

BEST PRACTICES FOR PROMOTING WOMEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN OAXACA

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- I. Reviewing best practices
- II. Best practices methodology
- III. From the “ideal entrepreneur” to reality
- IV. Profile of women entrepreneurs and their businesses
- V. Gender factors that can be obstacles for women entrepreneurship
- VI. Other factors hindering women entrepreneurship
- VII. Factors that promote women entrepreneurship
- VIII. Recommendations of best practices
- IX. Conclusions
- X. References

I. Reviewing best practices

As part of the initial diagnostic for the project “One-Stop-Shop for Micro-entrepreneurs in Oaxaca”, SiKanda conducted research and interviews in order to obtain relevant information for identifying best practices when working and providing services for women entrepreneurs.

This information will be relevant to refine the support provided to women entrepreneurs in Phase 2 of the project, modify the change ambition for the project, including impact and outcomes, and develop the capacity-building curriculum and services offered by the project in order to positively impact women led businesses and the lives of women entrepreneurs in Villa de Zaachila.

II. Best practices methodology

SiKanda reviewed relevant literature including specialized articles, reports and books dealing with female entrepreneurship, gender issues and entrepreneurship in general. We then identified relevant information regarding the profile of women entrepreneurs, their business and elements for success and failure that linked to gender roles or dynamics in a particular area. We also analyzed how organizations or women themselves addressed these elements when starting, developing or expanding their businesses.

SiKanda staff also collected the impressions and experience of five representatives from non-profit organizations working with women entrepreneurs in rural and indigenous communities in Oaxaca. Three of them work with women artisans that produce textiles and pottery, two work with women who produce and sell agricultural products. These organizations have over 15 years’ experience working in Oaxaca with marginalized communities. We also interviewed three academics with experience in research and public sector, specializing in gender. We contrasted the information gathered from the interviews with the literature review in order to identify elements that could be relevant when working with the women from Zaachila Oriente, taking into consideration their profile, their business profile and the particular context in which they develop.

III. From the “ideal entrepreneur” to reality

Although information about entrepreneurship is widely available, it quickly became apparent that very little has been written or researched about women entrepreneurs from highly marginalized, impoverished contexts in Mexico. The “Ideal entrepreneur”, is evident in the national communication campaign “Pepe y Toño”, created by the Council of Communications. This campaign, launched in 2011, has become the most easily recognized image of entrepreneurship in Mexico, which is not only male, but also white, heterosexual, middle-class and urban. It took three years after “Pepe y Toño” for the Council to launch the “Ana y Mary” campaign, aimed at women entrepreneurs, who are also urban, white, heterosexual and middle-class.

Pepe y Toño, the “ideal entrepreneur”, is still the underlying ideal recipient of national and state policy aimed at promoting entrepreneurship. Both in literature and through the interviews and fieldwork, it has become evident that this standard is still going strong.

Women, however, continue to face gender-specific challenges when becoming entrepreneurs, as explained below, challenges that are aggravated in contexts such as Zaachila Oriente, where marginalization, poverty and a systematic violation of human rights is present.

IV. Profile of women entrepreneurs and their businesses

Literature review showed that most women entrepreneurs are informal and working in the third sector, in either sales or services (Cherie Blair Foundation for Women, 2018; Santamaría Hernández & Tapia Quintana, 2017). Nonetheless, there are very few studies made in Mexico that focus on women entrepreneurs from marginalized urban areas. Interviews and further research showed that projects and support aimed at women entrepreneurs in Oaxaca concentrate on two types of projects: productive projects in the agricultural sector (chickens, small animals, and community and home gardens) and support for handcrafts and artisans (textiles, handcrafts). Organizations and government institutions providing support for these types of projects usually focus on either rural or indigenous populations and prefer to work with groups, rather than with individual entrepreneurs.

This is relevant because Zaachila Oriente is not classified as a rural area, although it lacks services like sewage and pavement. Many women who live in Zaachila Oriente have indigenous backgrounds, but might not see themselves as indigenous anymore, or are overlooked by institutions for living in a community not categorized as indigenous. Most women entrepreneurs in Zaachila interviewed or polled during the planning stage have individual or family endeavors, and none of them are artisans and few have agricultural projects. Thus, available literature and experience of other organizations mostly deals with profiles that have little to do with the reality faced by women in Zaachila or the businesses they run.

Taking into consideration that there are particularities in Zaachila Oriente, we can still, however, draw ideas and elements that can be introduced to the design, based on previous experiences and academic data and cross-referencing that with the fieldwork and knowledge of Zaachila that SiKanda has.

V. Gender factors that can be obstacles for women entrepreneurship

The main and most common element underlined by both literature and interviews as a major constrain for women entrepreneurs is time, as related to the “double burden of work” women face due to gender roles and expectations. Women are mostly responsible for house work and for caring for children or other family members (Bizkaia, 2016; Castiblanco Moreno, 2013; Cherie Blair Foundation for Women, 2018; ProMujer, 2017). This greatly limits the amount of time they have to dedicate to training, networking, finding new costumers or suppliers and in general time for themselves.

In Villa de Zaachila, men dedicate an average of 20.28 hours per week for non-remunerated work. Women, however, dedicate 53.63 hours per week to non-remunerated work such as caring for people who are sick, elderly, people with disabilities, caring for children under 14 years of age, preparing and serving food, cleaning their homes, washing clothes and shopping (INEGI, 2015). Women with small businesses therefore have very limited time to spare. This must be taken into account when planning training sessions.

Another gender-specific obstacle not mentioned in literature but in the interviews is “envy”. Women whose entrepreneurship are gaining momentum seem to be the object of gossip from neighbors. This affects their self-esteem and their relations with family and the community and can prove to be an obstacle for their businesses in the long term. Machismo and patriarchy often teach women to distrust each other, as exemplified by a Mexican proverb “*Mujeres juntas ni difuntas*” which translates to “Women together, not even in death”. Some local organizations address this issue by promoting sorority between women, or by encouraging women to invest in community activities like town festivities. This counteracts the idea of “self-benefit” and allows the community to perceive a growing women-led business as a benefit for the group as a whole.

Women entrepreneurs need services tailored to their specific needs. Training, mentoring, financial support, they are all mentioned both in literature and interviews. However, there are very few services designed specifically for women in Mexico¹, and even when they are, they follow the “Ana y Mary” model and are far removed from the reality of women such as those in Zaachila Oriente. The latter have very limited time, low educational levels, reduced mobility and structural difficulties such as lack of roads, electricity, sewage, running water, etcetera.

Paradoxically, the Oaxaca State Institute for Entrepreneurship and Competitiveness, institute responsible for promoting public policies and programs to support entrepreneurship in the state, has no programs or projects aimed at women. When questioned about the reason, the head of the incubator and liaisons department, Rolando Granados, stated that since they “*pursue gender equality*” *there were no programs for women because that would be unfair to their male peers*. This lack of sensitivity towards structural gender inequality and the specific needs and constraints faced by women, translates into inaccessible or inexistent programs and support.

VI. Other factors hindering women entrepreneurship

¹ Organizations like CREA (<http://www.crea.org.mx/mujeres/>), or programs like Mujeres PyME (<http://empresarias.inmujeres.gob.mx/>) are available for women entrepreneurs, but inaccessible for women in Zaachila.

Relocation is a factor analysed in a study conducted in Mexico City with women who could somewhat resemble conditions from women in Zaachila. Constantly moving or being relatively new to a particular area means that the women's support networks are severed, which has an important impact when most of their business relies on personal relations (ProMujer, 2017). This is quite relevant in Zaachila Oriente, since the area was populated just after the 1980s due to the presence of the dumpsite. Most women come from different communities and backgrounds, moving to Zaachila with their husbands or families only recently.

The inability to handle credit offered to costumers is also a relevant factor for failure in the ProMujer study. Women often offer credit or instalment payments to costumers. This creates issues when handling cash flow and reduces liquid capital to reinvest.

Limited access to education for women causes their knowledge of business management to be a result of "trial and error", or of family tradition. Thus, savings or income generated by women-led business are commonly used to respond to emergencies, health or family expenses, since they are usually expected to address family needs, instead of being reinvested into the business.

As stated above, there is also lack of access to financial products and services. Women are also perceived to be less risky than their male peers, have less use of technology and less access to training (Powers & Magnoni, 2010).

Also, there is a lack of relatable role models with which women can identify. Thus, women find it difficult to find sources of inspiration for their businesses or to come up with future projections of what they might want for themselves or their businesses (Bizkaia, 2016; Santamaría Hernández & Tapia Quintana, 2017) .

VII. Factors that promote women entrepreneurship

Classified into "push and pull factors", there are different reasons that lead a woman to be an entrepreneur. Amongst them: insufficient family income, low satisfaction with current salary, difficulty finding a job with flexible hours to fulfil family responsibilities, the desire for higher income, gaining on social status, higher educational levels, family size, death or abandonment of the spouse, gaining independence, or having a sense of achievement (Orham and Scott in Castiblanco Moreno, 2013).

Understanding the particular drive of each woman and the reasons that led them to be entrepreneurs can lead to establishing relevant, realistic objectives for their businesses. It also allows women to envision long-term plans for their business, including if and how they can grow or expand.

Previous work experience, having positive role models of women entrepreneurs, external support from an organization or government institution, support from family, friends and social networks, are all named between elements that have relevant positive impact on women entrepreneurs. (Castiblanco Moreno, 2013; Powers & Magnoni, 2010).

VIII. Recommendations of best practices:

After analysing available information, we identified the following as best practices that can be incorporated into the project design and expected outcomes.

1. Network:

Having support from family, friends, the community and a wider network, was cited as a common element for success, even for individual entrepreneurships. Building a support network allows women not only to start a business or find new customers, suppliers or to improve their business practices. It also allows them to build significant relationships with other women who encourage, support, and care for their lives and everyday problems. Women in Zaachila Oriente have mostly migrated from other areas, leaving friends and family behind. The difficult living conditions make it hard to build trustful and meaningful relationships. Having time and a place to meet with other women allows them to create a sense of community, fight against envy and gossip, and gain recognition for their efforts.

“Most entrepreneurships are individual projects, but they fail because they don’t have a support network to count on in case of problems or crisis. There is an opportunity for women to have a common project in which to encourage individual entrepreneurships that have a wider support network. This reduces individual risks for participants”. – Mtra. Claudia Ramírez Izucar

Interviewees underlined that the feeling of belonging to a group allows for new projects to emerge from it, such as “cajas de ahorro” or savings funds, while providing mutual support and strengthening existing capabilities. It also creates spaces for dialogue to find common solutions to individual or group problems.

Groups work better when brought together by a common interest or situation, instead of just forming to face or share particular responsibilities, such as those arising from implementing a project supported by an external party. Once again, understanding women’s reasons for entrepreneurship and their drive can be a starting point for networking with others.

2. Be flexible and foster proximity:

All interviews and reviewed literature pointed to a common obstacle: women have very little time to spare. Particularly in contexts in which gender roles force them to be in charge of household chores and their children, while also tending to other activities. Women in Zaachila Oriente do not have access to day-care facilities and, as opposed to middle-class women in Mexico, are unable to pay other women to help with the house, cleaning and taking care of their children.

*“A huge barrier is the work load women have for being women. They are not just artisans or entrepreneurs, they are moms, housewives, friends. They are very busy with family responsibilities. Having available time is a major challenge for their entrepreneurships. (...) Having to face the commitment and responsibility of assuming the change in rhythm between being an occasional artisan and being a business woman is a difficult task”
– Ana Paula Fuentes, CADA Foundation*

Women's double burden of work can become triple when participating in training sessions, mentorships and other activities. Organizations have different strategies to avoid, when possible, creating an even greater burden for women.

Flexible schedules are fundamental. Interviewees coincided that it is important to set the working schedule and meeting hours with the participating women themselves. Some groups may prefer to have intensive sessions in consecutive days, others may prefer to meet only in weekends even if the program takes longer to complete. Adapting to each group and taking into consideration time availability when integrating the groups makes it easier for women to participate and commit to the training process.

3. Build trust, sorority and self-esteem:

Interviews and literature underlined gender barriers related to women's roles. Women are not encouraged to be as ambitious or self-focused as their male counterparts, and dedicating time for their businesses can make them feel like they are neglecting family. Women often doubt their own abilities. They can also be discouraged from establishing trustful relations with other women

Low self-esteem might cause them to doubt their decisions and be more hesitant to take risks in their businesses. Building from, recognizing and strengthening their capacities and sense of self can lead to stronger businesses.

"We had problems with our husbands because we spent many days away from home or coming in late. We even joked about being scolded or sent to sleep with the dogs. Those jokes allowed us to hang in there, because there were moments in which we had so many problems at home that we were not sure it was all worth it. Luckily, we supported each other through, until our husbands started to come with us and realized that it was really a lot of work we were doing and that was why we were late when coming home. Not out of spite, but because we were creating benefits not just for ourselves, but for all the artisans in town" – Participant in the Santo Tomás Jalieza Women's textile group that built their own collective brand.

4. Listen:

To promote participation and ownership in the project, women must feel they have a voice in its design, implementation and evaluation.

"The daily plan is always flexible. We ask how women felt and then the facilitators propose activities without imposing or pressuring. The organization is a guide. In its role as a facilitator, intuition is fundamental. We have developed a very close collaboration. In each meeting, when the facilitator asks about how they are doing, in many occasions they express that they are sad or demotivated because something happened in their homes or lives. So, the meetings also helped them to find solutions and motivate them to keep going"

- Ana Paula Fuentes, CADA Foundation.

Focusing on participants not only strengthens their self-confidence, but also puts their needs first and breaks with the common practice of “paternalism”.

“A factor for failure is that (our organization) acted with paternalism with a particular group and took them too much “by the hand”. The facilitators organized the group excessively, dealing with activities the women should have done by themselves.”

– Sarahí García, Founder, Tejiendo Alianzas AC

5. Challenge gender roles by including family and the community: Let them see how much women work!

Transforming gender roles cannot be achieved by working only with women. To create a fertile ground for women entrepreneurship, gender roles that hinder their opportunities need to be addressed at a community level. By working with men, family members, daughters and sons, a community can learn to value the relevance of women’s entrepreneurship, balance chores at home and challenge traditional roles assigned to women and to men, who are usually less involved at home and childcare.

“Our group, as women, faced many challenges. The (local) government often treats you badly and think that what you’re requesting is not urgent or important. But you need to be constant and keep in mind the objectives and reasons of why you’re working. (...) That’s why family is important, above everything, making your partner understand that this is not a game, it’s work” – Participant in the Santo Tomás Jalieza Women’s textile group that built their own collective brand.

6. Understand what “success” looks like:

Many images and indicators for success in the traditional entrepreneurship approach are not just strongly related to male and patriarchal values, but also highly individualistic “weakening collective identity “ (Du Gay in Da Costa, Allesanda; Silva Saraiva, 2012, p. 593) favouring personal interest over collective well-being. It can also be highly “discriminatory, gender-biased, ethnocentrically determined and ideologically controlled, sustaining not only prevailing societal biases, but serving as a tapestry for un- examined and contradictory assumptions and knowledge about the reality of entrepreneurs.” (Ogbor, 2000, p. 1)

This approach to entrepreneurship works strongly against women in cultural contexts such as Zaachila Oriente. Understanding that for many women, success does not mean scaling their business or even maintaining it through time, but rather solving particular and specific needs or allowing them to spend time with their families or gaining spaces of independence, might seem conflicting from a mere business point of view, but can prove fundamental to empower and support women entrepreneurs. Creating with them their own image of success, what their business should look like and achieve, will reduce feelings of frustration and turn their business into a more relevant endeavor.

“A recommendation is to understand clearly the “scale of growth” for each project. I mean understanding what growing or progress looks like for each entrepreneur. For example, for us, growing is not incorporating more women, but rather having a small group of women

artisans working, that have good communication with each other, and that can maintain the stablished quality of their products”. -Ana Paula Fuentes, CADA Foundation.

7. Communicate images of role models that are relevant, appealing and relatable for their context and situation:

Communicating on a community-wide scale stories and images of women who are relatable and who face similar challenges than local women, allows them to feel inspired and more confident. It also tackles gender roles that might limit women’s mobility.

“If their context has a perception of the importance of gender equality, you’ll have a greater chance of success, with less difficulties or obstacles for entrepreneurship. If you are an entrepreneur in a context in which inequality is legitimized, then there will be more obstacles, even if with access to training and networking. (...)

Women have to fulfil certain roles: good wife, good mother. Another discourse often repeated is that “women can’t” and that they “can’t or shouldn’t be together”. These patriarchal discourses disintegrate networks They also feed the idea that it pays more to invest on men. The socialization and communication mechanisms of these discourses can go from radio, tv and songs to memes. How can you get rid of them if women grow with these images?”

– Mtra. Claudia Ramírez Izucar

Women in Zaachila Oriente and other marginalized areas have little exchange with different realities and lifestyles, since their experience and mobility is often limited by structural conditions. Images of successful women in the media are far removed from themselves and, in this particular context, they strongly reinforce the stereotypes and gender barriers. Women’s immediate references are other women in their family and community who managed to “make it” or “salir adelante” on a daily basis, which means that they managed to put food on their tables, often in subsistence levels.

By making stories of women like themselves, with similar backgrounds but with different ideas of success, available to them, you can foster new ambitions and creativity. A communication component of the project can be directed not only towards the community itself, but also towards the participating women, creating and strengthening a common identity that can foster cohesion, networking and sorority.

8. Make sure the training and methodology are relevant and pertinent:

For interviewees, the training curriculum must adapt to the specific needs of each group and allow women to be active participants when choosing what subjects need to be addressed, often choosing from the available curriculum or incorporating new topics as the training advances.

Most organizations expressed the need for training not only in topics relevant to starting, maintaining and growing a business, but also on subjects such as organization, conflict resolution, gender, human rights and team work. For these organizations, empowering women entrepreneurs needs to also address systemic change.

Between the training courses mentioned by interviewees and literature we have:

Production costs and fixing prices: one particular organization uses a Montessori methodology to reinforce knowledge in math. Another stresses the importance of “fair prices” by promoting a collective reflection of what fair looks like to participating women and how a particular price can also affect other members of the community.

Finances and administration: separating personal from business finances is mentioned as a best practice for women, one often neglected due to gender roles.

Commercialization and marketing: thinking about new markets that might be in reach but outside their imagination due to common practice and tradition. Technologies can also be introduced to improve customer services. An organization reported women may have phones or smartphones but little to no knowledge on how to use them. They provided training for one woman to be responsible for WhatsApp communication with costumers.

Quality and hygiene for food processing and selling: keeping good standards and ensuring that products are innocuous and handled with care.

Organizational skills: to improve how women organize their groups or the structure of a family business. They also teach time organization and teamwork.

Human rights and gender perspective: for women to feel empowered, the organizations also work strongly on training in human rights and gender perspective, often dealing with other subjects such as violence prevention and health. They also incorporate these aspects when designing, implementing and evaluating the projects.

Experience exchange and fostering dialogues: unique opportunities to share ideas and learn from other women, from inside and outside the group. Participating in forums, market fairs, and women’s encounters.

Methodologies used by the organizations vary, but most draw from popular education methodologies, following the school of Paulo Freire. They are also very flexible, user-centred and build from the knowledge and experience of the women themselves. Since time availability is a great constrain, organizations vary their schedules, sometimes preferring intensive, consecutive sessions, and others opting for weekly or monthly meetings or even individual sessions and visits. One organization mentioned the need to cover the same topic, individually, more than once with each person, since they could see it was difficult for learners to truly understand and implement the lessons.

9. Face conflict and train in conflict resolution:

In particular, interviewees pointed towards conflict resolution and transformation as a core topic. Conflict is a part of business, and life. Providing tools for positive conflict resolution can strengthen support networks and allow women to be better negotiators not only with business partners, suppliers or costumers, but also with their husbands, families and children. Women need to be able to face possible conflicts with family members and to negotiate positive resolutions, or to negotiate the distribution of chores within the household.

“Family can be a challenge because you have to negotiate family and project responsibilities. (...) You can’t just stop being a mom or a wife, you have to continue to be one and be a producer or seller at the same time.”

– Participant in the Santo Tomás Jalieza Women’s textile group that built their own collective brand.

10. Prefer small groups with long-term support over large groups:

Interviews with organizations and academics underlined that when working with women with limited education, time and mobility, who face structural violence, poverty and marginalization, training processes provide better and more sustainable results when focusing on smaller groups and favouring long-term support and companionship. This also allows for a closer, more trustful relationship to develop not only between the women themselves, but between them and the organization and trainers.

Smaller groups increase the quality of the workshops, translating into better results in terms of products and services offered by women participants after the training. Some organizations work with groups of up to 20 women that can receive training and support for 2 to 4 years. Another organization chose even smaller groups (5-8 participants) and prefers to schedule individual training sessions with each participant, while still hosting group sessions once a month to reinforce their skills. This methodology was preferred because it is difficult for women with little formal education to fully take advantage of the capacity-building program. This particular organization mentioned the need for constantly reviewing specific topics to make sure that they can be put into practice. Small groups create more proximity, trust relationships and facilitate follow-up on the learning process.

11. Create awareness in decision makers and other relevant stakeholders:

There is a need to close the gap between policy-makers, service providers and women entrepreneurs. As mentioned above, the state institute in charge of developing the programs and policies to foster entrepreneurship in Oaxaca lacks an understanding of the specific needs of women and gender barriers, from an intersectional perspective that could shed light on the greater difficulties faced by women from marginalized areas such as Zaachila Oriente.

The inexistence of a gender perspective is also clear amongst other relevant stakeholders. A local entrepreneurship incubator being interviewed for this project was asked about the types of services that could be available for women in the conditions of Zaachila Oriente. They replied “it is only now that you ask about it that I realized that the services we thought were available for everybody are completely inaccessible to this particular group, mostly due to the costs of transportation”.

Claudia Ramírez, Master in Public Policy with Gender Perspective, underlined that “in state public policies, the concept of entrepreneurship is not yet consolidated”. She mentioned the lack of mechanisms to link gender perspective with local programs, and the need to raise awareness about this issue: “politicians and other stakeholders don’t have a gender

perspective (...) there are few opportunities (for women) and when they are, they are incorrectly designed”.

Promoting a gender and intersectional perspective amongst local policy-makers and other stakeholders relevant for fostering entrepreneurship, can help bridge the gap between women seeking for support and local institutions and organizations.

12. Entrepreneurship for a good life:

Finally, the organizations interviewed and the literature reviewed point strongly towards a particular idea: **for most women, entrepreneurship is not just about economic benefits**. It might not even be the main reason to pursue or maintain a business. **Entrepreneurship is about creating a good life**, not just for women themselves, but for their families and community.

“Entrepreneurship is not to be measured only in economic terms, but also in “the good life”. A good life for a woman also means being able to have a role in their community, it can be having and caring for her children, getting an education, being healthy, as well as maintaining a business and having sales. Entrepreneurship is often linked only to an economic activity. For us, it’s a lot more than that.” – Mauricio del Villar, Puente a la Salud Comunitaria

This final best practice is linked with all the others. Without a clear understanding of what a good life means to a woman entrepreneur, we can hardly understand what success might look like to her, what her goals to grow can be, how far she wants to go, how important a support network can be. The bottom-line is not just numbers, it is overall well-being.

IX. Conclusions:

Women entrepreneurship and empowerment are fundamentally linked. In order to tackle entrepreneurship in contexts like the one in Zaachila Oriente, there is a strong need to understand and make visible structural constraints related not only to gender roles, but also with local culture, structural violence and inequality, public policy and territorial development. Whereas a hegemonic vision of entrepreneurship focuses mainly in individual capacity that can then create a “trickle-down effect”, we must be greatly aware of the already fractured social cohesion in Zaachila and how promoting entrepreneurship can either deepen that fracture, or create bridges in Oaxaca’s cultural tradition of communality and help women gain more control over their own lives and businesses.

Thus, women entrepreneurship can be understood as a creative activity in which a woman seeks not only economic benefits, but also achieves other personal objectives that contribute to her overall well-being and that of her family and community. Empowerment, understood as a process in which women gain control and conscience over their lives, conditions and context, is a necessary element for female entrepreneurship, as are strong support networks, relevant training and services and the transformation of traditional gender roles.

Entrepreneurship in contexts like Zaachila must foster economic development. However, its main goal is to achieve “a good life”. What a good life means varies between women and this must be taken into account when designing and implementing the training curriculum. Being flexible, able to adapt to specific needs and listening to women’s goals and problems (not just in business but in life) will allow the project to have more significant impacts to improve women’s lives.

Support networks and strong groups, even when dealing with individual enterprises, are also identified as elements of success. Promoting social cohesion, sorority and sharing benefits and experience with others helps women face cultural and gender constraints.

On a final note, the One-Stop-Shop for Micro-entrepreneurs in Oaxaca will be working with women from a particular background that is commonly overseen by researchers, government institutions, private service providers and even other civil organizations. Project systematization and follow-up will help create a precedent for other organizations in Mexico and for other women from marginalized peri-urban areas, seeking to improve their entrepreneurship capabilities in order to live a good life.

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