

**WAGE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SHOP ASSISTANTS IN BARCELONA
(1920- 1930): A GENDER DISCRIMINATION?**

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Abstract

With this paper, we want to show the situation of wage discrimination in women in a sector at a specific time and in a particular institution in the commercial assistance of Barcelona between 1920 and 1930, and we will do so by using documents issued by an institution, the *Comisión Mixta del Trabajo en el Comercio de Barcelona* (hereinafter the Joint Committee or *Comisión Mixta*).

By examining these documents, we will check whether such wage discrimination existed in the early-20s. We will examine the opinions of the components of the *Comisión Mixta* and see what arguments were used to justify such discrimination.

Nevertheless, thanks to these documents we will see how the debate on the injustice of wage discrimination emerged and how, finally, some members of the *Comisión Mixta* chose to denounce it. Even so, such discrimination still appeared in recent documents reviewed by the *Comisión Mixta* in the late 20s, particularly in the determination of minimum wages in commerce. It should also be considered that the recommendations of the ILO advocated setting the principle of equal pay, as enshrined in the section on labour rights of the 1919 Versailles Treaty.

With this, we want to show how fighting against gender pay discrimination was not effective or efficient in the trade sector in Barcelona between the years 1920 and 1930. In fact, it was minor. This will help us better interpret the situation of women's work in post-World War I Barcelona and its trade.

Palabras clave: Comisión Mixta del Trabajo en el Comercio de Barcelona, salarios, mujer

Key words: Joint Committee on Work in Trade in Barcelona, salaries, women.

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1. Introduction.

In March 1903, the Autonomous Shop Assistant Centre for Trade and Industry (*‘Centro Autonomista de Dependientes del Comercio y de la Industria’*, CADCI) was established, mainly because in commercial activity Barcelona had constant conflicts between employers and employees, between employers and shops assistants. The demand for a living wage and a minimum wage was constant.

In its first meeting in April 1913, members of CADCI discussed, among other issues, the need for a minimum wage, and the work of women in the trade area¹. However, both employers and the government refused to set a minimum wage in the area of trade, as this diminished their possibility to negotiate downward the wages of a great mass of working-class Barcelona.

To resolve these controversies, from 1918 contacts between trade and business associations of assistants started to take place². Proof of this was the Circular that on March 12th, 1919 CADCI sent to the voters of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Barcelona, proposing an increase in the wages of 'desk clerks, banking, wholesale and retail' from the wages they had in 1917, without differentiating by gender. It is worth noting that the CADCI also requested in the Circular the establishment *'with peremptory urgency of a mixed commission or tribunal of employers and assistants, which would:*

- *Handle all cases of doubt or disagreement on work issues that arise between employers and assistants, pronouncing rulings that must be complied with by all.*
- *Examine and rule on the different social points which concern working conditions, such as schedule, contracts, salaries, insurance for old age, etc. starting immediately for the preparation of a minimum wage rate and regulate the admission and conditions of assistants and unpaid trainees'.*

The Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Barcelona, in a communication of March 13th, 1919, asked its members to accept the recommended wage increases proposed by the CADCI; and it accepted that to solve potential conflicts in the application, if any, of such increases, they would form *'6 joint committees (comisiones mixtas) of conciliation,*

¹ ESPUNY TOMÀS, M.J. “Una reivindicación de la dependencia mercantil catalana: la campaña del cierre a las ocho”, *Iuslabor*, n° 2/2015, p. 7.

² ESPUNY TOMÀS, M.J.; GARCÍA GONZÁLEZ, G.; PAZ TORRES, O.: *Los obreros del comercio Un análisis histórico-jurídico de la dependencia mercantil catalana*; Madrid, Dykinson, 2011a, p. 117.

*composed of employers and likewise assistants in correlative number and groups that have been considered for this joint effect. These commissions will be chosen by the organized representations of the employers and those of assistants, and after study and deliberation, they will adopt in each case the solutions they deem most balanced”.*³

We could say that it was through this exchange and acceptance of proposals that what was later called the Joint Committee on Labour in Barcelona Trade emerged.

Since this was the mechanism by which employers and assistants would settle their wage disputes, we believe that it is necessary to examine conflicts and solutions adopted in the Joint Commission, to know whether or not, within the Barcelona trade of the 1920s and 1930s, there was an awareness of wage equality among assistants.

It is worth understanding why we intend to examine trade and not any other sector. The decision to choose trade comes from the division that CADCI and the Chamber of Commerce make: desk, banking, wholesale and retail. From this, we believe that trade (thus understood) was surely 'the sector of activity where both genders were working in similar proportions. The number of men and women who could work in trade was, if not equal to 50%, probably very close.

In fact, for REVENTÓS⁴, the mass participation of women in office work and trading desks is '*so important in volume, that it has to be of concern to those interested in social events as well as those in charge of elaborating legal rules for working life, as specialized problems will arise from this fact*'. For the author, most female jobs in trade were selling wholesale or retail, especially grocery, clothing and haberdashery; but also office jobs, as women's work here is effective, since it needs '*a sense of order, a constant application and a determined capacity: conditions that are fulfilled normally by the female employee*'.

We therefore believe that the display of wage discrimination would be more evident and, thus, the demand for pay equity would have begun in the trade sector before other sectors (e.g. construction), in which female work (and therefore salary discrimination) was not so present.

³ Monthly magazine '*La Industria Española*', No. 24, 1919, pp. 56 and 57.

⁴ REVENTÓS, M.: "Del treball de les dones en despatxos i escriptoris", *Anales de la Comisión Mixta del Trabajo en el Comercio de Barcelona*, 1922, p. 279.

2. The Joint Committee on Work in Trade in Barcelona.

On March 22nd, 1920 in Barcelona the most important social entities in trade gathered: the Chamber of Commerce, National Development for Work (*Fomento del Trabajo Nacional*), the Industrial Defence League (*Liga de Defensa Industrial*), the Association of Commercial Store Clerks (*Asociación de la Dependencia Mercantil*), the Autonomous Centre for Trade and Industry, the Professional Union of Employees and assistants of trade, the Centre of Representatives and travellers of trade and industry, the Association of trade travellers and the Ironmongery Association of Barcelona.

In that meeting, it was agreed to request the Spanish Government to create a body and rules to allow the *'harmonious solution of the differences that can arise between employers and assistants who are members of the business activities, before they escalate into conflicts'*.

This request included the wish that any work conflict would be solved through agreements before reaching the courts as a means of conflict resolution. It offers a harmonious vision of conflict settlement: the solution must come from rational agreement between the parties, rather than the unilateral decision of a third party (be it a judge or arbitrator).

This premise of the harmonious agreement belongs to the theory of the German philosopher Karl Krause, popular in Spain since the end of the 19th century⁵, which impregnated all Spanish social legislation.

In addition, this premise led to the creation of the Joint Commission, in a Royal Decree of April 24th, 1920 (Gaceta de Madrid, No. 116, of April 15th). This entity was formed by four joint committees (*comités paritarios*), which corresponded almost exactly to the division of trade proposed by the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona: banking, transport, wholesale and retail sale (art. 1) and, from October 19th, 1921, also grocery sale, separate from retail⁶ (Royal Order of October 18th, 1921, Gaceta de Madrid, No. 292); and later the banking sector was split off⁷.

⁵ PERFECTO, M.A.; "El corporativismo en España: desde los orígenes a la década de 1930", *Pasado y Memoria. Revista de Historia Contemporánea*, nº 5, 2006, p. 198.

⁶ In a Royal Decree of September 6th, 1924 (Gaceta de Madrid, No. 251, of September 7th), we proceeded to segregate the 5th (retail) and 6th (grocery) sectors from the scope of the Joint Commission, and the Regional Labour Delegation in Catalonia proceeded to create the Joint Commission of work in retail in Barcelona. It is very interesting that the trade sector did not agree on the separation, as there were entrepreneurs who were in both wholesale and retail: see also *Anales de la Comisión Mixta*, 1924, pp. 462 and 463, on the protest that the Professional Union of Commercial Employees and Assistants held regarding interventionism by the State embodied in such segregation, not agreed upon by the actors in the

In order to harmonize and unify the decisions and actions of the 4 joint committees, the same Joint Commission was created, which consisted of 3 representatives of employers and 3 of the assistants in each of the four committees, chosen by them. A judge of the Court of Barcelona chaired that Joint Commission, and it also had the positions of Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer and Counter, distributing these duties equally between employers and assistants.

Each joint committee had an equal number of representatives of employers and assistants. However, the number of such representatives was proportional to the number of assistants in each sector, and therefore it could easily not match the number of representatives of each joint committee. Even so, the number of representatives of employers and assistants on each joint committee could not be fewer than 12 or more than 40. Each committee elected a President and a Vice President, a Secretary and a Deputy Secretary; the positions of President and Secretary had to lie with employers or workers, alternatively, because either employers or workers could not hold both positions at the same time.

The term of office on the Joint Commission and the joint committees was of 4 years and half the members were renewed every two years.

Regarding the functions of the joint committees, it is essential to note what Article 4 of the Royal Decree of April 24th, 1920 says:

“[...] The joint committees have conciliatory functions, and all general agreements they take for the group they represent relating to wages, hours and labour regulations, shall be subject to approval by the Joint Commission, without which they cannot be enforced. Also, they will bring to the Joint Committee, duly informed, all issues that they have not managed to solve [...].”

First, it should be noted, as already mentioned, that the joint committees are part of a harmonious 'tradition', where employers and workers would ideally resolve their disputes through 'mediation', through negotiation between the parties without a third party deciding on the solution to the conflict.

sector. Similarly, this entity confirms its criticism in the journal *Anales de la Comisión Mixta* of 1925, p. 91.

⁷ ESPUNY TOMÀS, M. J.; PAZ TORRES, O.; *Esquemas de historia del derecho social y de las instituciones laborales*; Valencia, Tirant lo Blanch, 2011, p. 151.

This was not a novelty in Spanish legislation, which intended to provide solutions for the 'social question'. This harmonious vision was already explained in the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act, of May 19th, 1908 (Gaceta de Madrid, No. 141 of May 20th). This rule created the Conciliation Boards, made up of three representatives of employers, three workers and the Chairman of the Local Board of Social Reforms (*Junta Local de Reformas Sociales*), aimed at forcing workers and employers to avoid, respectively, a strike or lockout. As we see, the trend/belief in the value of mediation or negotiation between employers and employees is a constant as a mechanism for dispute resolution in the field of the Spanish 'social question'.

The joint committees of the Joint Commission met at least twice a month, always after working hours. In addition, they required an absolute majority to adopt resolutions on first call, and a simple majority on the second call.

The Joint Commission, which met every month after working hours, was responsible for solving the matters referred by the joint committees, it set minimum wages in each business field and, also, ensured compliance with social legislation. Failure to comply with the resolutions adopted by the Joint Commission could lead to the imposition of financial penalties for non-compliant parties.

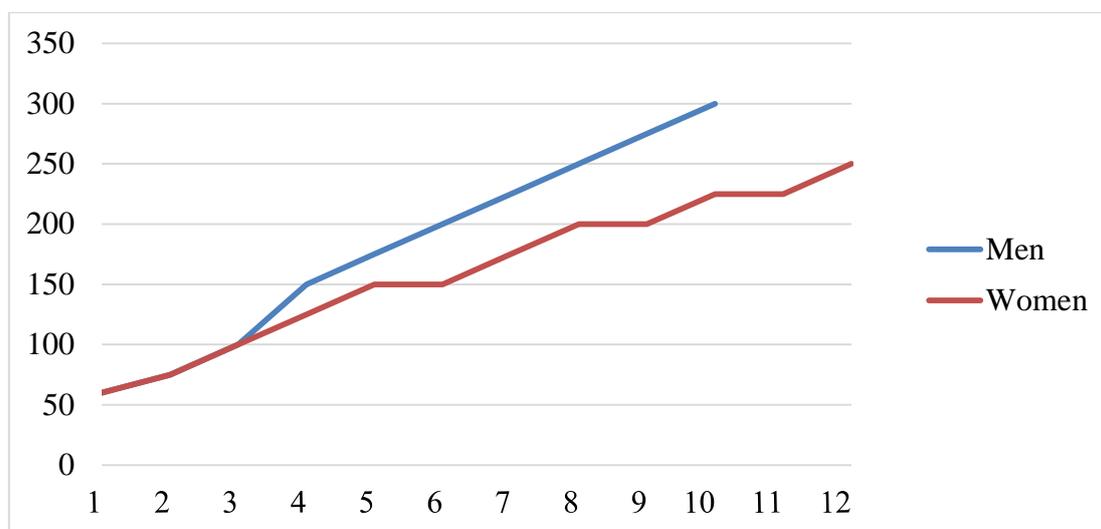
2.1. Wage agreements of the Joint Committee and proposed wage increases of CADCI.

The Joint Committee soon began to fix minimum wages for the employees of the respective branches of trade. Thus, in an agreement of October 1st, 1920, the following wages were set:

	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>
	Minimum monthly salary for assistants in banks, transport, wholesale and retail, confectionery and tailors	Minimum monthly salary for assistants in banks, transport, wholesale and retail
Years worked	<i>Pesetas</i> monthly	<i>Pesetas</i> monthly
1	60	60
2	75	75
3	100	100
4	150	125

5	175	150
6	200	150
7	225	175
8	250	200
9	275	200
10	300	225
11		225
12		250

The wage discrimination at the beginning of the work of the Joint Commission seems obvious. The same Joint Commission did not foresee the negativity of wage discrimination. Surely, a chart is much more enlightening to see such discrimination, where the pink line is the male wage and the brown line is the female wage:



After about three years, in around March 1923, the CADCI proposed a salary increase for trade assistants in Barcelona⁸. According to the CADCI, minimum wages in 1920 were respected in almost all businesses and shops. However, such salaries were not sufficient to meet the cost of living in 1923, mainly due to economic, inflationary and monetary collapse that the post-world war period brought to Spain⁹.

⁸ Journal *Acció*, No. 166, March 1923.

⁹ GARCÍA RUIZ, J.L.; “La inflación en la España del siglo XX: teorías y hechos”, *Boletín Económico de ICE*, nº 2667, del 16 al 22 de octubre de 2000, p. 25.

Furthermore, practice demonstrated that for the vast majority of employers, the minimum wage was, in fact, the '*maximum wage*' and, once the maximum of the salary scale was reached, the salary was frozen, without there being any possibility of a wage increase, outside the goodwill of the employer.

It is important to consider the proposed salary improvement by the CADCI in 1923:

<i>Increase for male assistants</i>		<i>Increase for female assistants</i>	
Years worked	Monthly increase in pesetas	Years worked	Monthly increase in pesetas
from 3 to 5	25	from 3 to 5	25
from 5 to 8	50	from 5 to 8	50
from 8 to 12	75	from 8 to 12	75
from 12 to 16	100	from 12 to 16	100
from 16 to 20	125	from 16 to 20	125
more than 20	150	more than 20	150

For CADCI, the wage increase was identical in both sexes and proportional. It did not, however, consider the wage discrimination agreements of the Joint Commission, in 1920. Therefore, in fact, this wage improvement by CADCI, although identical and proportional, still perpetuated the previous wage discrimination.

As is known, in late 1923 General Primo de Rivera closed the CADCI (it appeared in the newspaper ABC, October 17th, 1923), and arrested and prosecuted many of its leaders (ABC, December 20th and 30th, 1923¹⁰).

In March 1924, the journal *Anales de la Comisión Mixta* published the minimum wages of the employees of all sectors of the Commission. Those for assistants (male and female) were the same as those of 1920, which we discussed in the preceding paragraphs.

2.2. The perception of wage discrimination in the opinion of the members of the Joint Commission and its chronological development.

¹⁰ DEL RÍO SANTOS, S.: *Corporativismo y relaciones laborales en Cataluña. Una aproximación desde la prensa obrera*; Bellaterra, Servei de Publicacions de la UAB, 2000, p. 26.

It is worth asking what the Joint Commission's position was in relation to gender wage discrimination.

Regarding wage discrimination, REVENTÓS¹¹ wondered in the magazine published by the Joint Commission, *'whether the presence of women on desks means for men lower competition with a lower price? If not, does the phenomenon represent harm for the social body?'* The questions the author raised show the sensitivity that existed, at the time, regarding the gender wage gap: it is only thought of in terms of negative competition for men, or even for the rest of society. The answer REVENTÓS gave was that the savings for the employer were not the only reason for the increase in women's work: there was also a *'greater flexibility, submission and attention in certain tasks that belong to females, [...] tasks where the main characteristic is loyalty, patience and execution'*.

He thus understands that women's work is not in competition with men's, since their purpose is different, but he does believe that women's work is harmful to society as a whole, since it means that women abandon their traditional occupation of mother, wife and manager of the home¹². In addition, according to the author, having work means more freedom, and *'whoever has more freedom also has a more relaxed morale'*.

From the above, one can sense that at no moment did the Joint Commission question the fairness and validity of female wage discrimination. The members of the Joint Commission only mentioned the moral convenience of female work.

However, within the Joint Commission itself, few voices appeared recognizing the effort that was being made to combat wage discrimination. RUIZ CASTELLÀ, in the journal *Anales de la Comisión Mixta* of 1925 (pp. 17 ff), recognizes that *'as to the working woman of humble class but who socially until recently was giving it due consideration, today it is natural, thanks to the brunt of the social struggle and trends in workers' demands, to obtain equal wages to men [...] witnessing therefore a fact that increasingly imposes a matter of generality: the freedom of professions for women and the tendency to work and equal pay for both sexes'*. Even so, his speech is clearly discriminatory, *'but despite the importance the professional work of the woman*

¹¹ REVENTÓS, op. cit., p.282.

¹² A typical example of the *'male breadwinner system'*, i.e. the model of division of labour within a family unit, in which the man would occupy a salaried and outside-the-home job, while women would be responsible for performing work unpaid and within-the-home. SILVESTRE RODRÍGUEZ, J. (2005): "El grado de discriminación salarial de las mujeres en España, 1930: una primera aproximación", *Investigaciones de Historia Económica*, nº 2, 2005, p. 106.

deserves, more intense every day, she should always remember that foremost she is a woman and, in preference to all the duties that force her to meet her economic needs, there is her own delicate nature [...]: motherhood and her family duties as a wife and mother.'

While recognizing the existence of demands for equal pay between men and women, the fact is that the activity of the Joint Commission on wages was focused on claims for breach of agreements on minimum wages, as well as on non-compliance in salary increases (*Anales*, 1925: 338, 707, 714). Also, the truth is that the activity of organizations representing workers contained in the journal *Anales* does not show that, by 1925, there was a special sensitivity to gender wage discrimination.

Female wage discrimination was, however, sometimes questioned, and in the Second National Congress of the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Spain, held in Barcelona from August 25th to 30th, 1925, the topics of the presentations were, among others:

'1. Economic issues affecting the working class: a) Implementation of the minimum wage; b) Insurance for unemployment due to industrial crisis; c) Housing; d) Subsistence; e) Worker retirement; f) Accidents at work; g) Legal working hours; h) Piecework; i) Work of women and children; j) Technical Schools; k) School apprentices; l) Participation in work with management responsibility of companies and its benefits'.

But what did the trade unions gathered propose?

'The paper proposed: The disappearance of work for women and children; but taking into account the impossibility to do so immediately; it is proposed that the work of women does not start until the age of 16 for those who are not mothers; it should also be prohibited for under 16-year-old children to work at night.

Ors, Merino Gracia, Sales, Martínez, Pons and others, took part and approved the paper with the following addition:

When women work instead of men, they shall receive a salary equal to that of men' (Anales, 1925: 765, 768).

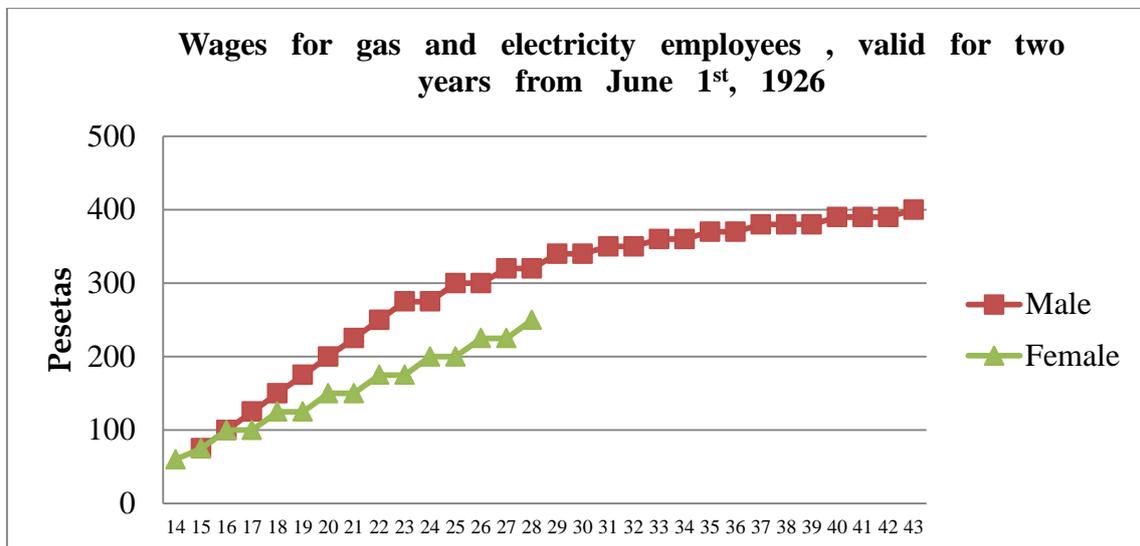
This shows us that the issue of female wage discrimination was itself on the agenda of the Spanish and Catalan trade unions, which participated in the forum of the Joint Committee.

This awareness did, however, mean, in fact, that the reality of the matter was parallel to the existence of wage discrimination. As an example, we show wages for gas and electricity employees, valid for two years from June 1st, 1926 (journal *Revista Social*, 1926 (I): 315):

	<i>Employees (male)</i>	<i>Employees (female)</i>
<i>Age</i>	<i>Pesetas</i>	<i>Pesetas</i>
14	-	60
15	75	75
16	100	100
17	125	100
18	150	125
19	175	125
20	200	150
21	225	150
22	250	175
23	275	175
24	275	200
25	300	200
26	300	225
27	320	225
28	320	250
29	340	
30	340	
31	350	
32	350	
33	360	
34	360	
35	370	

36	370
37	380
38	380
39	380
40	390
41	390
42	390
43	400

Visually, the salaries mentioned would be as follows:



From the above, we can conclude that in 1926 salary discrimination still existed in the trade sector in Barcelona. It was not, however, only salary discrimination: the fact that the minimum wage for female employees in the gas and electricity sector reached its maximum at 28 years old clearly discouraged women from continuing to work. This would surely mean the laying off from the work market of those women older than 28.

If we continue in chronological order on the perception of wage discrimination of participants in the Joint Commission, we find the Spanish participation in the 11th Session of the International Labour Conference of May 31st, 1928 (journal *Revista Social*, 1928: 103). It is worth noting that, in the section on minimum wages of the Convention, the Conference makes a 'recommendation' that complements it, and we have not found evidence of any objection from the Spanish representation:

“B) *The recommendation draws the attention of governments to the principle of equal pay, regardless of sex, for work of equal value, a principle enshrined in Article 427 of the Peace Treaty (Versailles)*” (journal *Revista Social*, 1928, V: 138).

However, what was most important for this communication was that this recommendation was reflected and discussed in the document '*Working arrangements agreed at the meeting held on December 27th, 28th and 29th, 1928, and approved by the Royal Order of the Ministry of Labour on December 27th, 1929. Supplementary Agreements*' published in 1930 by the Joint Commission.

On its page 53 it says:

“As for the female staff, in all groups, the minimum wages indicated are lower from the age of 17 years than those of men.

On this matter, the briefing note alluded to the Chief Clerk of the 4th Group (wholesale), and stated as follows:

'The minimum wage of assistants was dealt with in a special study. Assistants' representatives understand that justice should match wages of male and female assistants; that the future of many women was in the office, and that in general they had as many skills as men.

Other representatives defended the unequal justice scale even though, theoretically, they could not find any reason to keep it. They added that, in fact, women do not have the same preparation as men in Barcelona to work in trade; that matching them to male assistants would provoke the redundancy of many of them, and that ideally salaries of male assistants should be enough for women to avoid working in offices and shops'.

The Commission on International Labour Legislation, created and convened in Paris in the preliminaries of the Peace Conference, proposed, among other findings, as follows: “Equal pay, regardless of sex for equal work in quantity and quality'.

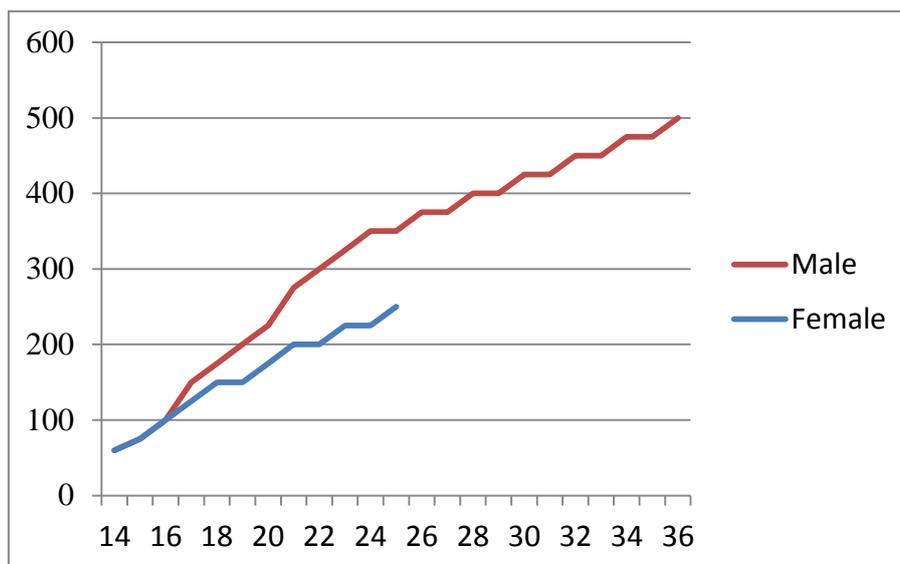
There are some authors who attribute a very small salary to women because the women who only need a support salary (to complete the parents', husbands', sons' or brothers') compete with those who need to work for a full salary; because women have lower needs than men, as they are more resilient than men; and because of the lack of professional organization from women, which leaves them defenceless against contractors.

There are also many writers who want to remove women and children from factories and workshops, although modern trends go towards the emancipation of women and equality of the sexes”.

Nevertheless, material achievement of these views can be seen in the wages that the same document established for the banking sector of Barcelona:

	<i>Male employee</i>	<i>Female employee</i>
<i>Years</i>	<i>Pesetas</i>	<i>Pesetas</i>
14	60	60
15	75	75
16	100	100
17	150	125
18	175	150
19	200	150
20	225	175
21	275	200
22	300	200
23	325	225
24	350	225
25	350	250
26	375	
27	375	
28	400	
29	400	
30	425	
31	425	
32	450	
33	450	
34	475	
35	475	
36	500	

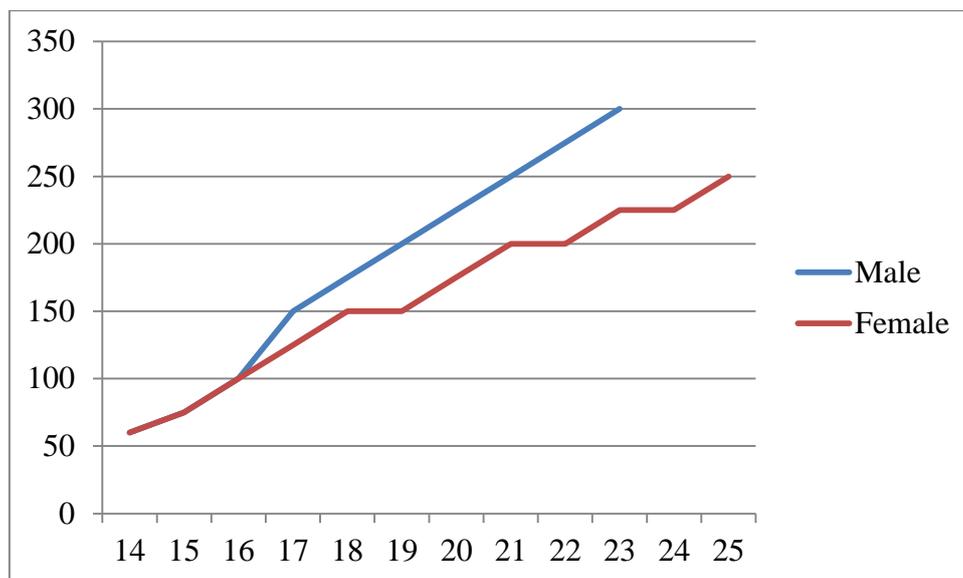
In this graph, we can see that wage discrimination by gender continued:



Also in the insurance sector, wages showed significant differences, fixed by the Regulation of December 1929:

<i>Years</i>	<i>Male employees</i>	<i>Female employees</i>
	<i>Minimum monthly wage</i>	<i>Minimum monthly wage</i>
14	60	60
15	75	75
16	100	100
17	150	125
18	175	150
19	200	150
20	225	175
21	250	200
22	275	200
23	300	225
24		225
25		250

And in a graph:

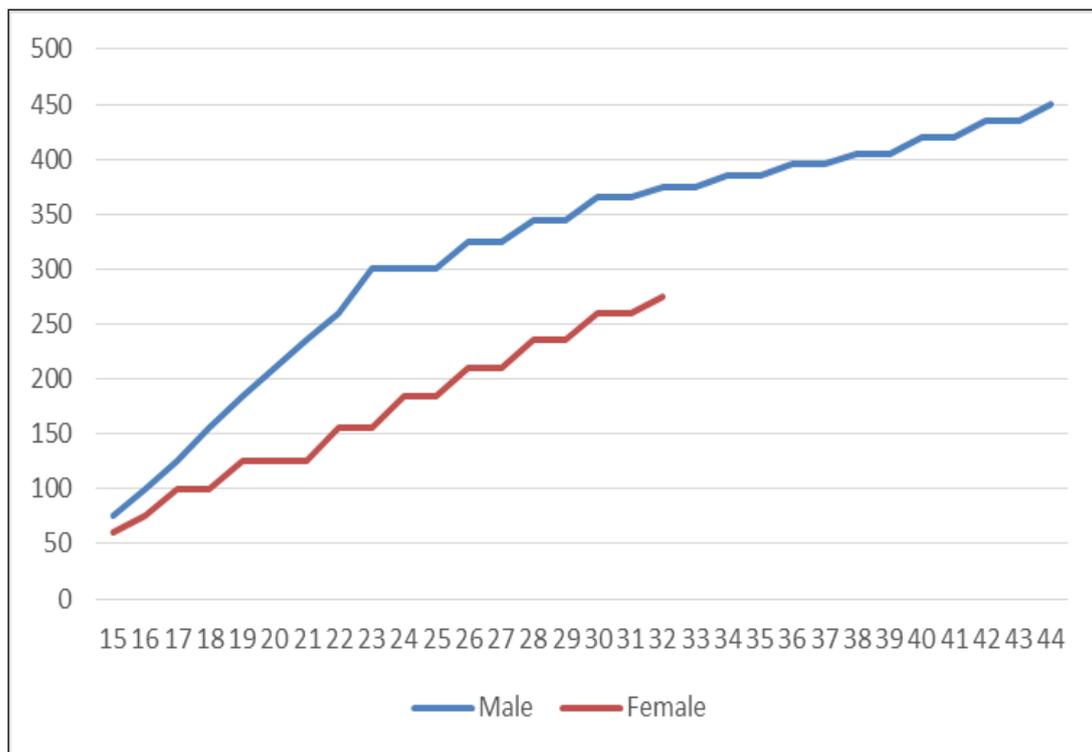


Likewise, the salaries of office assistants:

<i>Years</i>	<i>Male employees</i>	<i>Female employees</i>
	<i>Minimum monthly wage</i>	<i>Minimum monthly wage</i>
15	75	60
16	100	75
17	125	100
18	155	100
19	185	125
20	210	125
21	235	125
22	260	155
23	300	155
24	300	185
25	300	185
26	325	210
27	325	210
28	345	235
29	345	235
30	365	260
31	365	260
32	375	275

33	375
34	385
35	385
36	395
37	395
38	405
39	405
40	420
41	420
42	435
43	435
44	450

In a graph:



From the above we can suppose that there were people inside the Joint Commission who defended the suppression of female wage discrimination. However, the reality of the agreements on salary scales that we have just shown indicates that employers, and specially assistants, postponed the suppression of female wage discrimination until later. On the salary scales of minimum wages, we can see that this discrimination was accepted.

Therefore, we can only conclude that neither employers nor workers saw wage discrimination against female employees as an important issue to discuss and agree on its elimination. While the position of the employers would be economically understandable, it is important to note that trade unions did not see this issue as a cause worth fighting for. Without further information, it appears that these unions (CADCI, etc.) accepted discrimination.

3. Conclusion.

From the above, it can be concluded that gender wage discrimination in trade in Barcelona existed and was justified by members of the Joint Commission. This is shown by establishing different and lower minimum wages for female assistants than male assistants.

Over time, some attitudes appear to understand the injustice of that wage discrimination, but this was not reflected in the reality of minimum wage scales. Even wage improvements proposed by the 'unions' of assistants do not seek to overcome such discrimination, but rather perpetuate it because, although they proposed identical improvements for both sexes, they rely on minimum wages which were themselves discriminatory.

Moreover, ignoring the recommendations of the ILO, at the end of the 1920s, members of the Joint Committee agreed on minimum wage scales in which female wage discrimination remained.

In view of all the above, we have tried to show that female wage discrimination continued to exist until 1930 in the trade sector in Barcelona. In fact, an important detail is that there were very few voices in the trade unions against such wage discrimination. In the documents analyzed, as well as on pay scales agreed upon between employers and assistants, one can sense that, quite possibly, unions of assistants in Barcelona were not interested in the abolition of female wage discrimination as a target. In fact, until 1930, they accepted discriminatory minimum wage scales.

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