

# Exploring Women's Participation, Gender Discrimination, and Sexual Harassment in the Mexican Video Game Industry

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In 2020, Mexico positioned itself as the Latin American leader in the video game market, with estimated revenues of USD 1.9 billion. Among the factors propelling Mexico's gaming market to the top that year were the mobility restrictions imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, causing a notable spike in game sales and frequency of use during the outbreak. By 2020, there were 73 million video gamers in Mexico, 43% of them women, while the population of Mexico was estimated at 127.79 million (Statista 2021). Game studios concentrate in big cities, such as Mexico City or Guadalajara, facilitating tacit knowledge exchange in an urban environment and access to potential industry providers, freelancers, and employees (Contreras-Espinosa, 2018), including women that typically contribute to content development and creation. The diversity of viewpoints and the value that women bring to a team are crucial to continuing to innovate and produce games that can meet the market demand (Luzardo et al. 2019). However, as in other parts of the world, women represent a low percentage of the employees in the industry, and many of them are subject to sexual harassment at work (Huntemann 2013). These attitudes are so deeply rooted in history that they have become normalized (Contreras-Espinosa, 2021), and despite some improvements, sexism is still frequent in the video game industry (LaLonde 2020). For example, in May 2019, 150 Riot Games employees walked out of the company over harassment lawsuits in the largest protest in the history of the video game industry. The walkout was followed by employees, or former employees, filing other lawsuits alleging gender discrimination and harassment (Holden et al. 2020). In June 2020, Ubisoft saw high-ranking employees resign from the company as accounts went public on Twitter and in mainstream media of sexual harassment, abuse, and other misconduct at the company being covered up and ignored (Jenson and de Castell 2021).

Unfortunately, there is no official census available for the number of women working in the video game industry in Mexico, nor is there an estimation of the number of women working in technology. According to the International Labour Organization (2018), more than half of Mexico's population engages in the informal economy, with women (58.8%) being more likely than men (50.1%) to hold informal jobs and carry out unpaid work. Additionally, the participation of women in the labor force continues to lag behind men's, is below the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development average (OECD 2019), and, despite a slight increase over the past 15 years, women's participation in the labor force in Mexico remains lower than other Latin American countries (Bolio et al. 2018). In 2019, women were paid 18.8% less than men, based on average full-time earnings, a figure slightly above the OECD average of 13.1% (OECD 2019).

Mexico counts since 2007 with the *Ley General de Acceso de las Mujeres a una Vida Libre de Violencia*, or General Law on Women's Access to a Life Free of Violence, with Chapter II dedicated to workplace violence, while Section 15 specifies the effects of workplace harassment. In 2008, the Prosecutor's Office specialized in Violence Against Women and Human Trafficking, or FEVIMTRA, *Fiscalía Especial para los Delitos de Violencia Contra las Mujeres y Trata de Personas*, was created. This law regulates the investigation and prosecution of federal crimes against women, including workplace violence. It is noteworthy that the protocols elaborated to attend these cases registered by the Government of the Republic of Mexico do not cover circumstances beyond a physical workspace and, thus, are not updated to the new remote and freelance work modalities, so they do not effectively cover the needs of many women in the video game industry. This situation leads many women to conform in order to adapt to the situation (Morales et al. 2011). For instance, in the face of workplace harassment, Andrea, 32 years old, a digital artist dedicated to indie developments, states: "it is something you have to deal with every day if you want to continue in the industry, even when it undermines your self-esteem". Ana, 22 years old, a content creator on Twitch, mentions regarding the harassment she has experienced and seen in the video game streaming field: "it is a difficult process, but you adapt because, unfortunately, you will always encounter this kind of people in video games".

This study explores the participation of women and the gender discrimination and sexual harassment they suffer in the Mexican video game industry and, in consequence, the impact on their job satisfaction. Lower job satisfaction could lead to more turnover among women in the industry and fewer women working in the industry overall, which could further perpetuate gender inequality (Lau 2019). Despite previous studies have been conducted on gender discrimination or sexual harassment at work and its effects in male-dominated spaces, little research has focused on the Mexican video game industry. O'Leary-Kelly et al. (2009) found that experienced sexual harassment was consistently correlated with lower job satisfaction. Women who experience gender discrimination within their workplace also have lower professional self-confidence (Settles et al. 2012), while subtle discrimination negatively affects job satisfaction (Jones et al. 2016). Still, the participation of women in the Mexican video game industry seems unexplored, and in previous works concerning the situation of

the industry, there is no mention of this topic, such as in Cervera and Quesnel (2015) or Wong (2021).

Based on the history and culture of the Mexican video game industry, the present study explores the following hypotheses:

- (H1) Women working in the Mexican video game industry will report experiences of gender discrimination and sexual harassment during the study.
- (H2) Women working in the Mexican video game industry will report more experiences of gender discrimination and sexual harassment during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic as compared to the previous period.
- (H3) Women working in the Mexican video game industry will report lower job satisfaction, consequently affecting their professional self-confidence.

This undergoing work is based on the study carried out by Lau (2019) and uses the Shortened Sexual Experience Questionnaire (SEQ-DoD-s) to measure gender discrimination and sexual harassment. This questionnaire was designed by Stark et al. (2002) and employs 16 questions to assess various forms of sexual harassment experienced by the participants. Job satisfaction is measured through the item “Overall, I am satisfied with my current job”; as used in previous studies such as Wanous et al. (1997).

Participants include women between the ages of 18 and 45, professionals in the Mexican video game industry, and performing full-time, part-time, and freelance jobs which currently represent their core source of income. Participants are recruited using a snowball technique by requesting their contribution through an anonymous survey link sent via email. Once identified, women who have suffered gender discrimination and sexual harassment during the last 12 months are contacted to interview them. So far, up to 40 professionals have responded to the survey, and 10 professionals have been interviewed (Table 1). The language used in the survey and interviews was Spanish. In order to preserve their identities, subject names are not real.

**Table 1. Interviewed subjects.**

<b>ID</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>City</b>	<b>Socio-economic level</b>
1	Ana	22	Cisgender woman	Mestizo	CDMX	C+
2	Sofia	27	Transsexual woman	Mestizo	CDMX	C
3	Mariana	36	Cisgender woman	Caucasian	CDMX	C+
4	Laura	33	Cisgender woman	Caucasian	CDMX	C
5	Andrea	32	Cisgender woman	Mestizo	Querétaro	C+

6	Carla	40	Cisgender woman	Mestizo	Playa del Carmen	C
7	Fernanda	18	Cisgender woman	Mestizo	Guadalajara	C+
8	Blanca	45	Cisgender woman	Mestizo	Guadalajara	C+
9	Paola	23	Cisgender woman	Mestizo	Guadalajara	C+
10	Frida	24	Cisgender woman	Mestizo	Guadalajara	C

According to the first results derived from the questionnaires and the interviews, it seems that women have experienced gender discrimination and, in some cases, sexual harassment at work in the Mexican video game industry. This situation appears to have worsened during the pandemic, and some participants report having their professional self-confidence affected. Women working in the Mexican video game industry report lower job satisfaction, consequently affecting their professional self-confidence.

Through the analysis of results and from an intersectional feminist perspective, it is possible to already observe a trend in the interviewee responses: these women count with a favorable socio-economic level as presumably compared to the majority of the Mexican population, which enabled them to become video game users at an early age and later immerse themselves in the industry. Moreover, all the women interviewed lived in cities, which is consistent with the technological reach available to urban areas as compared to the deficiencies present in the rural environments. Last, it is noteworthy that none of the women interviewed belongs to a race typically subject to exclusion in Mexico or ethnic minorities. It is, therefore, possible to conclude that all of the participants so far are systemically favored in terms of race and socio-economic class, which enabled them to integrate into such an exclusive sector as the video game industry in Mexico. In the light of this, discrimination and harassment are likely to be mainly related to gender and not to socio-economic or racial reasons.

Despite the law being clear, and considering these behaviors as punishable, there seems to be a general lack of industry leaders who advocate for a respectful work environment for women in the video game sector. If game studios counted on authority figures striving to establish clear behavioral guidelines, display impeccable behaviors, investigate harassment claims, and hold perpetrators accountable, these problems would decrease. Andersson and Pearson (1999) discussed the group effect and stated that the simple act of passively witnessing negative behaviors and not acting towards them could encourage these incidents, increasing the hostility level and becoming a core characteristic of the work environment.

A cultural change towards accountability and the proactive protection of women in the Mexican video game industry is necessary and would be beneficial for the sector. Miner-Rubino and Cortina (2004) state that tolerance regarding gender discrimination and sexual harassment can lead to negative consequences for the members of any given organization and ultimately affect the whole

industry, as ignoring the problem could develop into the normalization and spread of these behaviors and the rise in the subsequent public reactions such as protests and lawsuits. Codes of conduct should be used and enforced, and the authorities should provide help to affected women, for instance, through legal advice.

Mexico can and must work to achieve the levels of gender diversity prevailing in more developed countries. The country must move forward with increased dedication and transparency, ensure the sustained commitment of business leaders, and coordinate all relevant public- and private-sector agents so that newly implemented measures truly take hold and bring about progress.

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