

**MOTHERS IN THE
INFORMAL ECONOMY:
A GENDER ANALYSIS
ON RESILIENCE
AND CHALLENGES
IN A RURAL AREA
OF SAN ANDRÉS
TLALNELHUAYOCAN**

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Abstract: This study explores the participation of mothers in the informal economy in rural contexts from a gender perspective. Through semi-structured interviews with five mothers, it was analyzed how they balance the demands of the home, child care and informal work. The results indicate that these women use informal work as a strategy for survival and economic improvement, despite the challenges and sacrifices that it entails. This study highlights the resilience of these women and the need for policies that recognize and support their contribution to the economy.

Keywords: informal economy, mothers, gender, rural areas, resilience.

INTRODUCTION

The informal economy is a reality in many regions of Mexico, and its understanding is essential for the design of effective public policies. In particular, the role of mothers in this other so-called informal economy is an area that requires more attention. Despite their significant contribution to the economy, mothers whose jobs are in the informal sector often face precarious working conditions, economic insecurity, and a lack of social protection.

In addition, mothers who participate in the informal economy must balance this work with housework, caring for children and the elderly. This balance can be especially challenging in rural contexts, where formal employment opportunities may be limited and social support networks may be less accessible.

Therefore, this research is necessary to shed light on the strategies these women use to navigate these complex realities. By doing so, we can provide valuable information that leads to the creation of policies and programs that support mothers in rural contexts and improve their economic and social well-being.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

In 2020, 41.9% of Mexicans were poor, according to the measurement of the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL), and 8.5% were in extreme poverty, in which their income is not enough for the minimum vital food (CONEVAL, 2020). This situation is aggravated in marginalized contexts, where formal jobs are limited and the informal economy becomes a strategy of resistance and fight against marginalization.

In this context, mothers of families face additional challenges. Although they represent a significant part of the country's labor force, their participation in the informal sector is especially high. According to a report from the Laboratory for Analysis of Commerce, Economy and Business (LACEN), women who work in the informal sector contribute 9 million pesos a day to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Mexico (FORBES WOMEN, 2021). However, these same women are at greater risk of living in poverty.

In addition, women in Mexico face workloads that can quadruple. On the one hand, there are the demands and care of the home and family, which often fall disproportionately on them, sometimes they are also in charge of caring for the elderly. On the other hand, there is informal work, which is necessary to supplement the household income. This situation can lead to an imbalance in the distribution of time, with women working more hours a week than men.

This study seeks to better understand how mothers in rural Mexican contexts navigate this reality, balancing the demands of home, family, as well as informal work. By doing so, we hope to shed light on the strategies that these women use to improve their economy and, ultimately, provide information that can be used to design specific support programs for this sector.

OBJECTIVES

GENERAL

- Understand the strategies that mothers of families in rural contexts in Mexico use to balance work at home, child care and work in the informal sector.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

- Describe the socioeconomic context of mothers in rural areas who participate in the informal economy.
- Identify the informal economic activities in which these mothers participate.
- Explore how these women balance the demands of working at home, childcare and informal work.
- Analyze the impact of participation in the informal economy on the economic and social well-being of these mothers.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a qualitative design, which facilitates an approach to understanding the experiences and perceptions of mothers in rural contexts who work in the informal sector (HERNÁNDEZ, FERNÁNDEZ, & BAPTISTA, 2014). The sample of this research was made up of five mothers from a low socioeconomic context in a rural area of San Andrés Tlaxnelhuayocan, Veracruz, who currently participate in the informal economy. The participants were selected using a directed sampling, looking for women who can provide a rich and detailed vision of the problem under study.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, which allowed for a flexible conversation tailored to each participant, while ensuring key issues were addressed. The interviews will focus on the following

variables:

- Economic situation: The current economic situation of the participants will be explored and how it is related to their participation in the informal economy.
- Economic activities that they carry out: The specific economic activities that the participants carry out within the informal sector will be inquired about.
- Balancing the demands of work, home, children and the elderly: Participants will be asked how they balance the demands of work at home, family and informal work.
- Impact of the informal economy on the family: It will explore how participation in the informal economy affects the family in economic and social terms.

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis, which involves the identification, analysis, and interpretation of patterns (themes) within the data (BRAUN, CLARKE, & RANCE, 2018). This process includes the coding of the data, the identification of themes, the review and definition of themes, and the production of the report. This approach allowed for a detailed and rich understanding of the experiences and perceptions of the participants.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

INFORMAL WORK

All economic activities of workers and economic units not covered or insufficiently regulated by formal laws and regulations are considered informal by the International Labor Organization (ILO). This can include both informal employment (for example, unregistered self-employed workers, unpaid family workers) and employment in the informal sector (for example, unregistered or

unincorporated companies), in addition to this, the ILO warns that “informality exposes workers to a greater risk of vulnerability and precariousness” (ILO, 2023).

In particular, it highlights the features that characterize the informal sector, which is defined as a set of production units that are not constituted as companies and that produce goods or services with the main objective of generating employment and income for the people involved (EUROSTAT, 2019).

According to the World Bank, informality is represented by all economic activities carried out outside the government’s fiscal regulations. This includes self-employment, informal employment, employment outside the formal sector, and labor without pension insurance (WORLDBANK, 2021)

An ILO report highlights that informal work is often determined by the lack of labor rights and social protection, job insecurity and lower income. In addition, these workers often lack basic services and adequate infrastructure, and have few formal training opportunities.

In other words, poverty at work occurs when the income of a family is insufficient to cover the basic needs of all its members, in this sense there are gender differences, the percentage of men in work poverty is 35.6%, which is 4.1% less than employed women (39.7%) (MEXICO, HOW ARE WE GOING?, 2023).

These definitions highlight the diversity and complexity of informal work, as well as the challenges it poses in terms of labor protection, income security, economic development and gender equality.

INFORMAL WORK IN RURAL CONTEXTS

Informal work in rural contexts is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by a variety of economic, social and cultural

factors. According to Acevedo et al. (2021) informal work in rural areas is often carried out in precarious conditions, with low income and little or no social protection. In the rural context, informal work can be a survival strategy for poor families without access to jobs in the formal economy. Alter (2003) highlights that informal work can provide a significant source of income, especially in regions where formal employment opportunities are limited.

Furthermore, informal work in rural contexts can be influenced by gender dynamics and cultural norms. According to Chen and Carré (2020) women in rural areas may be particularly represented in the informal sector, often doing work related to care and the home. On the other hand, informal work in rural contexts can have economic and social development implications, it can also contribute to the local economy and provide a source of employment for people who would otherwise be unemployed, however, it can also perpetuate poverty. and inequality if not properly regulated. (ILO, 2018)

GENDER PERSPECTIVE IN INFORMAL WORK

The gender approach in informal work is a variable of great importance for the analysis of current labor and economic dynamics. This perspective allows us to understand how gender inequalities are manifested and perpetuated in the informal sector of the economy. These inequalities can be even more pronounced for mothers working in the informal sector in rural contexts, where formal employment opportunities can be especially limited (ACEVEDO, et al., 2021).

The ILO notes that women are more likely than men to work in the unpaid care sector in most parts of the world. This overrepresentation of women in the unpaid care sector may be related to a number of factors, including gender discrimination

in the formal labor market, unpaid care responsibilities that often fall on women, and lack of opportunities of education and training for women (ILO, 2013).

Furthermore, women working in the informal sector often face more precarious working conditions than their male counterparts. According to Julià, Belvis, Vives, Tarafa, and Benach (2019), women in the informal sector tend to have lower incomes, less job security, and less access to employment benefits such as social security and health protection at work. Women may also have a harder time paying their bills with their earnings, work longer hours, have more hours of unpaid part-time work, receive less training and knowledge about occupational health and safety, have fewer non-wage benefits, and have less contact with their bosses.

It has been shown that social constructions such as gender have an independent impact on health disparities, which can be aggravated when gender interacts with other social factors such as employment and work circumstances (BESOAIN-SALDAÑA, FLORES, MUÑOZ, & SANHUEZA, 2022). Women can still suffer economic exclusion and discrimination due to the persistence of gender stereotypes in the social imagination, especially among businessmen, public officials and other economic agents. According to Buzó and Báez (2020), it is less likely that women can overcome segregation and participate on an equal footing in political, social and economic life if there are not enough ways to reconcile work and family life.

On the other hand, informal work can provide women with a vital source of income and a way to balance the demands of paid and unpaid work. However, it can also perpetuate gender inequalities and contribute to the feminization of poverty if underlying inequalities in the labor market and in society at large are not addressed (ALTER,

2003). Women not only show higher levels of discouragement and sadness at work than men, but they are also more afraid of demanding better conditions than men (BESOAIN-SALDAÑA, FLORES, MUÑOZ, & SANHUEZA, 2022). In conclusion, it is important to look at informal work from a gender point of view to understand how men and women are treated differently in the labor market and to develop policies and plans that favor gender equality at work.

MOTHERS OF FAMILIES AND INFORMAL WORK

Women heads of family in Latin America face a considerable challenge due to the precariousness of their situation, the lack of services such as daycare or full-time schools, to balance work at home with obtaining money, these women resort to various strategies.

One of these strategies is to seek employment in the informal sector, which allows the presence of children and offers the necessary flexibility to combine home and work responsibilities (ORTIZ, 1994; BURGOS & RODRÍGUEZ, 2020). This type of employment aligns with culturally linked responsibilities for women, such as caring for children and the elderly. However, this type of production often results in low productivity and a lack of labor protection.

Another strategy is to carry out income-generating activities at home, although this integration of domestic and work responsibilities has been criticized because it does not reduce the burden of domestic chores, it has also been pointed out as a resource to empower mothers. (GAMEZ, WILSON, & BONCHEVA, 2010). However, it is important to highlight that women often do not have the same opportunities as men in the informal sector.

The less risky, lower paid, and lower social value nature of the informal activities carried

out by women, such as domestic service, self-employment, and unpaid work in small and medium-sized domestic businesses, places them in the lowest strata of the structure. occupational (CALDERON, 2018).

Family mothers also rely on exchange and reciprocity networks, these networks provide income and services, such as child care, and allow access to loans and transactions in cash and in kind (ORTIZ, 1994). In situations of poverty, families may resort to leaving children at home alone, hiring the help of an older sibling, or taking the children to work (CASSIRER & ADDATI, 2007). Despite the challenges, these strategies and resources allow mothers to ensure the survival of their families.

RESULTS

DESCRIBE THE SOCIOECONOMIC CONTEXT OF MOTHERS IN RURAL AREAS WHO PARTICIPATE IN THE INFORMAL ECONOMY

The first objective of this study focused on describing the socioeconomic context of the mothers. Through the interviews, it was possible to gain a deeper insight into the circumstances and challenges these women face.

First of all, it is important to highlight that all the women interviewed participate in some form of informal work. As Rosa mentioned, she works in a store in the morning, while Lorena sells products from catalogs, María does manicures and pedicures at home, Carmen sells sweets from a table outside her house, and Ana sells clothes and used items at the market. These jobs, although varied, share the characteristic of being informal and, in many cases, precarious.

The socioeconomic context of these women is complex and challenging, as Carmen pointed out, “I am strong and

proud. Despite my situation, I never ask for help.” This statement reflects the resilience and strength of these women in the face of economic adversity. On the other hand, Lorena, despite her difficulties, says that she maintains “a positive and outgoing attitude”, which enables a network of clients for her catalog sales business.

Regarding the family situation, all the women interviewed are responsible for the care of their children. In Rosa’s case, in addition to her three children, she also cares for her mother and her brother. This additional responsibility can increase the workload and stress, further limiting her economic opportunities.

In terms of housing, all the women interviewed live in modest conditions. Ana, for example, lives in a small room in her aunt’s house. These housing conditions may reflect the precariousness of her jobs and the lack of opportunities for economic advancement.

The socioeconomic context of mothers in rural areas who participate in the informal economy is challenging. Despite adversity, these women show remarkable resilience and constantly seek ways to improve their situation and that of their families.

IDENTIFY THE INFORMAL ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES IN WHICH THESE MOTHERS PARTICIPATE

Through the interviews, a variety of informal jobs could be observed, all of them with particular characteristics that reflect the limitations and opportunities that these women face in their socioeconomic context. Rosa, for example, works in a store in the morning. She mentioned, “It’s hard work, but it’s what I can do to support my family.” This job, while providing an income, is likely low-paying with few opportunities for growth.

On the other hand, Lorena sells products by catalog. She shared: “I like this job because

I can do it in my free time and it allows me to be with my children.” This type of work, while flexible, can be unstable and relies heavily on Lorena’s network of contacts. María performs manicures and pedicures at home. She said: “I like my job because I can use my creativity and make people feel good about themselves.” Although this job allows Maria to use her skills and provide a valuable service, it is likely to be a low-paying job with no job benefits.

Carmen sells candy from a table outside her house. She commented, “I don’t earn much, but it’s enough to take care of my husband and maintain our house.” This work, while providing an income, is likely to be precarious and dependent on local demand. Finally, Ana sells used clothing and items at the market. She expressed, “I like to look for unique pieces to sell. It’s like a treasure.” This job, while allowing Ana to utilize her interest in fashion, is likely unstable and dependent on the availability of products to sell.

From a gender perspective, it is important to highlight that all these informal economic activities are traditionally feminized jobs, characterized by flexibility, low pay, and a lack of job benefits. These positions reflect the need for women to combine paid work with their obligations as caregivers.

EXPLORE HOW THESE WOMEN BALANCE THE DEMANDS OF WORKING AT HOME, CHILDCARE AND INFORMAL WORK

The responses of the interviewees revealed a series of strategies and challenges in this balance. Rosa, who works in a store in the morning, mentioned: “It’s a challenge, but I try to organize my time the best I can. When I’m not in the store, I’m at home with my children.” This statement reflects the double shift that many women face, having to balance paid work with their other responsibilities.

Lorena, who sells products by catalog,

shared: “Sometimes it is difficult, but I try to do my work when my children are at school or sleeping.” This strategy of working in “down time” is common among mothers who work in the informal sector, as it allows them to balance the demands of work and childcare.

Maria, who performs manicures and pedicures at home, said: “Sometimes I take my daughter with me when I go to work. She plays while I work.” This strategy of integrating childcare with work is another way that mothers in the informal sector balance these demands.

Carmen, who sells sweets from a table outside her house, commented: “My job allows me to be at home and take care of my husband. When I’m not selling sweets, I’m doing housework.” In this case, Carmen’s informal job allows her to combine her paid work with caring for her sick husband.

Finally, Ana, who sells used clothing and items at the market, expressed: “My job is flexible, so I can adjust it to my son’s needs. When he is at school, I am at the market.” This flexibility is a key feature of informal work that allows mothers like Ana to balance work and childcare.

These mothers of families use a variety of strategies to balance their responsibilities and informal work. However, they also face significant challenges, such as lack of support, job insecurity and lack of childcare support. These challenges reflect gender inequalities and the need for policies and services that support this sector.

ANALYZE THE IMPACT OF PARTICIPATION IN THE INFORMAL ECONOMY ON THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL WELL-BEING OF THESE MOTHERS

The interviewees’ responses provided valuable insight into the benefits and challenges of working in the informal sector.

Rosa, who works in a store in the morning, shared: “It helps me support my family, but it’s not enough. Sometimes I have to juggle bills and school expenses.” This statement reflects the economic precariousness that often accompanies informal work, where income can be unstable and not always sufficient to cover basic needs.

Lorena, who sells products by catalog, said, “It gives me the flexibility I need to take care of my children, but it’s not always easy. Sometimes I feel stressed and exhausted.” This response highlights the emotional and physical impact of balancing work and childcare, a challenge that is particularly acute for single mothers like Lorena.

Maria, who does manicures and pedicures at home, said, “I can be creative and do something I like, but it’s not always easy. Sometimes clients cancel at the last minute or don’t pay me on time.” This statement highlights the specific challenges of informal work, such as the lack of labor protections and income uncertainty.

Carmen, who sells sweets from a table outside her house, commented, “It gives me something to do and helps me feel useful. But I don’t earn much and sometimes I worry about the future.” This response reflects how informal work can provide a sense of purpose and self-esteem, but can also raise concerns about long-term economic security.

Finally, Ana, who sells used clothing and items at the market, said, “I can support my son, but sometimes it’s hard. I don’t always sell enough and sometimes I worry about how we’re going to survive.” This statement highlights the economic precariousness that often accompanies informal work, as well as the stress and anxiety it can generate.

Participation in the informal economy has a significant impact on the economic and social well-being of these mothers. While it provides a source of income and some flexibility, it also

comes with significant challenges, including economic precariousness, stress, and a lack of job protections. These findings underscore the need for policies and services that support working mothers in the informal sector and address gender inequalities at work and at home.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided a detailed view of the experiences of mothers who participate in the informal economy in a rural area of San Andrés Tlaxnelhuayocan, Veracruz. Through the interviews, it has been possible to explore how these women navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by informal work, and how they balance the demands of work, home and childcare.

The findings of this study highlight the precariousness and vulnerability that often characterize informal work. Despite providing a source of income and some flexibility, informal work also comes with significant challenges, including income instability, lack of job protections, and the stress of balancing work and family responsibilities. These challenges are compounded by gender inequalities and social norms that place most caregiving responsibilities on women.

At the same time, this study has also highlighted the resilience and agency of these mothers. Despite the difficulties, these women show a remarkable ability to adapt and seek ways to improve their situation and that of their families. Their participation in the informal economy not only provides them with a source of income, but also allows them to exercise some control over their time and work, which is especially valuable in the context of their multiple responsibilities.

These findings have important implications for policies and services to support mothers in the informal economy. It is crucial that these interventions recognize and address the

gender inequalities and structural barriers that these women face. This includes the need for social protection policies that provide adequate support to mothers working in the informal sector, as well as promoting decent work opportunities and improving working conditions in this sector.

In conclusion, this study underlines the importance of adopting a gender perspective in research and policy on informal work. By doing so, we can move towards an economy that recognizes and values the work of all people, and that promotes equity and justice for mothers in the informal economy.

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