” Critical aspects identified include dependence on worked hours for income, inconsistencies in payments, and pressure to extend work hours. She also mentions that state intervention in workshops is limited, as the complexity of identifying exploitation is often disguised as legal compliance, alluding to a state of exception.

With the amendment of Article 149, Silva (2022a) reaffirms that freedom gives way to dignity as the primary legal good. She refers to the concept of a state of exception, questioning how this condition perpetuates in certain locations. Refugee camps, garment factories, and slums illustrate spaces where the exception becomes the rule, challenging the distinction between fact and law, norm and application. Principles are adapted to different contexts. Given the complexity of human situations, between law and fact, there is a space where distinctions are challenging. This field requires flexibility regarding the nuances of human dignity. As highlighted by Silva (2022a), workers reduce the degrading effect by referencing conditions that are even worse.

In a second study, Silva (2022b) discusses the story of Rafael, a young Bolivian who was rescued in 2012 while working in conditions analogous to slavery at a garment factory in São Paulo. Focusing on the garment sector in the capital city, specifically sewing workshops, the researcher highlights the hierarchical differences between Brazilians and immigrants, which extend beyond objective aspects to include subjective ones. Invisibility and marginalization become favorable conditions for the perpetuation of enslavement. Due to their illegal status,

victims are hesitant to seek help from the Brazilian state, fearing being classified as criminals. All these associated factors contribute to the vulnerability of immigrants.

These studies reveal the influence of environmental factors on the enslavement of immigrant labor in the textile industry, as they create degrading working conditions. This complex relationship transcends the realm of work, perpetuating exploitation by integrating housing and control over individuals.

### **Gender and Vulnerability**

The analysis of the gender category in some studies delves deeper into the issue. João Paulo Cândia Veiga and Katiuscia Moreno Galhera (2016) examine the situation of Bolivian immigrant women working in the textile industry in São Paulo, highlighting the intricate dynamics related to gender, migration, precarious work, and inequality. The migration of Bolivian women to São Paulo, the sexual division of labor in the textile industry, and the role of kinship networks, as well as friendships in migration, contribute to the dynamics of domination analyzed. Among these, the gender hierarchy in the productive sphere stands out, where women often occupy lower-paid jobs. The precarious working conditions faced by Bolivian immigrants are evident, revealing a work environment marked by vulnerability and insecurity.

Among the main complaints of the interviewees in this research are exhausting work and labor overcrowding (Veiga; Galhera, 2016). Despite the significant precariousness, participants view work in Brazil as having "higher status and better conditions" compared to their experiences in Bolivia. Although they believe they have the same rights as Brazilians, expressing the value of "equality," they are still subjected to degrading work conditions.

The discrepancy between moral value and the daily experiences these groups are subjected to reflects the notion of "flexibilization of dignity." In contrast, there is a low perception among workers regarding the inadequacy of space and machinery in workshops, despite the high number of recorded labor accidents. Another contrasting difference between the environment and the assessment of the seamstresses is the low number of complaints about "general conditions," despite the poor and unhealthy conditions described in all reports resulting from inspections. The authors suggest further investigations into the privatization of workspaces in the sewing chain, focusing on the mobility of individuals and continuously monitoring working conditions (Veiga; Galhera, 2016).

Thus, Etzel (2019) adopts the perspective of Bolivian women and delves into the uniqueness of each narrative of enslaved immigrants in São Paulo. Consequently, she shifts the focus away from professional issues, emphasizing personal lives, including those before migration, and analyzes gender-social relations in sewing workshops. By concentrating on the sexual division of labor and labor conditions analogous to slavery, Etzel (2019) uses the narratives of the interviewees as a guiding thread to investigate gender inequalities, migration, and working conditions in São Paulo. Life history is the primary technique employed, addressing violence against women and dedication to children. The author also highlights that gender roles affect migrant men and women differently, with migration representing a break from traditions and a quest for autonomy.

The author aims to address both macro and micro perspectives, considering both the global context of productive reorganization and the daily aspects of the interviewees' lives. Regarding labor conditions analogous to slavery, she recognizes it as a political and legal construct. She emphasizes the individual agency of workers who, despite their disadvantaged positions, actively negotiate within unequal relationships. However, she argues that rescuing workers does not change the organization of the textile industry, indicating the need to address broader issues such as income distribution and employment (Etzel, 2019).

Immigrants with irregular status and women in lower-valued positions are vulnerable social groups and, therefore, central to the process of enslavement. Gender dynamics highlight the inequalities faced, especially by immigrant women in the textile industry. These inequalities range from occupying lower-paid jobs to working under precarious conditions, underscoring the need for a gender perspective in addressing the problem.

### **Accountability in the Supply Chain**

Another group of studies focuses on the accountability of the involved actors. André Junqueira Caetano and Bruna Fernanda Campos Alves (2022) assess the actions of the Brazilian business elite concerning the implementation of the "Dirty List." Compared to other sectors, such as construction, the business elite in the textile industry seems to have a better understanding of its responsibility in eradicating contemporary slavery. This is due to the perception that the economic activities of this sector expose the use of slave labor, affecting the companies' image and causing negative impacts on the financial market. This risk awareness leads to actions aimed at avoiding social and economic losses.

In this context, Caetano and Alves (2022) explore the actions of this elite regarding the implementation of the "Dirty List," aiming to understand this group's responses to the denunciation of contemporary slavery cases. They specifically focus on the narratives within the textile industry, particularly the Brazilian Cotton Producers Association (ABRAPA) and the Brazilian Textile Retail Association (ABVTEX). They describe the meanings attributed by the elites and their representatives in social interactions. The ABVTEX Program, established in 2010, is said to have created strict compliance standards, with voluntary monitoring of the production chain, to promote dignified work in the sector.

The agro-industrial and construction sectors' business elites do not recognize the importance of private sector participation in implementing public policies to combat contemporary slavery. On the contrary, they maintain close ties with political and bureaucratic elites, adopting a clientelist approach toward the state and obtaining benefits without contributing socially (Caetano; Alves, 2022).

Regarding harm to the community, Flora Oliveira da Costa and Luciana Paula Conforti (2018) reflect on the impact of companies' lack of knowledge about the United Nations Guiding Principles. They then focus on the case of Pernambucanas, one of Brazil's largest retail chains, condemned in 2014 for maintaining workers in conditions analogous to slavery. Key issues highlighted include: complete outsourcing of production; a history of weaving marked by degrading labor practices; and the contradiction between the company's legalistic rhetoric and the practice of perpetuating exploitative conditions. The problem extends beyond contractual non-compliance to include social damage, tax evasion, and failure to make social security contributions. Therefore, the authors call for the engagement of society as a whole in combating labor conditions analogous to slavery.

The case described by Costa and Conforti (2018) took place between 2010 and 2011 and led to judicial repercussions. In this case, 31 immigrants from Peru, Bolivia, and Paraguay, who were enslaved in illegal sewing workshops, were rescued from degrading working conditions. The workers' shifts exceeded 14 hours a day in environments lacking hygiene and safety, where they lived, and were not registered formally. At that time, the company received 41 notices of violation for environmental degradation, exhaustive working hours, and debt bondage. The Public Labor Ministry (MPT) notified the company to take corrective measures, but *Pernambucanas* refused to acknowledge its responsibility for the workers, claiming that it merely purchases the pieces from its suppliers. According to *Repórter Brasil*, *Pernambucanas*



was fined R\$2.5 million<sup>5</sup> for labor conditions analogous to slavery in the production of its clothing.

From the analysis of the Zara case, Camila Rodrigues Neves de Almeida Lima (2022) indicates that the exploitation and coercion of immigrant workers in the fashion sector persist, particularly due to the flexibilization brought about by labor reform and changes in outsourcing legislation. This situation is likely to worsen with potential setbacks in legislation. Outsourcing intensifies labor exploitation and complicates the legal identification of slave labor, maintaining its presence in the Brazilian textile sector.

Lima (2022) also advocates the concept of “collective awareness” as an alternative solution involving society as a group. Collective awareness refers to a group or society’s shared understanding of values and norms. In the mentioned context, it denotes the collective awareness of the importance of knowing the origin and production conditions of consumed products, including concerns about ethical practices such as the elimination of slave labor. This can influence behavioral changes, such as a preference for products from socially responsible companies. Lima (2022) discusses the social and legal ramifications resulting from the continued use of slave labor in the post-labor reform Brazilian fashion industry. She lists external and internal elements of slave labor that suggest socio-economic factors contribute to workers’ vulnerability, exacerbated by the specifics of the cases investigated. Thus, the author condemns the business quest for greater flexibilization leading to the precarization of labor relations and points out the vulnerability of victims, such as irregular immigrants, as a factor enabling exploitation.

Lima (2022) emphasizes the significant role of consumers in the fashion industry's dynamics, noting how their choices impact corporate practices. She reflects on the influence of political and legislative decisions on working conditions and regulations that encompass the fashion sector and the exploitation of slave labor. Despite social and legal recognition of these practices, their occurrence and the imposition of penalties on involved companies persist. The persistence of these cases reveals the complexity of the phenomenon and the need for more comprehensive approaches to combat it.

In this regard, Segatti *et al.* (2016) highlight the connection between slave labor exploitation and outsourcing. They stress the need to address this issue through measures that hold contracting companies accountable for abuses committed by their suppliers. However, they also point out the issue of working conditions analogous to slavery, linking it to the

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<sup>5</sup> In dollars it would be approximately: US\$443,592.746.

environment. According to the researchers, new technologies, globalized markets, and changes in capitalist production have led to transformations in society.

There is a tendency to accept flexibility in labor rights. Subject to the "quality control" imposed by the company, the service provided lacks autonomy. The ends of the production chain are referred to as the most vulnerable parts. Holding companies accountable requires concrete actions to combat slave labor. In this context, Segatti *et al.* (2016) suggest recognizing structural and integrative subordination. The former involves integrating the activity into the business dynamics, while the latter means that the work performed is part of the activities carried out by the employee, without the worker having their own company. Maintaining a safe working environment requires holding all layers of the production chain accountable, including end beneficiaries, and necessitates new legal theses. Beyond punitive measures, this requires a reassessment of business practices, considering the criminal responsibility of legal entities and political influence.

From a similar perspective, within the textile sector, Finelli and Silva (2018) analyzed the relationship between workplace accidents and contemporary slave labor. They assessed that there is a "flexibilization wave" imposed on workers in this field. According to the authors, this would lead to outsourcing, informality, and precarious conditions that characterize slave labor. In the pursuit of profit, to the detriment of human relations and dignity, exhaustive workdays and degrading conditions form the link between slavery and accidents.

**Chart 2 – Common Focuses in Selected Texts**

TOPIC	AUTORIA	COMMON APPROACHES
Vulnerability of social groups	Suzuki (2016), Veiga; Galhera (2016), Etzel (2019)	Bolivian immigrants and women are prone to exploitation due to unequal opportunities and precarious working conditions.
		Gender dynamics accentuate inequalities, especially for women in the textile industry.
		Vulnerability contributes to the perpetuation of slave labor, making it difficult to resist and seek help.
Outsourcing of production	Veiga; Galhera (2016), Lima (2022), Segatti <i>et al.</i> (2016); Finelli; Silva (2018)	Fragmentation of the production chain makes it difficult to monitor and hold workers accountable for working conditions.
		Outsourcing transfers the burden of poor working conditions to suppliers, perpetuating exploitation.
Flexibility of labor laws	Lima (2022), Costa; Conforti (2018)	Legislative changes, such as flexibilization, create conditions conducive to exploitation.
		Companies seek greater flexibility, resulting in precarious labor relations and the perpetuation of slave labor.

TOPIC	AUTORIA	COMMON APPROACHES
Accountability of stakeholders	Caetano; Alves (2022), Segatti <i>et al.</i> (2016), Lima (2022)	The business elite seeks to avoid social and economic losses by associating brands with slavery practices.
		Importance of criminal liability of legal entities and integration in the production chain.
Impact on living and working conditions	Silva (2022 a; 2022 b), Etzel (2019), Veiga; Galhera (2016)	Poor living and working conditions, exhausting workdays, dependence on hours worked for income.
		Contradictions between workers' perceptions and actual conditions, including the "flexibilization of dignity".
Gender dynamics	Veiga; Galhera (2016), Etzel (2019)	Gender hierarchy in the textile industry, women in lower-paid jobs.
		Inequalities faced by immigrant women, including overcrowding and exhausting work.
State intervention and legislation	Silva (2022 a), Lima (2022)	Limitations on state intervention due to the complexity of identifying exploitation disguised as legal compliance.
		Reflections on legislation, the impact of political decisions on working conditions and regulation in the textile industry.
Consumer awareness	Caetano; Alves (2022), Lima (2022)	Impact of consumer choices on company practices.
		Need for awareness to build an ethical industry and combat slave labor.

Source: Authors' elaboration (2023).

These studies reflect the growing concern in academic literature regarding the exploitation of slave labor in the fashion industry. They highlight the complexity of the phenomenon and point to the need for multidisciplinary and policy approaches to effectively combat it. The integration of gender perspectives, immigration issues, corporate responsibility, and social awareness emerges as essential aspects in understanding and addressing this problem.

### Final considerations

The analysis of literature on slave labor in the textile and fashion industry underscores the complexity of the phenomenon, correlating emerging themes and highlighting: i) the vulnerability of social groups, such as immigrants and women, who are prone to being subjected to slave labor due to the effects of unequal opportunities for decent work and greater exposure to exploitation; ii) the outsourcing of production, which fragments the production chain, complicates the monitoring of working conditions, and makes it more difficult to hold major actors in the chain accountable for exploitation; iii) the flexibilization of labor laws, which reduces workers' rights and creates conditions conducive to labor exploitation.

The proposed integrated approach, involving punitive actions, educational policies, and consumer awareness, aims to build an ethical industry and eradicate the inhumane practice of slave labor. The literature discusses the conditions that shape the dynamics of enslavement through geographical spaces within the city, where residences also function as factories, and characterizes the elements that reveal the problem. It presents the dynamics that render women and immigrants vulnerable, emphasizing their roles in these processes. However, none of the works delved deeply into analyzing the fashion industry with the specificities that anchor the phenomenon of contemporary slavery within the dynamics of this sector. Thus, the main limitation of this study relates to the consideration of the role of academic training in reducing contemporary slavery. Addressing this could enrich future research.

The issue of slave labor in the fashion industry, highlighted by the results of this analysis, underscores the urgent need for integrated and effective policies to address sustainability and corporate social responsibility, in line with the principles of the Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) agenda. By considering social vulnerability, corporate responsibility, and consumer awareness as key elements, governments, businesses, and civil society organizations must collaborate to drive meaningful change. With Brazil assuming the presidency of the G20, there is a crucial opportunity to lead the discussion and implementation of measures against slave labor in the fashion industry, both nationally and internationally. Ultimately, this requires an approach that involves all stakeholders.

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