



## Promoting Opportunities for Women's Social Enterprise: A Regional Effort in Mexico

*Grupo de Educación Popular con Mujeres, A. C. (GEM)*

The increasing clout of international markets has reaped significant benefits worldwide, but has also deepened economic crises in many developing countries, where local infrastructure and enterprise have been weakened. This trend has affected men and women differently, reinforcing gender biases in the workplace and with regard to unemployment. Despite considerable strides in economic and social development, millions of people in Mexico continue to endure conditions of extreme poverty, with women ranking among the poorest of the poor. Issues related to class and ethnicity have compounded an unequal distribution of wealth and opportunity, in turn spurring the increasing marginalization of Mexican women.

These circumstances prompted the Grupo de Educación Popular con Mujeres, A. C. (GEM) ("The Popular Education Group for Women") to strengthen the ability of regional organizations to generate innovative development projects that benefit poor indigenous, peasant, and urban women. Founded in 1986, GEM is a Mexican nongovernmental organization (NGO) with the mission of assisting women's groups to transform unequal and discriminatory relationships between the sexes and to improve women's living and working conditions. To this end, GEM operates regional training centers, provides training and education programs, and conducts social and economic analysis. The current social enterprise project responded to the need to identify and implement solutions to women's economic problems and other gender-related concerns.<sup>1</sup>

### Objectives

The overall project goal was to combine action research, training, and organizational capacity-building activities to engage participants in analyzing and documenting their experiences, and in turn to facilitate strategic planning, advocacy, and job creation. Specific objectives of the project were to:

- ▶ Strengthen the collective regional presence of women leaders;
- ▶ Conduct training workshops to impart business and organizational development skills;
- ▶ Broaden the range of opportunities available to women;
- ▶ Enable representatives of regional centers to meet and discuss research on the impact of macroeconomic policies and how to influence local, regional, and national politics;
- ▶ Disseminate the debates and the proposals produced by this project in order to encourage similar initiatives in other parts of Mexico.

<sup>1</sup> "Social enterprise" projects facilitate not only income generation, but also social consciousness. They consider a range of interrelated aspects, including ecological issues, women's health and status, violence prevention, and access to job training and education.

## Project Plan

The project was conducted in 1997-98 in six Mexican states: Chiapas, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Guanajuato, Oaxaca, and Puebla.<sup>2</sup> It comprised five central components: research and systematization<sup>3</sup>; institutional strengthening of regional centers; participation in networks and civic organizations; influencing policy; and development of teaching and training materials. These processes were carried out individually by center staff and through training sessions, workshops, and meetings involving a range of NGOs, community members, and representatives from government institutions.

A large part of GEM's work consisted of developing a participatory methodology for community women, based primarily on a "enseñanza-aprendizaje" ("teaching-

learning") process. This was accomplished through an initial proposal developed jointly with the regional centers. Staff worked with community women to implement a process of learning and apprenticeship that enabled all participants to discuss work and life experiences, receive

feedback on strategies to improve their conditions, and contribute to project planning. Importantly, women from local communities participated in and contributed to workshops and other events on social enterprise, gender issues, and public policy.

Christina is a 35-year old Nahuatl from Xiloxochico. Married with two children, she is a member of the board of directors of La Maseualsiuame, an indigenous artisan women's cooperative, and participated in capacity-building activities run by the regional center in Puebla. During the project, the cooperative gained strength and visibility. The nearly 200 members of La Maseualsiuame have learned to work together, support each other, contribute to their household income, and improve the lives of their families and communities.

"In Maseualsiuame we formed teams of artisans who would go to other cities to sell goods," explains Christina. "At first it was difficult to convince our families and husbands to allow us to go, but the training we received and the support from our organization gave us the strength we needed to realize our potential and carry out our responsibilities. I am no longer fearful of speaking in public, talking to local officials, or being away from home...I never thought my life would change like this...I am now a leader, valued and respected in my community and in the region."

## Results

### Strengthening Institutions

Training and workshops enabled GEM, affiliate organizations, and individuals to share knowledge and information, which in turn contributed to lasting networks:

- ▶ More than 100 training sessions and workshops were held to strengthen the organizational and technical skills of the women who make up GEM and its regional centers. Strategic plans to further economic development and business skills were explored.
- ▶ Eighteen workshops were held with directors and staff from the regional centers, as well as about 100 women with whom the centers worked. Issue areas included: approaches to development; organizational skills;

development planning; policy advocacy; self-esteem; strategic planning; and the process of systematizing project experiences.

- ▶ To encourage collective information sharing and action, linkages were forged among regional centers, civic organizations, and government institutions. Through the trainings and ensuing local projects, five existing regional centers were strengthened and two new ones were established.

### Systematization and Dissemination

Systematic analysis was undertaken collaboratively by participants and project staff. This served to both strengthen the learning and organizational capacity of GEM and its regional centers and to generate

new employment opportunities for women. In addition, research and publication initiatives enabled GEM to share its work with NGOs and citizen groups—both throughout Mexico and in other countries—that seek alternative ways to combat poverty and inequality:

- ▶ The publication, *Construyendo un Nuevo Poder: Centros Regionales de Capacitación a la Mujer* (*Constructing a New Power: Regional Women's Training Centers*), is a detailed, final report on the experiences of establishing and strengthening regional centers. Designed as a case study, it describes the background, activities, and impact of, as well as lessons learned from, the project, thus serving as a model

<sup>2</sup> Participating centers were: CIDHAL and El Grupo de Investigación Asesoría y Acción para el Desarrollo Comunitario (Chiapas); Centro de Atención a la Mujer Trabajadora (Chihuahua); Promotora de la Calidad Empresarial (Coahuila); Centro Regional de la Red de Mujeres del Bajío (Guanajuato); Centro de Capacitación de la Mujer (Oaxaca); and Centro de Asesoría y Desarrollo entre Mujeres (Puebla).

<sup>3</sup> Systematization is a continuous process of participatory reflection and documentation of a project's processes and results, as well as the experiences of participants.

for possible replication in similar settings.

- ▶ Seven issues of the newsletter *Mujeres Empresarias (Women Entrepreneurs)* were published, and 3,600 copies were distributed to women participating in programs at regional centers, community members, local and regional NGOs, and other civic and governmental institutions.
- ▶ A reference manual and a journal were developed for each activity, meeting, and workshop conducted during the project. These research documents were distributed to directors and staff at each center.

### Impact on Local Communities

In addition to strengthening the capacity of the regional centers, GEM conducted activities with government agencies and other civic organizations, NGOs, and informal networks:

- ▶ Ongoing training programs on strategic planning, micro-enterprise, and income generation involved the staff of social service agencies and local, municipal, and national government officials. Such work will continue in the future with civic organizations and NGOs, enabling them to develop gender-sensitive local and regional development projects and to strengthen advocacy networks.
- ▶ Regional centers held 89 community workshops on 28 different topics with more than 1,300 women, in turn generating work projects in 100 communities. Funds were channeled to each regional center to initiate social sector projects that would both generate recognition of the center's work and create employment for women. Approximately

120 new jobs were created in numerous fields, including construction (homes and wells), shoemaking, furniture and toy production, sheep farming, agriculture, food production, health care, education, child care, violence prevention, and traditional medicine.

- ▶ The regional centers took part in numerous efforts to assist civic and community groups with organizational development and public relations. GEM conducted ten "Gender and Business Development" workshops in collaboration with other NGOs. Participants in the workshops included representatives of NGOs in other Mexican states that hoped to improve the entrepreneurial skills and capacity of their organizations and the women with whom they worked. New networks were formed, including the Chiapas-based *Red de Mujeres del Consamaloapan* ("Consamaloapan Women's Network").

### Policy Advocacy

For the first time, GEM channeled resources through projects and made specific agreements with the centers for training programs, business investment projects, community development, and financing activities. Opportunities were created for the regional centers to meet and exchange ideas with NGOs in order to foster joint planning and to maximize advocacy efforts at the local, regional, and national levels:

- ▶ The centers heightened awareness of women's work and their contributions to society. As a result, women are

increasingly visible in the media and have better representation in public life, in elected offices, and as participants and leaders in community activities, institutions, and political assemblies.

- ▶ Women from the regional centers acted as mediators and issue experts and drafted legislation on economic and social policies that affect women. In Chihuahua, for example, the *Centro de Atención a la Mujer Trabajadora* ("Center for Attention to Working Women") advocated for and achieved the establishment of a state government *estancia* (office or division) for women's issues. The Centro is working with the state Congress to develop a two-year plan to address such concerns as legal rights, family violence, child care, and health conditions in the workplace.

### Income Generation

Through skills training and collaboration with other agencies, the regional centers opened up new enterprise opportunities for women, thereby strengthening gender perspectives on work in the region.



*This GEM-supported tortilla factory serves dual purposes: generating employment for women and contributing to community health through the production of vitamin-enriched food*

Examples of small businesses and programs that resulted from GEM's work include the Children's Center Savings Association in Coahuila; the Enterprise Network in Guanajuato; the *Hotel Ecoturista* in Puebla; the Indigenous Women's Training Center in Oaxaca; a library in Chihuahua; and a revolving loan fund for housing construction in Chiapas.

### Conclusions

The work begun under this project strengthened institutions in civil society and enabled them to develop gender-sensitive local and regional development projects. The project also broadened GEM's concept of development and gender. GEM and its partners succeeded in their goal

of designing and implementing integrated programs that provide economic opportunities and social benefits to women and their families. At the same time, GEM fostered a strong network of women capable of advocating on behalf of themselves and their communities.

## Recommendations and Lessons Learned

The project yielded important information that can be applied to other efforts. Recommendations for the future include:

### ► Promote women's employment.

To enhance their economic and social status, women must have access to financial resources, as well as to integrated programs that include training in new technologies, market research, leadership, and other skills. It is also critical for women to influence development policies that promote women's employment. Governments should therefore be made aware of the positive role that women's economic activity plays—and must continue to play—in overall social and economic development.

### ► Foster political participation.

It is important to generate a sustainable political force to effect systemic change. GEM's experience has

shown that service delivery projects for women must be accompanied by advocacy efforts to change current policies, including drafting legislation, lobbying government officials, and collaborating with NGOs.

► **Replicate the program.** GEM's outreach was limited only by the absence of regional training centers for women in every state of Mexico. This project suggests that activities should be replicated in all states, with added emphasis on garnering assistance from federal and state governments to support regional centers. A critical next step for GEM will be to strengthen and expand its new network of regional centers, a process that will help foster broad-based support for women's improved status and political participation.

Lessons were learned that GEM and other organizations can apply to similar projects for women:

► **Cooperative learning is beneficial.** GEM found that the process of "teaching-learning" strengthened and promoted the institutions' capacity to serve rural women and was in some ways equally important as the actual organizational knowledge, business skills, and jobs acquired.

► **Documentation is key.** The systematization process showed that the regional centers needed to address a range of issues and problems because of the marginalization of women and the lack of opportunity that exists in areas where extreme poverty is prevalent. GEM's documentation of project processes can serve as a resource for other organizations, women's groups, and civic institutions seeking alternative means to combat poverty, transform unequal power relations, and increase women's access to and ability to compete in the labor market.

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