



WORK AND TERRITORY: A TERRITORIAL ANALYSIS OF THE PREDOMINANCE OF THE FOOTWEAR INDUSTRY IN THE LABOR MARKET OF CANDELÁRIA (RS)

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Abstract: This article analyzes the predominance of the footwear industry in the labor market of Candelária, Rio Grande do Sul, from a territorial perspective. Qualitative in nature and derived from a master's thesis in Regional Development, the study was based on seven semi-structured interviews with workers active in the sector in 2025, organized into four axes: sociodemographic data, daily work relations, the production process, and support and care networks. The findings indicate that 81.5% of formal industrial jobs are concentrated in the footwear segment, demonstrating extreme productive specialization. The analyzed trajectories reveal that remaining in the industry stems from the scarcity of occupational alternatives within the territory, rather than from job satisfaction, rendering labor insertion a socially produced necessity. The study demonstrates the interplay between global dynamics and local specificities, in which tobacco farming and the footwear sector generate structural dependence and vulnerability. It is concluded that Candelária's labor market expresses contradictions of contemporary capitalism, simultaneously reproducing formal employment opportunities and forms of labor exploitation and precarization.

Keywords: Footwear industry; Labor market; Municipality of Candelária (RS); Territory.

TRABALHO E TERRITÓRIO: UMA ANÁLISE TERRITORIAL ACERCA DA PREDOMINÂNCIA DA INDÚSTRIA DE CALÇADOS NO MERCADO DE TRABALHO DE CANDELÁRIA (RS)

Resumo: O presente artigo analisa a predominância da indústria de calçados no mercado de trabalho de Candelária, no Rio Grande do Sul, sob uma perspectiva territorial. De natureza qualitativa e vinculado à dissertação de mestrado em Desenvolvimento Regional, o estudo baseou-se em sete entrevistas semiestruturadas com trabalhadores e trabalhadoras atuantes no setor em 2025, organizadas em quatro eixos: dados sociodemográficos, relações cotidianas de trabalho, processo produtivo e redes de suporte e cuidado. Os resultados apontam que 81,5% dos empregos industriais formais concentram-se no segmento calçadista, evidenciando extrema especialização produtiva. As trajetórias analisadas revelam que a permanência na indústria decorre da escassez de alternativas ocupacionais no território, e não de satisfação profissional, configurando a inserção como necessidade socialmente produzida. O estudo demonstra a articulação entre dinâmicas globais e peculiaridades locais, nas quais fumicultura e setor calçadista geram dependência estrutural e vulnerabilidade. Conclui-se que o mercado de trabalho de Candelária expressa contradições do capitalismo contemporâneo, reproduzindo simultaneamente postos formais de trabalho e formas de exploração e precarização.

Palavras-chave: Indústria de calçados; mercado de trabalho; município de Candelária (RS); território.

1 Introduction

This article addresses the relationship between labor and territory by analyzing the predominance of the footwear industry in the labor market of the municipality of Candelária, Rio Grande do Sul. The analyzed context reveals contradictions characteristic of contemporary capitalism, marked by the concentration of formal employment opportunities in a single productive

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sector and by working conditions that are frequently precarious. The research problem motivating this investigation stems from the tension between the economic centrality of the footwear sector for the municipality and the social reproduction conditions of the working-class families employed within it, shaping a scenario in which structural dependence on the industry coexists with low wages, high turnover rates, and limited prospects for social mobility.

The leather-footwear sector of Rio Grande do Sul has established itself as a national and international benchmark. Historically, it has undergone phases such as mechanization, territorial expansion, and international competitiveness. This process involved transformations including the flexibilization of production processes, the decentralization of manufacturing plants toward regions with lower labor costs, and the intensification of control over the workforce through Taylorist and Fordist methods. In Candelária, these dynamics have manifested through the installation of large manufacturing facilities from the mid-2010s onward, particularly Calçados Beira Rio, and the local population's structural dependence on the jobs generated by the sector. The central question guiding this study is: how does the predominance of the footwear industry in Candelária's labor market articulate with the territorial, economic, and social conditions that shape the labor trajectories of the municipality's workers?

The relevance of this study lies in the need to understand how the spatial organization of capitalism is reproduced at local scales, articulating global production dynamics with regional territorial specificities. In this regard, the research demonstrates that Candelária presents a unique configuration within the Rio Pardo Valley, where tobacco farming dominates the agricultural economy while the footwear industry concentrates urban formal employment. This combination creates a scenario of social vulnerability in which a large portion of the population economically depends on a sector characterized by often unfavorable working conditions. Understanding this reality contributes to academic debates on regional development, the geography of labor, and the sociology of work, while also providing support for local public policies that consider the territorial dimensions of labor issues.

In light of this problem, the general objective of this article is to analyze the predominance of the footwear industry in Candelária's labor market from a territorial perspective, understanding how this sectoral concentration articulates with the labor trajectories and social reproduction conditions of working families. Specifically, the study seeks to: (i) historically contextualize the consolidation of the footwear sector in Rio Grande do Sul and its territorial expansion into interior municipalities; (ii) describe the configuration of the formal labor market in Candelária with an emphasis on the footwear segment, analyzing its sectoral distribution and the sexual division of labor; (iii) understand labor trajectories and family strategies for entering and remaining in the industry based on workers' own narratives; and (iv) identify the capital-labor tensions expressed



in working conditions, organizational practices, and union mobilization within the territory.

Regarding the methodological approach, this research is qualitative, focusing on understanding subjective experiences and objective working conditions from the perspective of workers. For data collection, semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture the complexity of the labor trajectories and labor relations experienced in the municipality, combined with documentary analysis and secondary statistical data. This article is derived from research conducted for a Master's Thesis in Regional Development on organizational moral harassment based on the experiences of footwear industry workers in Candelária, a municipality in the Rio Pardo Valley, Rio Grande do Sul. For the specific purposes defined in the Master's Thesis from which this article originates, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with workers active in the footwear industry in Candelária in 2025. The interviews were organized around the following thematic axes: sociodemographic data; work experience and daily relations; production process and organizational conduct; and reactions, support networks, and care practices.

Data analysis followed hermeneutic interpretation procedures, treating participants' narratives as the primary source of information on territorial and labor dynamics. In addition to the interviews, secondary data from official sources were consulted, such as the Ministry of Labor and Employment (MTE/CAGED), the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), and sectoral reports from the Brazilian Footwear Industries Association (Abicalçados), enabling data triangulation and enriching the empirical framework. The structure of the article comprises four sections beyond this introduction: the first historically contextualizes the footwear sector in Rio Grande do Sul; the second analyzes Candelária's labor market and the predominance of the footwear sector; the third examines the labor trajectories of the interviewed workers; and the final considerations summarize the main findings and their implications for understanding the relationship between labor and territory.

This investigative framework allows for an understanding not only of the quantitative dimensions of the footwear industry's predominance, but also of the qualitative dimensions emerging from the concrete experiences of workers. Thus, the article contributes to the debate on labor and territory, highlighting how the capitalist organization of production intersects with local and regional specificities, simultaneously reproducing avenues for labor insertion and forms of social vulnerability and exploitation.

2 The Historical Context of the Footwear Sector in Rio Grande do Sul

The footwear sector of Rio Grande do Sul established itself as a national and international benchmark, notably due to its export capacity and the concentration of enterprises in the Sinos River Valley (Vale do Rio dos Sinos). It became both a symbol of the sector's international



insertion and a stage for social tensions arising from the precarization of working conditions. The cluster logic fostered inter-firm cooperation, technology diffusion, and productive modernization; however, it also reinforced practices of labor discipline and surveillance, leading to greater objectification of the labor process while diminishing workers' subjectivity and autonomy (Ruas, 1989, 1995). The industrialization process, nevertheless, "traveled a long path before actually achieving the status of an industrial sector" (Schneider, 1996, p. 307).

According to Schneider (1996, p. 307), the historical trajectory of the leather-footwear sector in Rio Grande do Sul can be divided into two main periods: the first, between 1890 and 1930, when leather and footwear crafts, still dispersed across small rural workshops, managed to establish themselves independently from other craft practices; and the second, between 1930 and 1970, marked by accelerated growth in sector-related activities, with a significant increase in the number of establishments and greater labor absorption per unit. During this second phase, the Sinos River Valley region, particularly the municipality of Novo Hamburgo, consolidated its position as the state's primary footwear manufacturing hub (Schneider, 1996).

The first period dates back to the arrival of the first German immigrants in Rio Grande do Sul in 1824 at the Real Feitoria do Linho Cânhamo, in what is now the municipality of São Leopoldo. They were brought by the imperial government under the mission of serving as "a blend of settler and soldier," capable of "colonizing the lands of the Serra and the Plateau, supplying food to the Province's urban population, and securing Portuguese territory across lands deemed 'unoccupied'" (Schneider, 1996, pp. 300-301).

From the outset, however, settlers combined agriculture with artisanal activities—such as leather tanning and the manufacture of rudimentary footwear—to secure their livelihoods. The social environment reinforced this dynamic, as communities were organized into dispersed rural settlements sustained by close kinship relations, neighborly solidarity, and religious life. Festivities such as the Kerb, celebrated to thank the patron saint for the harvest, served as moments to reaffirm Germanic cultural identity and strengthen community ties (Schneider, 1996). This cohesive sociability enabled "leather-footwear craftsmanship, despite being fragmented and practiced in small rural workshops," to "achieve autonomy relative to other forms of rural crafts" (Schneider, 1996, p. 307).

The second period relates to the "rapid growth of activities linked to leather-footwear craftsmanship" (Schneider, 1996, p. 307). Footwear production ceased to be merely a complementary activity to the colonial way of life and became one of the pillars of Rio Grande do Sul's economy, carrying profound social and cultural repercussions. Schneider (1996) underscores that the social and cultural background of the settlers during this period is critical to understanding the sector's expansion, highlighting the emergence of the "worker-settler" (*colono-operário*), who



divided labor power between agriculture and the factory floor.

This movement coincided with the expansion of the footwear sector, whose demand for labor grew substantially from 1968 onward, driven by entry into foreign markets through public incentive policies offering tax and credit subsidies amid the need for trade surpluses to manage external debt, thereby cementing the Sinos Valley as the core production center (Navarro, 2006; Schneider, 2004).

From the 1970s onward, the sector assumed full industrial characteristics, driven by the convergence of two macroeconomic factors. On the one hand, facing a realization crisis in sectors reliant on working-class consumption—such as textiles, apparel, and footwear—worsened by the erosion of the minimum wage's purchasing power, the Brazilian State took a decisive role in revitalizing industries and promoting manufactured exports. On the other hand, as a result of these policies, footwear factories gained significant market share in Global North capitalist economies, particularly the United States. This internationalization led the local leather-footwear industry to rapidly transform its technological foundation and productive structure, inaugurating a period of intense industrial growth.

Within this framework, rationalization methods for production and work organization were introduced. The adoption of Taylorism and Fordism raised productivity and expanded capital accumulation, while significantly expanding labor absorption, quickly depleting the available labor pool in the Sinos Valley (Navarro, 2006; Schneider, 1996).

Beginning in the 1980s, rising foreign demand led footwear manufacturers to adopt new recruitment strategies, shaping specific patterns of industrial development and labor regulation. Factories began flexibilizing production processes and decentralizing units toward peri-urban areas of the Encosta da Serra, Vale do Caí, and Vale do Taquari microregions, prioritizing wage employment for the children of settlers living nearby. This flexibilization involved increased subcontracting through workshops (ateliês) and the establishment of satellite units dedicated to specific stages of manufacturing. Contributing factors included the rapid uptake of Taylorist technologies, which attracted migrants seeking employment—spurring disordered urbanization—as well as the search for lower-cost, more easily disciplined rural labor, alongside efforts to circumvent growing unionization and strike activity in major urban centers. This territorial expansion into the interior was further supported by municipal incentives, such as tax breaks and infrastructure improvements (Schneider, 2004).

The outcomes of this decentralization strategy were directly tied to productivity gains. In rural communities characterized by rigid social values and strong moral cohesion, industries found favorable conditions for establishing satellite units, as worker turnover and absenteeism remained low. Consequently, even though wages in these units were equal to or often lower than those at



headquarters, higher worker attendance and commitment, combined with reduced expenditures on welfare and social benefits, offset investments and yielded higher profit margins (Schneider, 2004).

From the 1990s onward, however, the Brazilian footwear sector faced intense competitive pressures in the global market, particularly from China and Vietnam, which operated with substantially lower production costs. According to research by Achyles Barcelos da Costa and Cristiane Froehlich (2007), in 1990 Brazil "accounted for 9.2% of footwear pairs imported by the United States, declining to 4.7% in 2004; meanwhile, China represented 35.3% of U.S. imports in 1990, rising to 83.5% in 2004" (Costa & Froehlich, 2007, p. 5).

The authors also noted that Chinese workers faced shifts of 10 to 12 hours daily, with extremely low wages and virtually no social protections, creating an insurmountable cost advantage in price-sensitive segments. This context triggered a retraction in Brazilian exports and heightened external competition, undermining Brazil's status as a leading exporter (Costa & Froehlich, 2007). Export revenue, which had reached US\$ 1.8 billion in 1993, fell to approximately US\$ 1.2 billion in 1999 and fluctuated throughout the 2000s, influenced by currency appreciation and the 2008 global financial crisis (Roehrig et al., 2020).

Attracted by tax incentives and cheaper labor—frequently hired through cooperatives, manufacturers from Rio Grande do Sul shifted portions of their production to Brazil's Northeast (Zingano & Oliveira, 2014). Other factories decentralized production stages, accelerating outsourcing and the proliferation of small subcontracted workshops (*facções*). While this relocation and productive fragmentation reduced operating costs, preserving Brazil's position among the world's leading footwear manufacturers, it also contributed to the partial dismantling of the state's traditional footwear cluster and the fragmentation of local employment. This transition generated substantial social impacts, including rising turnover, weakened union organization, loss of labor rights, and workplace instability, thereby deepening informality and labor precarization (Rodrigues, 2021; Roehrig et al., 2020).

Subsequent years confirmed a shift from export markets to the domestic market. In 2011, Rio Grande do Sul produced approximately 185.9 million pairs of shoes, representing roughly 20% of national production and employing 78,700 formal workers. However, only 15% of that output was destined for foreign markets, underscoring the challenge of competing internationally against Asian footwear, predominantly Chinese, entering Brazil at significantly lower price points (Roehrig et al., 2020). Between 2017 and 2020, domestic market reliance deepened further, prompting firms to invest in product differentiation through design, proprietary branding, and line diversification (Roehrig et al., 2020).

In recent years, the sector underwent a period of post-pandemic recovery. By 2021, while



national manufacturing had not yet returned to pre-pandemic volumes, Rio Grande do Sul remained a leading productive hub, responsible for roughly 20% of Brazilian output. According to the Brazilian Footwear Industries Association (Abicalçados), the rebound was driven by external demand, particularly from the United States seeking alternatives to Asian supply chains, temporarily boosting Brazilian shipments (Abicalçados, 2022). In 2022, the sector posted more consistent expansion, with national production exceeding 820 million pairs, and Rio Grande do Sul retaining its role as the largest producer outside Asia. Foreign markets proved decisive once more, with exports growing between 8.4% and 10.2% compared to 2021, accompanied by employment gains of over 280,000 direct jobs nationwide, a substantial share of which remained in Rio Grande do Sul (Abicalçados, 2022).

The year 2023, however, saw a renewed slowdown. According to Abicalçados, the high baseline of 2022, paired with macroeconomic challenges across key consumer markets, produced contractions in both output and exports, directly impacting employment through job cuts and increased pressure on labor standards (Abicalçados, 2024). In 2024, national production rebounded, surpassing 2019 levels, with nearly 90% absorbed domestically. Although this recovery restored relative employment stability, it did not resolve underlying structural weaknesses, as working conditions remained constrained by external competition and informality within subcontracted tiers (Abicalçados, 2025).

This historical trajectory traces the evolution of the footwear sector in Rio Grande do Sul from the artisanal practices of German settlers to an integrated and competitive industrial complex shaped by mechanization, territorial expansion, and international integration. In doing so, it reflects the broader capitalist transformations and contradictions of industrial development: on one hand, the pursuit of efficiency and global competitiveness supported by modern organizational techniques and technology; on the other, the intensification of labor exploitation and control, reflected in precarized working conditions, heightened work paces, diminished worker autonomy, and localized social vulnerability. It is against this historical backdrop that the footwear industry in the municipality of Candelária is analyzed.

3 The Footwear Industry in Candelária's Labor Market

The municipality of Candelária is located in the Rio Pardo Valley region, whose history is marked by different processes of territorial occupation and reorganization: the extensive development of cattle ranching, the granting of land allotments (sesmarias), Azorean colonization based on small landholdings, and, from the second half of the 19th century onward, the arrival of German immigration (Hermann & Silveira, 2001). Thus, as observed in the Sinos River Valley region, the German immigrants who settled in the Rio Pardo Valley also brought agricultural



practices, technical knowledge, and modes of community organization that shaped the region.

Currently, the Rio Pardo Valley region holds strong economic and social relevance through the tobacco industry, especially in the municipality of Santa Cruz do Sul, which, in addition to being one of the main centers of national tobacco production, is also configured as a mid-sized city connecting its local and regional economy to global dynamics. In contrast, most of the region consists of small municipalities where formal jobs do not hold the same centrality, with agricultural occupations remaining predominant in the productive structure of tobacco and in the livelihoods of families (Cadoná & Freitas, 2024).

From the perspective of the labor market, this configuration produces a singular characteristic: seasonality. A significant portion of the workers employed in tobacco manufacturing works in temporary jobs, known as seasonal harvest workers (*safristas*), concentrated mainly in the first half of the year during the harvest peak. In the second half of the year, many of these workers face unemployment, competing for vacancies in other activities or waiting for the next harvest in the expectation of being rehired by the industries. This dynamic demonstrates both the region's dependence on the tobacco sector and the vulnerability of workers given the instability of formal employment (Cadoná & Freitas, 2024).

The municipality of Candelária is also part of this logic, to the extent that the municipal City Council recently approved Bill no. 008/2025, which "declares tobacco farming an activity of relevant economic, social, and cultural interest within the Municipality of Candelária" (Portal Arauto, 2025). However, since the second half of the 1990s, the processes of land concentration resulting from this regional economic dynamic linked to tobacco farming, which extracts surplus labor from family farming and holds a market monopoly while reducing other subsistence crops (Hermann & Silveira, 2001), have led most of the population to concentrate in the urban area of the municipality (Prefeitura Municipal de Candelária, 2011).

Currently, agriculture and livestock farming (which includes tobacco cultivation) ranks first in terms of contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the municipality (IBGE, 2022). However, this predominance also constitutes one of the markers of socioeconomic inequality in the municipality. While the per capita GDP in 2021 was R\$ 34,255.30, the average salary of formal workers corresponded to only two minimum wages, and approximately 31.5% of the population lived with a nominal monthly per capita income of up to half a minimum wage (IBGE, 2022). This reveals a discrepancy between aggregate economic performance and effectively distributed income, which is reflected in the living conditions of the population and, consequently, in the occupation of jobs marked by superexploitation, as is the case in the footwear industry.

As shown in the table below, formal jobs in industry account for 44.1% of all formal



employment in the municipality of Candelária, followed by commerce (27.1%) and services (24.8%) (MTE, 2025).

Table 01 – Formal employment in the municipality of Candelária (Jan. to Dec. 2025).

Formal Employment Sectors	Number	%
Agriculture and Livestock	102	1,9
Industry	2.326	44,1
Civil Construction	110	2,1
Commerce	1.432	27,1
Services	1.308	24,8
Total	5.278	100,0

Source: Ministry of Labor and Employment. New General Register of Employed and Unemployed Workers (CAGED), 2025. Data organized by the authors.

Another indicator that warrants attention reflects the gender division of labor in the municipality. With the exception of agriculture and civil construction, all other sectors, including industry, hire more women than men.

Table 02: Admissions by sector according to gender (Jan. to Dec. 2025)

Formal Employment Sectors	Mulheres	Homens
Agropecuária	4	34
Indústria	836	693
Construção Civil	5	55
Comércio	470	408
Serviços	327	313
Total	1.642	1.503

Source: Ministry of Labor and Employment. New General Register of Employed and Unemployed Workers (CAGED), 2025. Data organized by the authors.

A The footwear industry, in turn, has significant importance among jobs linked to industrial production in the municipality and, consequently, in the employability of women. To illustrate this importance, consider that in 2025, out of the 2,326 formal jobs linked to industry in the municipality, 1,894 (81.5%) were in the footwear segment (MTE, 2025). This relevance stems from the presence of nearly twenty footwear factories in the municipality, the most prominent being Calçados Beira Rio, which inaugurated its first production plant in Candelária in 2015 with approximately 500 workers at the time, as part of a corporate project aimed at making it the largest women's footwear company in Brazil (Candelária, 2025).

In 2022, Calçados Beira Rio benefited from Fundopem/RS through a tax incentive of R\$ 156 million granted by the State of Rio Grande do Sul, of which R\$ 64 million was allocated to the "opening of the second plant in Candelária, which projected 150 new direct jobs in addition to

another 1,680 indirect jobs through micro and small enterprises that make up the productive chain mobilized by Beira Rio in the region" through the transfer of certain production stages, such as stitching and assembly of footwear (Governo do Estado do Rio Grande do Sul, 2022).

In addition to using outsourced and fourth-party subcontracted labor through micro-enterprises, workshops, and other contracting arrangements, Calçados Beira Rio "[...] adopts Industry 4.0 concepts, with the upgrading and modernization of various types of systems that, invested in the company's processes and methodology, increase competitiveness" (Jornal do Comércio, 2022). This produces direct impacts on the worsening of working and living conditions of the working class due to increased unemployment and the instability resulting from new forms of organizing social labor relations (Queiróz et al., 2024).

In this sense, a characteristic that warrants attention is the high rate of volatility in formal employment in the municipality. In the cumulative data for 2025, the municipality of Candelária recorded 3,145 admissions and 3,279 separations (MTE, 2025), mostly in the footwear segment. This high level of volatility should therefore be regarded as a notable singularity, as it is related both to the global context of intensifying labor super exploitation and to the regional and local contexts of economic organization. The local territory was a conscious choice by the footwear industry, confirmed by the founder and president of Calçados Beira Rio, Roberto Argenta, who stated that the company is "guided by the principle of localivism [sic]" (Freitas, 2025).

However, while the sector provides jobs and stimulates the local economy, it also reproduces practices of labor precarization, workplace harassment, and intensified production rhythms. Restroom restrictions, exhausting shifts on one's feet, and unhealthy working environments have already been subject to complaints and union mobilizations, highlighting tensions between capital and labor (CNTRV, 2020).

Figure 01 – Mobilization of workers from the Beira Rio footwear industry in Candelária against workplace harassment and for the defense of rights.



Source: CNTRV, 2020.

In this context, Candelária's labor market reflects the contradictions of contemporary capitalism in articulation with the regional and territorial singularities that constitute the



municipality, among which agriculture and the tobacco industry stand out. Consequently, analyzing the predominance of the footwear industry in Candelária's labor market requires understanding the transformations in capitalist modes of production through a lens focused on territory.

4 Labor Trajectories and Entry into the Footwear Industry: A Perspective from Those Living in the Territory

The analysis of the labor trajectories of the interviewed workers allows for an understanding not only of individual pathways into the footwear industry, but also of the social, economic, and territorial determinants shaping workforce insertion patterns in the municipality of Candelária. Rather than strictly individual choices, the observed occupational trajectories reveal the influence of objective conditions of existence, opportunities available in the local labor market, and family strategies deployed to secure daily social reproduction.

The interviews show that entry into the footwear industry is linked to the characteristics of regional socioeconomic formation. In a context marked by limited economic diversification and the centrality of the footwear sector in generating formal employment, the factory emerges for many workers as one of the few concrete possibilities for labor insertion. In this sense, the analyzed trajectories express both movements between countryside and city and patterns of retention in a sector occupying a strategic position in the organization of the local labor market, reflecting the historical dynamics of industrial decentralization into the interior described by Schneider (2004).

At the same time, the accounts reveal that labor trajectories cannot be understood apart from family relations, caregiving responsibilities, and territorial mobility conditions. Proximity between home and workplace, the need to balance employment with family care, and the constraints imposed by the scarcity of occupational alternatives represent recurring dimensions in the experiences of the interviewees. From these aspects, it becomes possible to comprehend how the footwear industry not only absorbs available labor, but also takes part in organizing the social reproduction conditions of working-class families in the municipality, establishing an interdependence between the productive sphere and domestic life.

The relationship between territory and labor emerges persistently across the trajectories of the interviewees. The accounts indicate that entry into the footwear industry is frequently associated with spatial mobility, particularly between rural areas and the urban center. Rather than a simple migratory movement, such relocations express strategies developed by families facing the limits imposed by rural production and reproduction conditions, alongside the pursuit of formal labor market insertion.

The interviews demonstrate that rural-urban migration is driven by combined economic



and family factors. Across several accounts, remaining in rural areas is linked to low returns on agricultural labor, difficulties faced by family farming, and the scarcity of non-agricultural employment opportunities. As Hermann and Silveira (2001) point out, the expansion and monopoly of tobacco farming in the Rio Pardo Valley historically captured family farm surpluses and restricted subsistence agriculture, driving population concentration into urban areas. Under these circumstances, the city comes to represent not only a place of residence, but above all access to more stable income sources. In this context, employment in the footwear industry represents a concrete alternative for workers seeking subsistence amid rural constraints.

At the same time, the analyzed trajectories reveal that migration does not resolve the contradictions within the social reproduction process of working-class families. Although the city offers greater possibilities for formal employment, available opportunities remain concentrated in the footwear sector, narrowing occupational alternatives and fostering dependence on this productive branch. Some accounts even point to commuting patterns between countryside and city, as well as returns to rural areas following frustrating experiences in manufacturing. These arrangements directly mirror the historical figure of the "worker-settler" (colono-operário) discussed by Schneider (1996), in which labor power is divided between agricultural work and factory shifts. This oscillation also connects with the marked seasonality of regional tobacco farming, where unstable cycles between harvest and off-season push the working population toward precarious industrial jobs (Cadoná & Freitas, 2024). Such elements suggest that migration should not be understood as a linear progression toward better living standards, but as part of survival strategies devised within a territory marked by limited economic diversification:

[e left the countryside] because of the difficulty of living there and because my grandparents were already elderly. I lived with them my entire life, so they were no longer able to work in the fields, so we decided to move to town. They came along. [...]. A lot of people come from the countryside to the shoe factories, you see, and work double shifts. Some still work on weekends harvesting or planting tobacco and work at shoe factory Y. I know a lot of people who do that. I know people who worked for months, a year or two, and thought: "Oh, it must be easier to work in the city"; "Let's leave the fields and live in town," but they could not stay long at all, no, and went back to the countryside, because working in the countryside is hard. [...]. Seasonal work pays little, very little, which is why people look in the city for what they think does not exist in the countryside, and then they often end up going back, because they find factory work harder. It is a matter of wages and treatment, but mostly wages. So people can often make more in the countryside than in the factory (Interview 6, 2025).

This account illustrates that movements between countryside and city stem not solely from job searches, but also from shifts in the reproductive conditions of rural households, such as the aging or loss of relatives holding agricultural know-how. Furthermore, it reveals that industrial insertion does not always match expectations of improved living standards, producing trajectories marked by departures, returns, and stays conditioned by the opportunities actually available across the territory.



As noted, the analyzed labor trajectories underscore the central role of the footwear industry within Candelária's labor market. In a setting characterized by limited productive diversification and a narrow supply of formal jobs in other branches, footwear enterprises play a decisive part in absorbing the local labor force. This centrality is visible both in the large share of workers who have passed through the sector across their working lives and in the capacity of factories to continuously incorporate new labor cohorts.

The interviews indicate that entry into the industry frequently occurs without requirements for prior experience or specialized training, widening recruitment reach and turning manufacturing into an accessible option across diverse population segments. This dynamic reflects the Taylorist and Fordist work organization entrenched in the footwear sector, grounded in task fragmentation and simplification (Navarro, 2006; Ruas, 1989), which facilitates the rapid absorption of young and rural-origin workers. This corroborates Schneider's (2004) thesis regarding the objectives of industrial relocation into the interior: capital's search for an abundant, low-cost labor supply easily disciplined by factory norms. At the same time, easy entry does not necessarily translate into better working conditions or upward professional mobility. On the contrary, the interviews suggest that sector predominance is linked to a lack of occupational alternatives, leading many workers to remain in factories not out of identification with the activity, but out of the need to secure income and basic stability for themselves and their households:

[...] I started working there when I was 15. So she [the mother, who also worked at the company] spoke for me, right? Because I did not know what to do, I didn't know anything (Interview 1, 2025).

[...] recently there were 13 buses from other towns. So 13 buses... almost 800 people. [...] Now, if you walk down the street, me being there for seven years, I walk down the street and everyone calls me coworker, right? It is rare to find someone who hasn't worked at the shoe factory. [...] So you stay there until you find something better. Unfortunately, that is how it is. Moving somewhere else, or because you have small children and need to stay in town (Interview 4, 2025).

[...] I think I was a teenager or so, I was in high school. And then high school ended, right? That usual thing: time to start working. Then my father wanted me to go work with him [at the shoe factory], right? So I went, I was 17. I started. The [shoe factory] still takes minors today, right? I started at 17 at the [shoe factory]... back then we [the parents] had moved there and lived there for a while. [...] (Interview 7, 2025).

The centrality of the footwear industry in the local labor market generates effects extending beyond the strictly economic realm. By concentrating a major share of formal employment opportunities in the municipality, the sector comes to shape family strategies, occupational paths, and concrete mobility prospects for the working population. In this sense, footwear predominance reflects not only local economic importance, but also structural family dependence on a sector characterized by low wages, high turnover, and limited upward mobility. These traits have defined recent restructuring and fragmentation within Rio Grande do Sul's footwear labor market



(Rodrigues, 2021; Roehrig et al., 2020), rendering continued factory employment, in most instances, a socially produced necessity.

The interviews also show that labor trajectories in the footwear industry are heavily shaped by family ties and care responsibilities. Far from reflecting purely individual choices, decisions regarding entering, remaining in, or leaving a job are bound to household organization needs, the presence of children, the distribution of care tasks, and real possibilities for reconciling paid work with domestic life. This dimension becomes even more salient given the gender profile observed in Candelária, where manufacturing primarily absorbs female labor (MTE, 2025), superimposing assembly line demands onto unpaid reproductive duties.

Within this framework, the family functions simultaneously as a source of support and a source of constraint on labor trajectories. In multiple accounts, residential proximity to the workplace is valued not only for reducing commute times, but for enabling workers to balance factory schedules with household duties. Likewise, the presence of several family members working in the industry shows how sectoral insertion often operates as a collective household strategy to secure income and navigate economic hardship, weaving kinship networks into factory life, as highlighted in studies on industrial communities in Rio Grande do Sul (Schneider, 1996, 2004). Workforce reproduction therefore occurs not merely within factory walls, but inside households through arrangements that sustain workers' continued presence in the sector:

I stayed for 5 years and 7 months at company X, you know? It was good for me there because my daughter was still small and I lived close by, so during lunch break I could go home, do my chores, take her to school, and head back to work, right? In the late afternoon, pick her up, so my schedule worked out (Interview 3, 2025).

Yes, it was me [who chose the night shift]. To stay with the little one [...]. My husband is a truck driver, right? [...] So I chose it to stay with the little one during the day (Interview 5, 2025).

These accounts illustrate that remaining in the footwear industry cannot be interpreted solely through company conditions or local labor market characteristics. It is equally tied to family strategies organized around daily social reproduction. Proximity between home and workplace, child-rearing demands, domestic division of labor, and financial reliance on factory earnings are decisive factors in employment choices. In this sense, the family plays an ambiguous role: while providing material and emotional backing to endure industrial labor pressures, it can also reinforce workers' retention in low-wage, precarious positions, as household income stability relies directly on sustaining those employment ties.

The experiences shared by the interviewed workers further disclose a consistent feature: retention in the footwear industry is frequently marked by a contradiction between economic necessity and the desire to leave the sector. While manufacturing provides a vital source of income



and relative stability within an undiversified local labor market, testimonies indicate that many workers do not envision a long-term future in the industry, remaining only until they can secure preferable alternatives.

This contradictory retention is linked both to concrete shop-floor conditions and to structural constraints in the territory. Low pay, limited promotional paths, and perceived devaluation of labor recur across statements. Complaints about work intensification, bodily surveillance, and institutional neglect of occupational illnesses reflect the daily disciplinary mechanisms of the footwear regime (Ruas, 1989), intensified by recent technological shifts that heighten output pressures on the working class (Queiróz et al., 2024), alongside documented complaints of harassment and physical restrictions on factory floors in the municipality (CNTRV, 2020). However, the scarcity of alternative employment options repeatedly defers exits from the sector. The footwear industry thus occupies a paradoxical place: it is regarded simultaneously as an indispensable income source and as an environment from which many workers wish to break away:

I got used to [the environment]. Like I told you, I like my coworkers, I got used to it. But I don't like this thing where... when someone is sick, someone is unwell, they don't... they don't give you medical leave. And they say... no, there isn't... Yeah, but then you go to the public health clinic (SUS) and you lose pay, you lose your food basket, you lose everything [...]. They don't provide a doctor, [they say] there is no doctor at the plant, they don't want one, right? [When asked, she stated that she feels sad when she experiences pain and the company does nothing] (Interview 2, 2025).

[...] I stayed a week and said: I will never work in a shoe factory again. Then I came here and ended up staying. That's life, right? [...] trying to leave for two years now, right? For two years I've been struggling to leave [...]. So you stay there until you get something better. Unfortunately, that's what it is (Interview 4, 2025).

[...] the pay is quite low, right? And since I didn't study further to build a career, right? To enter another field... So this is what was left for me for now (Interview 3, 2025).

These testimonies clarify that workers' retention in the footwear industry cannot be viewed merely as an outcome of personal choices or occupational preferences. It reflects, above all, the structural limits circumscribing viable alternatives for the working population in settings where employment opportunities are concentrated in very few sectors. As Rodrigues (2021) and Roehrig et al. (2020) emphasize, capital pressures on the leather-footwear industry tend to transfer instability onto workers through turnover, wage suppression, and precarization. In this light, the apparent job stability observed among some interviewees does not imply satisfaction with factory labor, but rather forms of adaptation to local labor market constraints. Retention therefore functions as a socially structured survival strategy, demonstrating how dependence on the footwear sector is reproduced not only through job generation, but also through the acute shortage of opportunities beyond it.



5 Final Considerations

This article aimed to analyze the predominance of the footwear industry in Candelária's labor market from a territorial perspective, examining how sectoral concentration articulates with the labor trajectories and social reproduction conditions of working-class families. Through the combination of quantitative formal labor market data and qualitative narratives from workers, the study concludes that the municipality experiences structural dependence on the footwear sector, creating a reality in which labor insertion becomes less of an occupational choice and more of a socially produced necessity.

The findings show that 81.5% of formal industrial jobs in the municipality are concentrated in the footwear segment, reflecting an extreme productive specialization that shapes the opportunities available to the working population. This concentration aligns with historical dynamics of territorial expansion across Rio Grande do Sul, where manufacturers since the 1980s adopted decentralization strategies toward regions with lower labor costs, leveraging local tax incentives and seeking workers who were more easily disciplined in rural and peri-urban environments. Within this context, Candelária forms part of the interiorization process of footwear enterprises in the state, currently led by Calçados Beira Rio S.A.

The analysis of labor trajectories revealed that retention in the footwear industry does not stem from occupational satisfaction, but from the scarcity of alternatives across the territory. Workers' testimonies show a contradictory relationship between economic necessity and the desire to leave the sector, demonstrating that dependence on the footwear industry is sustained not only by the availability of factory jobs, but also by the lack of viable options outside of it. This contradiction produces a setting in which workers remain in precarious working conditions characterized by low pay, high turnover, and limited paths for professional growth and social mobility.

The territorial dimension serves as a central pillar for understanding these dynamics. Proximity between home and workplace, the need to balance employment with family care, and constraints stemming from limited occupational choices represent recurring elements in the experiences of the interviewees. The family assumes an ambiguous role: while offering material and emotional support to withstand the demands of industrial labor, it can also reinforce workers' retention in precarious employment, given that household income stability depends directly on the continuity of these job ties.

Furthermore, the data show that 44.1% of formal employment in the municipality is concentrated in industry, with women hired in greater numbers than men across most sectors, including footwear manufacturing. This demonstrates that the sector drives local female employability while simultaneously reproducing gender inequalities through concentration in



lower-paying roles subject to intensified production tempos. The volatility of formal employment, evidenced by more job terminations than hires in 2025, underscores the structural instability of the municipal labor market.

Tensions between capital and labor surface directly in shop-floor conditions and union organizing, marked by formal complaints regarding restroom restrictions, exhausting shifts on one's feet, and unhealthy working environments. Such practices reflect intensified control over the labor force and the erosion of social reproduction conditions for working families. The implementation of Industry 4.0 principles, combined with heavy reliance on third-party and fourth-party subcontracting, compounds these effects by increasing unemployment and instability generated by restructured labor relations.

From this perspective, the study contributes to the literature on labor and territory by showing how the capitalist organization of production intersects with local and regional specificities, generating formal employment opportunities alongside structural vulnerability and exploitation. The analysis sheds light on the contradictions of local economic development, demonstrating how reliance on a single productive branch restricts real choices for working families and conditions everyday survival strategies.

Regarding study limitations, the sample of seven interviews, while sufficient for in-depth qualitative analysis, does not support statistical generalization across the municipality's entire workforce. Future research could expand the number of participants and incorporate comparative analyses with neighboring municipalities that present different economic configurations. Additionally, longitudinal studies could track labor trajectories over extended periods, capturing shifts in working conditions and household reproductive strategies.

Finally, this article provides analytical support for discussions on more sustainable and equitable productive models within the studied territory. Local public policies that address the territorial dimensions of employment, foster economic diversification, and reinforce trade union organization can help alleviate structural dependence on the footwear industry and improve living standards for the local working population.

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