

Economic opportunities for Mexican women from low socioeconomic status: results from a technical and life skills training program

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Oportunidades económicas para mujeres mexicanas de nivel socioeconómico bajo: resultados de un programa de capacitación técnica de habilidades para la vida

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Abstract

This study presents the outcomes of a technical and life-skills training program in Mexico aimed to help women from low socioeconomic status (SES) find formal employment in sales, retail, and/or customer service. To determine the extent to which the program reached its target population and its impacts, researchers analyzed a national database of over sixty-eight thousand Mexican beneficiaries from 2016 to 2020 and conducted telephone surveys with a representative sample of women beneficiaries in Veracruz. Results from the national-level analysis of 5,326 women participants identified as low SES indicate that 23 % found better economic and educational opportunities. The state-level analysis of 94 low SES women in Veracruz was higher, with 40 % reporting to have found better opportunities; of those who reported salary information, roughly half improved their income. Lessons learned are discussed regarding reaching target populations and the potential of job training programs in developing countries.

Keywords: job training, economic empowerment, gender inequality, Mexico, Latin America.

Resumen

En este estudio, se presentan los resultados de un programa de capacitación técnica y de habilidades para la vida en México, destinado a ayudar a mujeres de bajo nivel socioeconómico a encontrar un empleo formal en ventas, en el comercio minorista o en atención al cliente. Para determinar en qué medida el programa llegó a su población objetivo y sus impactos, los investigadores analizaron una base de datos nacional de más de sesenta y ocho mil beneficiarios mexicanos, entre 2016 y 2020, y realizaron encuestas telefónicas con una muestra representativa de mujeres beneficiarias en Veracruz. Los resultados del análisis a nivel nacional de 5326 mujeres participantes identificadas como de bajo nivel socioeconómico indican que el 23 % encontró mejores oportunidades económicas y educativas. El análisis a nivel estatal de 94 mujeres de bajo nivel socioeconómico en Veracruz fue más alto, con un 40 % reportando haber encontrado mejores oportunidades; de quienes informaron sobre la remuneración, aproximadamente la mitad mejoró sus ingresos. Se discute acerca de las lecciones aprendidas sobre cómo llegar a las poblaciones objetivo, así como el potencial de los programas de capacitación laboral en los países en desarrollo.

Palabras clave: capacitación laboral, empoderamiento económico, desigualdad de género, México, Latinoamérica.

1 Introduction

Job training programs for women aim to promote human capital development and skill acquisition, thereby increasing access and inclusion to the formal labor market and economic autonomy. Proyecto VIVE, an initiative of the nonprofit Trust for the Americas affiliated with the Organization of American States (OAS), offered 40 hours of free technical and life-skills training to over sixty-eight thousand people (78.5 % women) from 2016 to 2020. The objective was to specifically reach Mexican women from groups or contexts of economic and/or social vulnerability (e.g., low socioeconomic status [SES], poor academic performance, victims of gender-based violence or from violent social environments, or unemployed or working in the informal sector) to prepare them for better job opportunities and contribute to their economic empowerment by increasing their skills in sales, retail, customer service, entrepreneurship, effective communication and leadership (Trust for the Americas 2019).

This article reports our findings to the research questions: to what extent did Proyecto VIVE a) reach its target population, b) generate economic outcomes, and c) enable and/or facilitate empowerment processes? The present research focuses on the extent to which Proyecto VIVE was able to reach its target population and the impact it generated in terms of economic outcomes and empowerment. The analysis was divided into two parts. The first was conducted at a national level based on Proyecto VIVE's database, which included the information of over sixty-eight thousand beneficiaries from 2016 to 2020, with the purpose of identifying women that fit the target population, specifically women from SES. To further understand their conditions of vulnerability and professional and personal changes experienced after the training, the second part of the analysis was a case study of women beneficiaries from Veracruz in which researchers conducted telephone surveys with a random sample of 94 women identified as low SES from the national level database. Findings suggest some reported increases in finding better economic and educational opportunities at the national level, as well as improvements in income specifically in the case-study of Veracruz. However, defining and reaching women from vulnerable groups proved to be challenging overall.

The paper begins by reviewing previous research on women's exclusion from and barriers to entering and prospering in the job market, the outcomes of job training programs for women, and background information on the specific job training program analyzed. In the next sections, it is explained the methodology and results. The paper concludes with a discussion about the potential outcomes of job training programs for promoting skills development of women in developing countries.

2 Gender inequalities and the labor market

Pre-market or entry barriers and the barriers within markets themselves contribute to the exclusion of women from the workforce, as well as the disparity between men and women within the labor market itself (Canelas & Salazar 2014). Important pre-market barriers include the unequal distribution of unpaid domestic and care work (Vogel 2000, Bruschini 2006), in which women are expected to conform to cultural and social norms that assign women the labor related to social reproduction (Pagán & Sánchez 2000, Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe [CEPAL] 2019, Vaca-Trigo 2019). This is especially true in the case in Latin America, where low levels of human capital and the perpetuation of social norms and expectations that relegate women to the domestic sphere continue to disproportionately burden them with most household duties (Canelas & Salazar 2014).

First, the unequal distribution of domestic tasks may discourage women from entering the formal and/or informal labor markets, since they must reconcile unpaid domestic labor with their workday. They often accept jobs in low-productivity sectors (mostly related with domestic labor and care, but also in low-skilled manufacturing sectors such as *maquiladoras*), part-time jobs or jobs in the informal labor market, a sector in which women are overrepresented, with low salaries and no access to social security (Garduño-Rivera 2013, Vaca-Trigo 2019).

Second, another important entry barrier for women is education. As Heath and Jayachandran (2017) argue, as economies move forward and require less physically skilled workers or «brawn-based work», education regarding technological literacy, skill acquirement, social abilities (such as leadership and management), life-skills, entrepreneurship, and critical thinking have become essential assets to enter the labor market. Despite wider representation of women in secondary and postsecondary educational levels globally, several disadvantages persist for women regarding education and attaining skills (Rico & Trucco 2014). First, gender segmentation and stereotyping have an important presence through the educational process, even from very early phases (Tiedemann 2000), which discourages women to aspire to leadership roles or to pursue careers in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) sector and encourages their integration into low-paying sectors (Vaca-Trigo 2019). Additionally, women face disadvantages regarding access to continuous and permanent skill-related education due to the prioritization of domestic work and care responsibilities (Rico & Trucco 2014).

Third, women who do enter the labor market must overcome the internal barriers of the job market; mainly, gendered occupational segregation. Gendered occupational segregation occurs when women occupy jobs that perpetuate gender roles as an extension of the patriarchal nature of the labor market (CEPAL 2017). This occupational segregation is reflected by the concentration of women in jobs in the service, care, food, and hospitality sectors, as these jobs are seen as nurturing, care-taking roles associated with «femaleness» (Chow & Berheide 1988). Because these jobs are considered secondary or supporting, they are usually less valued in economic terms and therefore less remunerated, while at the same time exclude women from high-ranking positions in which they can be decision-makers (Vaca-Trigo 2019). Finally, these difficulties are aggravated in Latin American societies for indigenous or afro-descendant women that face intersectional discrimination related to language, gender, and ethnicity (Pagán & Sánchez 2000, Canelas & Salazar 2014).

Fourth, women do not only face a «double-shift» in which their longer involves fulfilling more domestic and care duties than men, but they also face gender segmentation of jobs: this creates a vicious circle of economic, social, and cultural conditions that place women at a disadvantage (Vogel 2000, Bruschini 2006, CEPAL 2019). Harlan and Berheide (1994) conceptualize this as the «sticky floor», which refers to the «low-paying, low-prestige, and, most important, low-mobility jobs typically held by women» and the barriers women face for vertical mobility in their labor trajectories (Berheide 2013, p. 825). Hence, women do not only struggle to enter the formal labor market but also to aspire to better positions, higher salaries, and full-time jobs (Buquet & Moreno 2017, Vaca-Trigo 2019). Finally, Pagán and Sánchez (2000) argue that these barriers in the formal labor market make self-employment an attractive option for women (who are overrepresented in this sector), especially for those who are women and/or have young children.

Fifth, the consequences of labor market exclusion are not only economic, but they also impact women's lives in other aspects. Previous research has established that the capacity of women to exercise their economic autonomy is interconnected with political and physical aspects (Muñoz Rojas 2017, Vaca-Trigo 2019); for example, earning wages allows women to become relevant decision-makers in their households, since primary earners make important decisions regarding the allocation of resources in this unit (Pepin 2019). Women who do not work may face other vulnerabilities: for example, compared to women who work, women who do not work have lower decision-making power and may become economic dependent (Lupica 2015), have a higher risk of becoming victims of physical, psychological, and/or sexual gender violence (Klevens 2001), and may live in poverty in old age, due to being unaffiliated with social security system during their lifetime (Richardson 1999).

In sum, various factors place women at a disadvantage both before entering the labor market and within the labor market itself and serve to reinforce one another. The cultural and social norms that assign women caretaking responsibilities and burden them with domestic work may limit some women from attaining education and/or acquiring marketable skills needed to secure quality employment, leading them to pursue sectors or jobs with more flexibility in the formal and informal markets or relegate them to low-paying secondary jobs associated with service and caretaking. This is especially true for women from disadvantaged groups in a society, particularly for those from low SES backgrounds and minority groups. The consequences are far-reaching, impacting their economic and financial security and, potentially, their political power and physical well-being.

3 Job training programs for women

In response to the problem in which women, especially those from low SES, are excluded from the labor market or segregated to low-productive sectors, both the private and public sectors have implemented job training programs. This strategy aims to promote the inclusion of women in the labor force through human capital development and skill acquisition, thereby increasing their access to better formal work opportunities and economic autonomy (Weller 2009, Canelas & Salazar 2014, Muñoz Rojas 2017). Due to the heterogeneity and diversity of structures and characteristics of job training programs, there is no unified classification of job training programs. However, basic aspects of job training programs include whether the program is part of the formal education system or not, the target population, and the goal of the policies (e.g., job performance or insertion).

Job training programs can be considered as part of labor market programs (LMP), which are of two types: passive and active. Passive LMPs are often focused on economic subsidies for unemployed persons (such as unemployment compensation and early retirement pensions) who are trying to access the job market (OECD 1993, Martin & Grubb 2001). As presented in Table 1, active LMPs are focused on reducing structural unemployment through a wider scope of policies most commonly classified in four to five categories: direct job creation, support for micro-enterprise development, intermediary programs or job search agencies (reducing inefficiencies by matching job-seekers to employers), wage and employment subsidies, and training and re-training of job-related skills (Dar & Tzannatos 1999, Heckman *et al.* 1999, Betcherman *et al.* 2004, Fernández Garrido *et al.* 2013). In terms of job training specifically, according to Urzúa and Puentes (2010), any private or public efforts to enhance the abilities of individuals to enter or re-enter the labor market can be considered training.

Focus	Examples
Direct job creation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Public service employment - Programs that provide temporary work experience
Job-matching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intermediary programs or job search agencies that match jobseekers to public or private employers
Micro-enterprise development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Financial support (e.g., grants or loans) - Technical training and support for micro-enterprises
Support to private firms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Programs that provide wage and/or employment subsidies
Training and/or re-training of job-related skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Technical training for youth inside or outside the educational system - Training for the long term unemployed - Retraining for those laid off in masse - Apprenticeships

Table 1

Types of active LMPs

Source: Dar and Tzannatos (1999), Heckman *et al.* (1999), Urzúa and Puentes (2010).

Furthermore, these LMPs (both active and passive) play a key role in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals in low- and middle-income countries, especially related to decent work and economic growth, reducing inequality, and potentially gender inequality, when specifically focused on women; in this way, LMPs can potentially improve the well-being of individuals, as well as their families and communities (Thimmappa *et al.* 2021).

Active LMPs related to job training have been developed as a tool of public policy inside and outside the formal education system. The incorporation of job training as part of the education model differs across countries; for example, France employs a vocational model, Germany has adopted a dual system based on both vocational education and apprenticeship programs and the United States has a system like the French in which secondary education can include vocational training. However, the Latin America model is compensatory; this means that vocational training is mostly offered outside the formal education system, offering a flexible scheme in which people from a wide range of ages and sometimes without access to formal education can be part of those programs, while at the same time adapting the training programs to the necessities of the market (Urzúa & Puentes 2010). It is worth mentioning that Mexico, the country in which the present research is focused, does offer some vocational training opportunities at technical high schools whose students tend to come from lower SES.

Results of job training programs vary. In existing literature, it has identified several difficulties in measuring the impacts of job training programs, including the wide array and types of programs, methodologies, and beneficiaries, as well as data scarcity, the lack of impact evaluations, and the vocational or compensatory nature of the initiatives, which may explain the inconclusive results generally of the impacts of job-training programs (Dar & Tzannatos 1999, Heckman *et al.* 1999, Fitzenberger *et al.* 2008, Urzúa & Puentes 2010).

The complexity of studying the impact of job training on women's employment status goes beyond studying a causal relationship between job training and job access. Leahey (2001) establishes that «a unique combination of independent and dependent variables» (p. 32) influence the outcomes of those programs on the future employment of their beneficiaries; individual variables such as race and work experience, community-level variables regarding economic factors (*e.g.*, unemployment rate), and geographic location variables (*e.g.*, metropolitan or rural), as well as program variables (*e.g.*, the length and types of training) have an important effect on potential access to part- or full-time jobs and income improvement. Therefore, efforts towards reducing the vulnerability of women through job training must consider the context and factors from the micro to macro level.

In terms of the type of training, multidimensional programs that are longer in duration and address several deficiencies have a better impact on the beneficiaries in terms of an increase of income or access to a full-time job (Leahey 2001, Betcherman *et al.* 2004, Fitzenberger *et al.* 2008). At the same time, carefully targeted programs directed toward a specific group in contrast to general programs (Dar & Tzannatos 1999), in which non-governmental actors and private partnerships are involved (Urzúa & Puentes 2010) and both cognitive and non-cognitive skills are taught (Heckman *et al.* 2006), have shown to be more effective in increasing the employability of its beneficiaries.

Much of the general literature on active LMPs, specifically job training programs, has concentrated on the United States, Canada, and some European countries, while adopting mostly quasi-experimental methods to evaluate those programs (Martin & Grubb 2001, Card *et al.* 2010, Urzúa & Puentes 2010). Although the effects of training differ among the demographic groups and locations where the programs are implemented (Heckman *et al.* 1999), some evidence suggests that women tend to benefit more in comparison to men (Friedlander *et al.* 1997), especially from formal classroom training and on-the-job training (Martin & Grubb 2001).

Meta-evaluations of job-training programs in OECD and European Union countries have similarly evidenced that job-related training has better outcomes for adult women, in comparison to adult men

and young people, having a significant effect on reducing unemployment by improving employment prospects (Friedlander *et al.* 1997, Leahey 2001, Martin & Grubb 2001, Fitzenberger *et al.* 2008, Guzmán 2014). Positive results in these types of programs are often visible in the medium-term, around two to three years (Card *et al.* 2010).

However, other research in the United States and Europe on government-funded job training programs, such as Leahey's work (2001), has demonstrated unremarkable outcomes in terms of increasing job access for vulnerable women; similarly, Card *et al.* (2010) found that active LMPs, specifically classroom and on-the-job training, have the same effects on women as men. Moreover, Heckman *et al.* (1999) note that the rate of social return is low and the increase of income of the beneficiaries is not significant enough to lift them out of poverty.

Experimental studies regarding job training programs in Latin America, such as Attanasio *et al.*'s (2011) research, have highlighted the positive effects for young women in terms of access to formal jobs and higher earnings, with greater net-gains in the long term, in comparison to training programs in developed countries. Card *et al.* (2011) also found that the wages of the participants of job training programs increased by a modest percentage. Additionally, Ñopo *et al.* (2008) provide evidence that active LMPs related to increasing the level of skills of the population (such as job training) can have a more significant effect on middle- and low-income countries in contrast to developed countries. Nonetheless, the overall experience of job training programs in Latin America is difficult to evaluate since most of the programs implemented often lack either a reliable database or impact evaluations (Urzúa & Puentes 2010).

In sum, although results of studies on the impact of job training programs differ, existing evidence suggests that formal classroom training and on-the-job training could be beneficial for women in developing countries. Moreover, programs that are directed toward a specific group and address various skill development areas, including cognitive and non-cognitive skills, could be more effective.

4 Gender inequalities in Mexico and Proyecto VIVE

Latin America is well known for being one of the most unequal regions of the world, especially in terms of wealth and income. Additionally, it is also home to societies fraught with gender inequalities across various dimensions. In the case of Mexico, although the gender gap in education has decreased, the gender gap in employment remains large: according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2020), the most re-

cent data indicate that approximately 48 % of working-age women (fourteen-sixty-four years old) are employed, compared to about 82 % of men. Women are also likely to work in the informal sector in low-paying positions, without access to social security and protection. Additionally, a lack of public policies that effectively support working mothers and families lead to less mothers working and, for those who do work, low salaries and little advancement (OECD 2017).

Given the gender gap in employment and the low-quality jobs that Mexican women are likely to have, Proyecto VIVE was implemented in Mexico for women from SES and other vulnerable groups (e.g., unemployed or working in the informal sector, and victims of gender-based violence or from violent social environments). The goal was to improve their skills in sales, retail, customer service, entrepreneurship, effective communication, and leadership, to prepare them for better job opportunities and contribute to their economic empowerment (Trust for the Americas 2019). Importantly, a major funder of Proyecto VIVE was the Wal-Mart Foundation, which had a particular interest in women receiving training, to become successfully employed by existing businesses or companies.

Proyecto VIVE was an initiative of The Trust for the Americas, a non-profit organization established in 1997 and affiliated with the OAS, whose objective is to establish and boost alliances between the public and private sector, to create initiatives that promote educational and economic opportunities, as well as to promote government transparency in Latin America and the Caribbean (Trust for the Americas 2019).

The target population of the job training program as defined in the proposal of the Trust for the Americas (2015) are young women with the following characteristics: low socioeconomic level, poor academic performance, from violent social environments, unemployed or working in the informal sector and seeking to obtain their first job in the retail or sales. In practice, the free 40-hour training was open to women above fifteen years old who could read and write in 29 states¹ in Mexico.

The full 40-hour training consisted of sessions on customer support, sales, retail, marketing, and soft skill components (e.g., leadership and self-esteem). There was also a module on gender-based violence prevention that was later incorporated. Shorter, intensive, training sessions of 8 and 20 hours, solely focused on sales, retail and marketing were also offered. After the training, some support was offered to program graduates in their process of job-seeking and job-insertion. Although the main objective of the project was for the beneficiaries to find employment with existing companies in the formal sector, which was also the interest of the major corporate funder, in some training locations, trainers gave optional support related to entrepreneurship initiatives to those who sought to open their own business. This was sometimes carried out concurrently or

1 From year to year, the number of states where Proyecto VIVE operated varied, as some sites were closed, and others were opened. However, Proyecto VIVE operated across a total of 29 states from 2016 to 2020.

as a follow-up to the training, outside the official training content; however, this interest and need of beneficiaries led Proyecto VIVE to partner with another NGO, to pilot an entrepreneurship training in 2019 and implement it in 2020 (virtually). Furthermore, an additional and more in-depth gender violence prevention course was added, after detecting this need among women participants.

In the present study, it is evaluated to what extent this job training program resulted in positive professional and personal changes for the women who took the course, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, focusing on a general analysis at the national level and a more detailed, qualitative analysis in a case study of Veracruz.

5 Methodology

Researchers were given access to Proyecto VIVE's national database by the program administrators. The database contained information of over sixty-eight thousand men and women beneficiaries from August 2016 to August 2020, including the date they were added to the database, the site they took the training at, how they found out about the training, when they took the training, what modules of the training they completed, whether or not they finished the training, demographic and personal information (*e.g.*, gender, birthdate, civil status, number of children, level of education attained, whether they had a disability or not, contact information), and employment information before and after the training (*e.g.*, employment status, sector, and income).

Researchers analyzed the data to determine the characteristics of the women graduates and any changes in employment status and income post-training. Due to limitations of the data collected and missing data, the target population was narrowed to women from low SES defined as low educational level (high school or less) and earning approximately one minimum wage or less. The minimum wage limits were adjusted according to the general minimum wage set by the federal government for each year of the project (2016-2020). Of the 56,370 women who took training from 2016 to 2020, 95.6 % successfully finished. However, only 27,666 women provided enough information to determine whether they were from low SES or not.

Researchers also conducted an exploratory case study of Proyecto VIVE's Veracruz location in 2018. Veracruz was selected, due to the state's high levels of poverty (Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social 2020), the willingness of the site's facilitators to participate in semi-structured interviews and organize a focus group with program graduates, and the proximity of the site to the researchers.

According to the database that had information of 1862 women graduates in Veracruz from 2016 to 2018, 637 women were determined to be from low SES. Researchers conducted a 22-question telephone survey, with a random sample of 94 women of low SES status. The response rate was 20.8 %; that is, around 450 phone calls were made to obtain the sample of 94 women. Notably, most of the failed phone call attempts were due to a change of the telephone numbers and not because of an unwillingness from the beneficiaries to participate in the surveys. The survey included four sections: the first consisted of five items about how the women found out about the job training program, why they participated, and their perceptions of it (*i.e.*, ease of understanding, or applicability to their daily lives); the second section included eight items related to SES; the third section focused on six items related to employment status and income changes before and after the trainings; and the last section had three items that explored women's perceived safety and discrimination they have faced.

Importantly, to measure SES more accurately, researchers used the methodology of the Mexican Association of Intelligence Agencies of Market and Opinion's (AMAI) Socioeconomic Index (AMAI 2017), which is constructed from six variables (education level of the head of household, access to Internet in the home, number of bathrooms, number of bedrooms, number of automobiles, and number of working household members) and classifies households into seven socioeconomic levels (from low to high: E, D, D+, C-, C, C+, and A/B).

6 Results

6.1. National analysis

Of the 27,666 women graduates of Proyecto VIVE's job training program who provided enough information to determine whether they were from low SES or not, only 5,326 women, or approximately 19.3 % fit the above-mentioned criteria of having low educational level (high school or less) and earning approximately one minimum wage or less at the time they started their training. Of these 5,326 low SES women, 88.8 % finished the training ($N = 4,731$).

Three to six months after their training ended, 15.13 % reported to have obtained an educational opportunity and 8.28 % an economic opportunity; however, 33.7 % reported that no opportunity was found (see Table 2). Importantly, 42.93 % of women graduates could not be contacted or did not report this data in follow-up surveys. Similarly, due to the lack of data regarding their post-training salary, a comparative analysis was not possible.

Opportunity	Percentage
No response	42.93
No opportunity	33.65
Educational opportunity	15.13
Full-time job	2.68
Started a business/entrepreneurship	2.10
Part-time job	1.56
Working for hourly or daily wage	0.97
Promotion at existing job	0.44
Temporary job (trial period)	0.34
Internship	0.19
Total	99.99

Table 2
Economic and educational opportunities for women graduates from low SES

6.2. Results from the Veracruz analysis

According to the AMAI (2017), Veracruz state has a higher percentage of households from low SES, compared to the national distribution, as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2. Specifically, 41 % of the Mexican population falls into the lowest two socioeconomic levels of the seven that AMAI calculates, while in Veracruz this increases to 59 %.

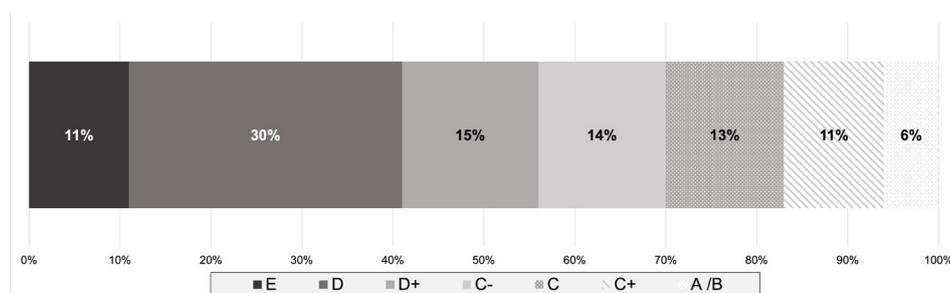


Figure 1
National distribution of Mexican households by SES
Source: AMAI (2017).

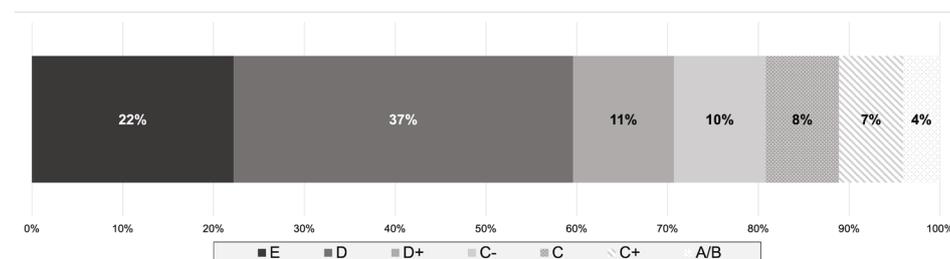


Figure 2
Distribution of Veracruz households by SES
Source: AMAI (2017).

However, when using this methodology to determine the SES of Proyecto VIVE's women graduates in Veracruz, the majority were not from low SES. In other words, even though the sample of women taken from the national database met the criteria of low educational levels (high school or less) and were earning one minimum wage or less when they started training, most were not considered to be of low SES when using the more complete AMAI methodology, as illustrated in Figure 3. In fact, none of the women were from the lowest socioeconomic level (E), and only 11 % were from the second-lowest socioeconomic level (D).

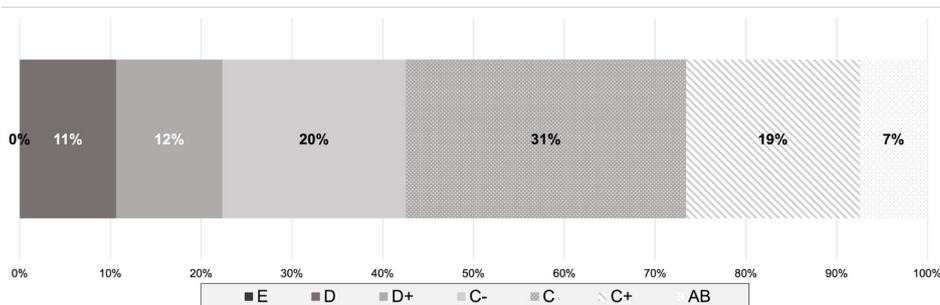


Figure 3
Distribution of Proyecto VIVE's women graduates in Veracruz by SES
Source: AMAI (2017).

Of the 94 women surveyed by telephone, 62 % reported that they had taken the job training to learn; some of them already had a business or job and were looking to obtain knowledge and develop their skills. Another 12.7 % took the training because they wanted to start a business, while 10.6 % were looking for a job, and 9.8 % reported no specific motivation to take the training.

Moreover, half of the participants were employed when starting the training; of them, 36.2 % reported to be self-employed, 29.8 % were part-time workers, and 23.4 % had full-time jobs. Of the other half that were not employed, 57.5 % reported wanting to learn, 17 % took the training because they wanted to find a job, and 14.9 % took the training because they wanted to start a business.

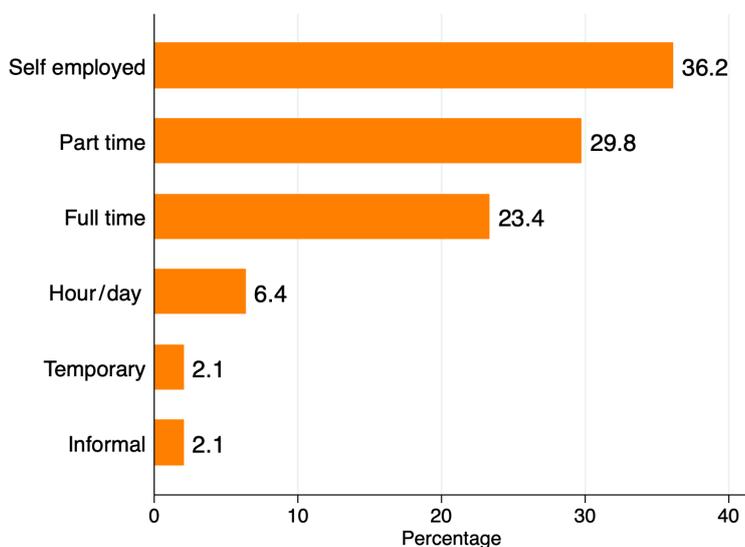


Figure 4
Employment type of Proyecto VIVE participants

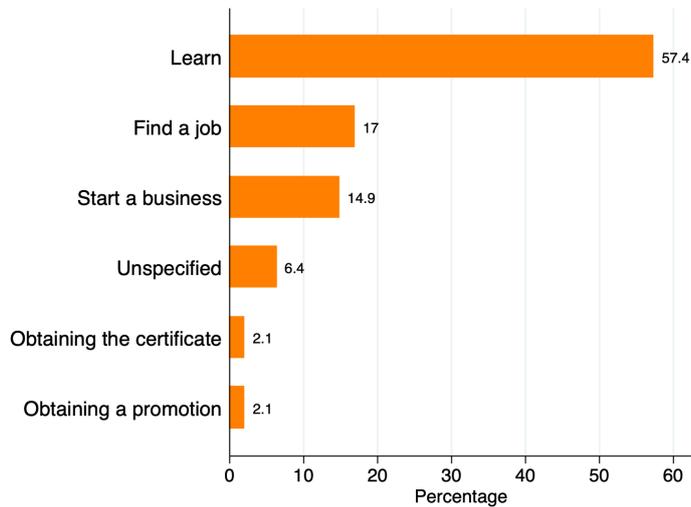


Figure 5
Unemployed participant's reason for taking Proyecto VIVE's training

The percentage of women graduates obtaining economic opportunities was much higher in the Veracruz sample than at the national level: approximately, 40 % reported to have obtained economic opportunities within six months after the training. Around 20 % started their own businesses, 18 % found jobs, and 2 % obtained promotions; additionally, 27 % continued in their same job. Furthermore, 53 % reported increases in their incomes up to six months after the training. Importantly, anecdotal evidence from facilitator interviews and the focus group with program graduates suggested that due to low-paying, inflexible formal sector jobs, women were inclined to become entrepreneurs, rather than search for jobs in the formal labor market. Regarding non-economic outcomes, almost 83 % of the women surveyed reported that the training was useful or very useful for their daily life and 26 % mentioned that the training helped them to increase their self-confidence, which was also supported with anecdotal evidence from the interview and focus group.

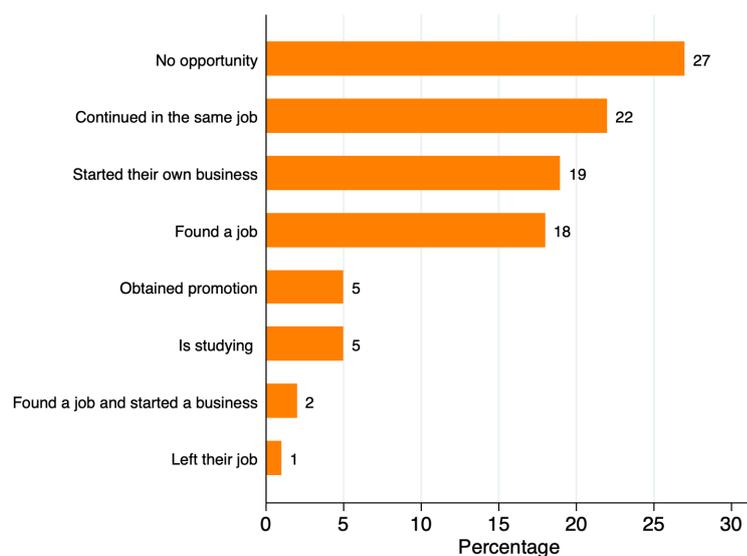


Figure 6
Economic opportunities obtained by participants six months after training

7 Conclusions

Women face many challenges entering, remaining, and advancing in the labor market. Burdened with most domestic and caretaking responsibilities, women may not attain the education or necessary skills needed for quality jobs, especially if they are poor, and/or from other vulnerable groups. Through human capital and skill development, job training programs like Proyecto VIVE look to give women more job opportunities in the formal labor market and ultimately economic autonomy.

Existing research on job training programs in Latin America has suggested some positive effects for women in terms of increasing skills, finding employment, and better salaries, although many challenges remain in effectively evaluating the outcomes and impacts of these programs (Urzúa & Puentes 2010). The present research adds to this growing body of literature by reporting on a national job training program for women in Mexico that was successfully completed by over fifty thousand women from 2016 to 2020. The study had a particular focus on how well the target population was reached and what the specific outcomes were for them.

Almost all the women who took the training successfully completed it. However, the lack of complete data for many participants reduced the national analysis to a little over half of them. Of them, one in five women were of low SES, defined as having attained high school education or less and earning less than one minimum wage at the start of the program. Similarly, around 4 in 10 of these women were either unable to be contacted or provide follow-up information to determine short- and medium-term outcomes. Of those who reported obtaining opportunities after the training, the majority were education-related as opposed to economic, which partially points to the difficulty of finding employment-related opportunities that was anecdotally mentioned by participants and facilitators.

Efforts were carried out in this research to identify SES and outcomes in the state of Veracruz. Although the random sample of women who completed the telephone surveys had low educational attainment and salaries of one minimum wage or less according to the national database, the majority were not of low SES when using AMAI's (2017) more complete methodology. This suggests that the job training program did not effectively target women from low SES status, even though there was a greater opportunity to do so in Veracruz, given that more women are more likely to be of low SES compared to the national average. Despite this, it is important to recognize that the women that did participate reported important gains: two in five women reported obtaining better opportunities after the training. Notably, about one in five started their own businesses and one in five found jobs or obtained a promotion. Ad-

ditionally, the women reported non-economic benefits of the program, such as more self-confidence.

The study's findings suggest that reaching low SES women with job training programs is challenging. Job training programs should operationalize with greater clarity the characteristics of the target population to design more effective outreach strategies; for example, if reaching women from low SES is the priority, then programs should consider offering training directly in marginalized areas, as opposed to women from low SES commuting to where the training is offered. Job training programs could also consider working with strategic partners that serve women from low SES either through existing government welfare and support programs or other NGOs. If reaching survivors of gender violence is the priority, then job training programs could explore tapping into existing networks of such women and/or working with shelters. In this way, success should not simply be defined as the number of people reached, but also if those who are reached formed part of the clearly defined target population. When target populations are defined by SES, programs should make use of previously standardized measures; in Mexico, the AMAI (2017) offers a simple and clear methodology to measure SES, that could be easily integrated into data-gathering processes for improved analyses; in this case, especially at the national level.

Challenges with contacting women graduates and/or completing follow-up surveys impeded a more complete analysis. However, available data from this study point to many women reporting positive changes related to economic opportunities both nationally and even more so in Veracruz, as well as increased income in Veracruz. Furthermore, the proportion of women graduates in Veracruz that reported starting businesses is of particular interest and suggests that women might not be interested or able to find flexible jobs with competitive salaries in the formal labor market, which pushes them toward the entrepreneurship path that can also provide the flexibility that many women are looking for. Although Proyecto VIVE did implement a small-scale entrepreneurship training in partnership with another NGO after this research was conducted, the results in Veracruz highlight a potential disconnect between the funders' main priority of preparing women with technical skills to become successful employees and the needs and interests of the beneficiaries to explore other avenues, such as entrepreneurship. However, it is important to note that the learning paths are somewhat related since some of the components for entrepreneurs and potential employees are similar (*e.g.*, customer support, sales, retail, and marketing). Future programs may consider framing the content and learning as strategies for generating income, instead of a dichotomy between employee or employer.

Proyecto VIVE also adapted in other ways, such as including more gender-based violence education and modifying their courses

digitally to continue to reach women during the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of job training programs for women to bring awareness to and learning about other issues (e.g., gender violence) in addition to other adaptations that are made are potential areas of research and evaluation for future similar programs.

In future research, it should be also considered the wide range and combination of factors that influence the attainment of employment and/or better opportunities for beneficiaries of job training programs, as Leahey (2001) points out. This includes considering the local context (unemployment rate and geographic location) in the analysis and ideally using experimental or quasi-experimental methodologies to compare results with control or comparison groups and different program variables, such as various lengths, types, and content (e.g., retail skills, or entrepreneurship) of training. Moreover, given the systemic complexity that women in general, and especially women from marginalized groups, face when searching for economic opportunities, future studies should approach this topic from an interdisciplinary perspective (e.g., economics, political economy, sociology, gender studies, psychology...) and incorporate both qualitative and mixed-methods research to enrich the quantitative focus related to changes in employment and income.

Additionally, results from this study point to both economic and non-economic outcomes for the women participants in the job training program. Specific outputs and outcomes should be clearly established to define success and, in future research on job training programs, it should be consider approaching outcomes from a social value or social impact investment framework, in which not only economic outcomes are taken as a reference to determine the success of a given initiative (OECD 2015, p. 58).

Finally, in-depth participative needs assessments with target populations are key to building programs that serve and evolve, according to their necessities and aspirations, taking into consideration local and regional labor market demands, especially in developing countries with struggling economies and large informal markets. Comparative analyses with similar programs both in Mexico and other countries in Latin America could also provide valuable conclusions and best practices for this type of program.

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