**Female entrepreneurs in Sinaloa, Mexico and their contributions to local development**

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**Abstract:** Underlining and recognizing the economic participation of women is important to value their intervention as an agent that modifies business, social and cultural activities of their communities. Likewise, it is imperative to situate their business histories in a social order that is still gendered. Fimale entrepreneurs show us a way to achieve the empowerment of women and change gender roles, which they reconfigure with their economic independence. The objective of this research is to understand the insertion of women in business life despite the gendered context and generalized violence. Also, describe the business strategies that some Sinaloan businesswomen have followed. We conducted qualitative research with women entrepreneurs, 20 semi-structured interviews with women business owners. Female entrepreneurs in Sinaloa contribute to the generation of jobs, the strengthening of local production networks and the innovation of products and services. The recognition of the participation and economic contribution of women in the state is imminent.

**Keywords:** Entrepreneurs, Sinaloa, achievements, local development, visibility

Background & problem statement

We are in the world of the 21st century and the conditions for women are still unequal, the gender gap continues to permeate individual lives and the way we get involved in our communities. Besides, there is evidence that women are increasingly participating in economic and working life in our environment. However, their working conditions continue to be precarious and their salaries are lower than those of their male counterparts, in the same positions and with the same obligations.

In 2020, the gender gap in Mexico, in terms of participation and economic opportunities, is 57.4%; that is, women continue to have 42.6% fewer job opportunities and job quality than men. This item also considers the salary variable between men and women for similar jobs. These economic disadvantages occur despite the fact that women have achieved a more equitable level of education. The gender gap in education in Mexico is 99.7%; that is, practically men and women have the same opportunities and the same levels of education (World Economic Forum, Gender Gap Report, 2020).

However, in Mexico, independent women workers in companies and businesses represent 21% (908 thousand 952) compared to the participation of men in this area, whom reach 79% with 3 thousand 534 people who own companies. We can say that there is a gender gap in the country's business participation of 58%. Of this total of women business owners, 27% are employers (249,311) and 73% (659,641) are self-employed (Montoya, 2017, p. 70).

Emphasizing and acknowledging the economic participation of women is important to value their intervention as an agent that modifies the business, social and cultural activities of their communities. Female entrepreneurs show us a way to achieve the empowerment of women and change gender roles, which they reconfigure with their economic independence. In addition, women's entrepreneurship represents a potential means of reducing gender inequalities. It is important to recognize that women entrepreneurs contribute economically in the sectors where they participate, support the growth of the global economy and productivity, favor job creation and education levels; in addition, they are a source of the fight against poverty (Guzmán & Rodríguez, 2008; Weeks & Seiler, 2001).

Likewise, it is imperative to situate their business histories in a social order that is still gendered. That is, women's business activities emerge from unequal gender conditions, both in public and private life (inequality in working conditions, in wages, in domestic tasks, in high-level decision-making). These inequalities condition shape the manner of their participation in economic activities. At the same time that women are challenging these gender conditions through entrepreneurship, gender conditions also impact how women undertake and design their businesses. In addition to this background, there are news initiatives of women's companies that respond to a new way of structuring the economic and social order. Regional commercial and economic relations are generating an economic field where women are contributing, adding their way of doing business, their new femininity and marking new gender frontiers.

It is important to place our research in the Sinaloa context, where there is an atmosphere of different types of violence. According to data from the Executive Secretariat of the State Public Security System, in 2017, 1,565 violent crimes were recorded in the state; in 2018 the homicides were a little less, 1,120. In the municipality of Culiacán, 578 were registered, in Mazatlán 114 and Ahome 80 (Milenio, 2019). There is a perception that this violence, already permanent in Sinaloa since 2008, is the result of the activities linked to drug trafficking, a product of the internal war that is disputed between the various groups whose main intentions are to eliminate competition, reinforce control over the members of the group and discourage the activity of the security authorities. Ibarra describes the city of Culiacán as "one of the most insecure cities in the Mexican Republic in the recent decade, as a result of the empowerment of organizations dedicated to the drug trafficking economy that have acquired enormous economic and political power, which were linked successfully to the globalization of drug production and trafficking circuits, in a context of institutional vacuum that favored its operations in the state of Sinaloa” (Ibarra, 2015, p. 286).

Under this context, in Sinaloa, the participation of women as independent workers represents 37% of all independent workers, of which, 16% are considered employers. And their incursion as businesswomen is 23% compared to men in the state (77%), above the percentage of women's participation at the national level, which is 21%. Likewise, the growth in the number of women entrepreneurs has been on a permanent increase from 2005 to 2015, going from 26,337 to 30,735 women entrepreneurs (Montoya, 2017, p. 85).

That is why we are concern with the following research questions: How has the insertion of women in business life been? What are the business strategies of women in the context of Sinaloa?

Objectives

The objective is to understand the insertion of women in business life despite the gendered context and generalized violence. Also, describe the business strategies that some sinaloan businesswomen have followed.

Methodology

Qualitative study carried out on 20 businesswomen from different areas in Sinaloa is taken up. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the purpose of analyzing the type of companies they generate, the innovations they have implemented, their contribution to job creation and the support they provide to the local production network. These interviews were conducted in a first part in 2015 and a second part in 2019. They were recorded as voice notes, lasting between one hour and twenty minutes, the shortest, and three hours, the longest.

The participants were chosen under a sampling of convenience or opportunity, the people who were located and were willing to participate were interviewed; therefore, it is not a representative sample. However, this type of methodology allows us to carry out exploratory studies, illustrate the participation of Sinaloan women in setting up businesses and analyze the perceptions of the interviewees about the phenomenon that concerns us.

Results

The women entrepreneurs interviewed cover all three economic sectors; we interviewed farmers, artisans, merchants, restaurateurs, publishers, beverage producers, fashion designers (see Table 1). They are leaders of small, medium and large enterprises and some are self-employed. One of the entrepreneurs generates up to 350 direct jobs (Edna Fong, beverage producer) and we interviewed others whose activities allow them to be self-employed (Mary Salazar, tomato jam producer; Victoria Tatto, cultural promoter; Paula Zabala, grocery store). The years of operation of their businesses range from 55 years, as in the case of Paula Zavala with her grocery store, to three years after starting her business (Fernanda Beltrán with her cultural magazine).

Table 1. Examples of women entrepreneurs in Sinaloa

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Name of the Entrepreneur | Type of business | Local development impact | Name of the Entrepreneur | Type of business | Local development impact |
| 1. Isabel Montiel
 | Doll handicrafts | Employment generation (5-10). Female leadership in the artisan field. | 11. Zulema Coronel | Agricultural machinery construction | Employment generation (20-50). |
| 1. Irma Ríos
 | Citrus farming. | Employment generation (50-100).Female business leadership in agriculture | 12. Fernanda Beltrán | Publication of cultural magazine and sale of advertising | Self-employed. Cultural promotion. |
| 1. Juanita Tolosa
 | Manufacture and sale of ice pops. | Employment generation (50-100). | 13. Eva Guerrero | Publication of informative newspaper. | Employment generation (5-15).Female leadership in the media. |
| 1. Susana Sarabia
 | Regional cuisine restaurant. | Employment generation (50-100).Female business leadership. | 14. Victoria Tatto | Cultural promotion. | Self-employed.Cultural promotion. |
| 1. Elia Araujo
 | Shoe stores and franchises management. | Employment generation (more than 100).Female business leadership. | 15. Ana Mireles | Production of costumes for musical groups. | Employment generation (5-10). |
| 1. Ania Cuesta
 | Sale of food, bakery and pizzas. | Employment generation (50-100).Business spided off due to the demand for inputs. | 16. Altagracia González | Grain farmer and fertilizer distributor. | Employment generation (5-10).Female business leadership in agriculture. |
| 1. Maribel Chan
 | Restaurant. | Employment generation (50-100). | 17. Maritza López | Book editor. | Employment generation (5-10). |
| 1. Conchita Peña
 | Installation and distribution of automotive glass. | Employment generation (50-100).Female business leadership. | 18. Lupita Loya | Flour tortilla producer. | Employment generation (50-100).Female business leadership. |
| 1. Mary Salazar
 | Preparation of tomato jam and dried tomato. | Self-employed. | 19. Fabiola García | Shoe store network | Employment generation (more than 100). |
| 1. Edna Fong
 | Manufacture and sale of bottled beverages. | Employment generation (more than 100).Female business leadership.Business spided off due to the demand for inputs. | 20. Paula Zavala | Grocery Store | Self-employed. |

Source: Own elaboration based on field work conducted.

Main achievements of women entrepreneurs in Sinaloa

Women's businesses have make progress in terms of their services and products, their production processes, the number of clients, and their relationships with other business and government institutions. This is how Eva tells it:

I have all kinds of clients, government institutions, the municipal government, foreign companies, who talk to us and contact us by internet. I have a portfolio of one hundred clients, restaurants, salons, spas, I have daily sales, I have an agreement with five parking lots that I sell them the newspaper and they give it away in their parking lot, I have those agreements, I have magazine stands. That's where I get a part of it back, although the biggest profit is in advertising (Eva, local newspaper producer, 48 years old).

For example, Isabel, a doll producer, already has the registered brand. She has managed to automate the production processes. Her company now exports its products to the US, Israel and the Vatican. In addition to the typical Sinaloan doll, they make blanket cloth dolls, which is the Mexican toy par excellence, they are rag dolls in third dimension, with hand-painted features and worsted hair, and they sell very well in the interior of the Mexican Republic. They also make harlequins, fairies, Marías, tomato farmer dolls, and the dancing deer doll.

In the case of Irma, a citrus grower, has become one of the largest citrus growers in Culiacán. Each season, her ranch produces 100 tons of lemons and 200 tons of oranges with 37 hectares of plants. In the agricultural field she has 90 hectares for horticultural products. However, Irma feels and believes that she has the capacity to produce 250 hectares, to export not only to the US, but also to the Middle East and Europe.

For her part, Juanita, a ice popsicle producer, has also managed to get her company a registered brand, has qualified workers, good salaries and already has organized work stations. They produce more than 20,000 ice popsicles a day. They have a capacity to produce 50 thousand popsicles, but they still do not produce them, that is the new challenge, they are looking to increase the capacity of everything to produce them.

In Zulema's company, a producer of agricultural machinery, they began selling to other farmers in other areas of the state of Sinaloa and other mexican states. In Sinaloa, they have customers in Navolato, Culiacán, Guamúchil, Los Mochis, Salvador Alvarado, Juan José Ríos, Guasave, Costa Rica, Mazatlán, Escuinapa. They also have customers in other states such as Tepic, Puebla, Querétaro, Pachuca, Mexico City, Monterrey, Veracruz, Tamaulipas; in the United States, Canada and soon in Spain, with a mandarin packing machine. In all these places they have already sold and have customers. Being a small company, they have become a competitive company in prices. Recently, they have completed a project with an exporting and importing company in New York, with whom they have partnered to distribute their agricultural machinery there. This opens up a world of possibilities and growth for their company.

One aspect that women entrepreneurs mention as an achievement is not only the progress in their businesses, but they also recognize satisfaction in the fact of being able to combine their business work with their activities as mothers, in the case of mumpreneurs. For example, Paula, a grocery store clerk for more than 55 years, tells us that thanks to her work in her store she has been able to provide education for her four children, after being widowed at the age of 40. We can say that this case illustrates the history of more than 990 thousand grocery stores established in Mexico, and more than 14,100 grocery stores in Sinaloa, most of which are managed by women (Economic Census 2019).

By analyzing their history and business evolution, we can emphasize that the characteristics and challenges of women's businesses (the organization of work-family time, coupled with the problems of business management such as competition, employees and the way of linking with business and social networks) make women entrepreneurs reformulate their own strategies and peculiarities in their way of doing business. Women entrepreneurs challenge the imposed business status quo and propose their own business profile, solution strategies and leadership formulas (Montoya, 2017).

Female leadership

Women entrepreneurs have managed to create and develop a very important leadership role in the community, not only by managing their businesses, but also by leading trade associations. In the case of Isabel, a doll producer, she became president of the Culiacán Artisan Association, which consolidates her strong and binding voice for the benefit of artisans in Sinaloa.

Another example of entrepreneurial leadership is Edna, a beverage producer, who was president of AMMJE (Association of Women Entrepreneurs and Business Owners). In that environment Edna had the opportunity to create new things for the association, promote new leadership, and open new paths of action for the women's business group. Now her leadership is bearing fruit in Coparmex (Employers' Confederation of the Mexican Republic), which is a very different category from AMMJE. Coparmex is an employers' center of men and women, and has a very well-directed focus. She has had the opportunity to participate at a national level in this organization and has realized that there is now a very strong gap in the representation of women in this area, the women presidents of the state chambers is only thirty percent.

Women entrepreneurs also show and share a value for what they can do, at the same time as they begin to create their own frameworks of values, beliefs and restructure their ways of thinking. As suggested by several of the authors consulted (Barrera, 2001; Arias, 2001; Ekinsmyth, 2011:105; Leung, 2011; Lewis et al., 2015) women entrepreneurs are agents of social change. With the ways of practicing leadership, women entrepreneurs are contributing to the reconstruction of new feminine identities, from the public sphere, in a visible manner and without being exempt from struggles, fights and contradictions. Women entrepreneurs are managing to move the generic frontiers where they redefine their identity, their roles in the family, society and the economy.

Job generation and local production networks

The women interviewed are growing their businesses and generating important jobs in the region. Among the women interviewed, four are self-employed, that is, they have an activity that generates their own income and do not generate jobs (Fernanda Beltrán, cultural magazine; Paula Zavala, grocery store; Victoria Tatto, cultural promoter; and Mary Salazar, tomato jam producer). Five companies are considered small because of the number of jobs they generate, between 11 and 50 jobs (Isabel Montiel, producer of handmade dolls; Ana Mireles, producer of musical group costumes; Zulema Coronel, producer of agricultural machinery; Eva Guerrero, producer of a local newspaper; Maritza López, publishing house).

Eight companies we consider medium, generating more than 50 jobs and less than 100 (Susana Sarabia, restaurateur; Maribel Chan, restaurateur; Lupita Loya, flour tortilla producer; Juanita Tolosa, ice popsicle producer; Írma Ríos, citrus farmer; Altagracia González, grain farmer; Ania Cuestas, food producer; Conchita Peña, glass distributor). And three companies are classified as large, generating more than 100 jobs (Edna Fong, beverage producer; Fabiola García, shoe stores; Elia Araujo, shoe stores and franchises).

Most of the businesswomen hire mostly women, arguing that they feel better working with women, that they are more responsible, that they want to help them, that they are more apt for the work required.

Seventy percent of the people I hire are women. Women are more dedicated to everything, they have to be women to cut, men are harsher, they pull the plant more. Women are kinder with the plant. The man is more operative, he helps to load, to drive tractors, to fumigate, to prune, to do other types of work, and the woman does the cutting. (Irma, citrus fruit producer, 42 years old).

In the case of Edna, a beverage producer, it is generating close to 350 direct jobs, 176 are in the Culiacán plant and the rest are in the distribution centers they have throughout the country; almost half of these jobs are women. They have a head office in the city of Culiacán, 7 distribution centers and 2 production plants. The company is present in six states, they have distribution in the main shopping centers in the country and the state: Wal-Mart, Ley, OXXO, Soriana, Superfarmacias, Comercial Mexicana, 7 Eleven, City Club, Bix. H.E.B.

The company led by Edna has supported the local economy by consuming the inputs they need from local suppliers, only when they see that they can no longer supply them because of the size or volume, they look for suppliers outside or when there are no materials here in the region, for example, Jasmine tea is supplied directly from China. But their business philosophy is to consume locally. Lemon is one of the inputs they buy from local producers. The specifications to receive the lemon have to be within the standards they handle, because if a lemon is yellow it can spoil the flavor of a batch. They have to take great care of that and the suppliers have to be prepared and know how they require the product. Sugar is another input and requires that the sacks, for example, do not come stained. It has also contributed to generate a business detachment, with the demand for plastic containers, a company has been developed focused on supplying them with this input.

The case of Maritza's publishing company generates direct and indirect jobs in the city's printing and design firms. These economic units of the publishing industry always express their appreciation to Maritza for taking up serious and quality publishing projects. Publishing books in Culiacán is a parallel dimension, little known and scarcely valued, but this dimension could generate great social and economic changes if we see it with the passion and sensitivity that Maritza introduces.

In the case of Irma's company, she has 20 permanent employees, but when she cuts a truckload of lemons, she needs 60-70 people to fill a truckload of lemons. Irma started her adventure planting 7 hectares of lemons and now she has 37 hectares of citrus: 22 hectares of oranges and 15 hectares of lemons. The lemons and oranges are in Rancho Ayuné, on the road to Sanalona, where she had to arrange for the construction of a pipeline of almost three kilometers of pipe to reach the farm and also to expand the irrigation systems, so Irma was building the necessary infrastructure to produce citrus.

These examples show us that it is important to recognize that women entrepreneurs contribute economically in the sectors in which they participate, support the growth of the economy and productivity, favor job creation and education levels, and are a source of the fight against poverty.

Innovation

Women entrepreneurs in Sinaloa have innovated in the type of services they offer, in the way they do business and in the design products according to their conditions as working women, mothers, professionals and leaders.

In Zulema's company, they started handling stainless steel, but their specialty continues to be machinery for agricultural packaging. They have also worked with brass; they did this kind of work at La Vaca Argentina restaurant in Culiacán. They started selling spare parts, and they are already working as builders. The next step is to set up points of sale, small offices where they sell and make known what they do. They already have one in Guadalajara and Monterrey. The next one is to install one in San Diego, California.

Edna continues on her path as an entrepreneur and leader. Currently, her company has innovated in the diversification of products to cover different markets: Jazyfrut, Jamaite, Hawaiian Tea, Jaztea in gallon, jasmine tea, green tea and lemon tea. These products are prepared in the company's two plants in Mexico. The main plant is located in Culiacán, Sinaloa, serving the Mexican market, as well as Sonora, Tijuana and Mexicali. Its other plant is located in Guadalajara, where it serves consumers in Puebla and Nuevo León. At the Culiacán plant, the company produces around 120,000 liters of tea daily, which is used to produce the brand's different presentations, such as the 250-milliliter (ml) children's drink, the 500-ml sport version and its liter, half-gallon and gallon displays.

In the case of Maribel, a restaurateur, she has managed to present an innovation in her meals since the beginning of her business, an aspect that has guaranteed her success. For example, the pizza that is consumed in her restaurant is a freshly made dough, it has 24 hours of rest, it is a freshly baked bread. The ingredients are special, from the cheeses that are selected. All the food has previous processes, the tomato sauce is homemade, it is fresh tomato. That was the main focus, to give a taste experience and they also innovate in beverages. They designed a flavored beer, people would stop by their restaurant to take the cranberry beer. They innovated in glassware, the glass was different, it was a more European style, no neck. It was a very short menu, they offered 8 different pizzas, four salads, they started with very few things.

Technology is a limited part of the production processes, depending on the type of product. Such is the case of Mary's company, a producer of tomato jam, where the objective is to preserve the quality of the product and not to mass-produce it, since it wants to preserve the artisanal flavor of the product. However, her innovation consists of presenting a totally handmade product as tomato jam.

Women entrepreneurs generate new products and production processes with a "feminine style" such as the creation of tomato jam, dolls from Sinaloa, fashion for artists, and cultural products and services. They are present in mostly male economic sectors, such as the installation of automobile windows and the printing of a local newspaper. Women entrepreneurs are not only generating jobs, mainly for women, but also improving work environments, conceiving them differently and with a social conscience.

Conclusions

In the study of the participation of female entrepreneurs, it is necessary to start from the recognition the gendered structural forces that influence the economic and business activity of women; that is, starting from an analysis of structural problems (institutions, culture and gendered labor markets) to understand and clarify the empirical findings and show the heterogeneity of business experiences with a vision of gender regimes. Gendered institutions, where women develop their work, social and family trajectories, model the characteristics of their business activities and their self-employment activities. At the same time, we see that both business activities and self-employment activities are an agent that promotes changes in gender relations, where new alternatives to female identity are created and, thus, a platform for greater equality is generated.

The findings show us that women's businesses in Sinaloa are starting on a small scale, some informally, but they are accumulating a significant source of innovation, knowledge and experiences, as Scott (2006, p. 67) suggests: “The activities Innovative small-scale companies tend to be especially susceptible to stimulating the origin of agglomeration processes”. The initial seed has been planted in various sectors, such as fashion design for musical groups, handicrafts, book publishing, magazines and local newspapers; It remains to be seen whether these seeds can generate subsequent events that result in a production network that gradually becomes and is embedded in the context of Culiacán, with its own expansion resources.

We found companies that have a cultural content rooted in the space where they are developed, for example: Ana Mireles, designer of costumes for ¨gruperos¨ musical groups, and Isabel, with its manufacture and sale of sinaloan dolls, which rescue the typical costumes of the state of Sinaloa and the activities that take place in the state (example: the ¨tomaterito¨ doll, tomato farm doll). Also, the artisanal production of tomato jam, a typical product of the region that has been the image of the state as a vegetable producer.

On the other hand, it is also reflected in women's businesses that try to influence culturally in an environment they consider inappropriate, such as Fernanda Beltrán's cultural magazine and Victoria Tatto's business to promote culture. Through reading and cultural promotion, they seek to influence and counteract the culture of drug trafficking that in many ways permeates the environment of Culiacán. This outcome generates more questions than certainties in this study; however, it allows us to detect an incipient economy embedded in the cultural characteristics of the community and with cultural dyes on a small scale and at the local level, linked to the space and the characteristics of the social and economic life of Sinaloa.

Little by little, women are making inroads into leading male business circles. We find an important participation of women business leaders, not only in women's organizations, but also in organizations of male-dominated guilds. These participations are not free of conflicts, but they have been able to remain and have marked their style in the way they organize and lead. Women entrepreneurs are building their business, information and social networks with their own style, which gives them identity.

Likewise, women entrepreneurs may be shaping new women's entrepreneurial identities. At the same time that they are accepted more financial liabilities, there are constant negotiations to change the different roles of women in the family. There is a recognition of their competitive advantages and disadvantages. There is a very blurred dividing line in terms of their family, business and personal activities. Their leadership strategies are under construction, they value belonging to networks and business organizations, they recognize themselves as leaders in the family, business and guild context, and there is recognition of others women as leaders. They value and give importance to training, exchange of experiences and networking. They are constantly present participating in the community, not only generating jobs, but also improving work environments, conceiving them as different and socially conscious, they are linked to volunteer actions, civil associations supporting the community in ecological, road, violence, etc. issues. Women entrepreneurs also show and share a value for what needs to be done, at the same time that they create their own frameworks of values, beliefs and restructure ways of thinking. Sinaloan women entrepreneurs are being agents of social change.

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