

Organizing and empowering artisan women: twenty-year state of the art

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Abstract

Several studies have highlighted the crucial role that women's organizations, such as cooperatives and craft associations, play in women's empowerment. These spaces provide training, mutual support, and personal, economic, and social development, which contributed to improving women's living conditions and promoting their social participation. Empowerment is key to achieving gender equality; it is necessary to analyze how organizations promote this process. The objective of this essay is to describe, through a bibliographic review, the contribution of organizations to the empowerment of artisan women in the following dimensions: personal, close relationships, and collective, highlighting the benefits and challenges they face in each one. A documentary analysis of 34 academic sources was conducted, including scientific articles and books from Scopus, Web of Science, and Scielo published between 2004 and 2024 in the Latin American region. The analysis allowed us to classify 14 documents into the personal dimension, 9 into the close relationships dimension and 11 into the collective dimension. The systematization of the information showed that organizations strengthen women's empowerment by creating support networks, improving skills and facilitating access to economic resources. The main challenges identified were the unequal distribution of resources, domestic-organizational conflicts, and internal power dynamics. Strengthening these organizations through inclusive policies, technical, organizational and gender training, and transparent management is essential to maximize their contribution to the empowerment of artisan women.

Keywords:

community development, crafts, gender, leadership, rural enterprise.



Introduction

Through their work, artisan women not only preserve cultural practices and seek economic autonomy but also challenge traditional gender roles. Despite their potential, they often face barriers that limit their development. Lack of access to fair markets, financial resources, and training opportunities, coupled with gender discrimination and poor recognition of their work, hinders their path to economic independence and empowerment.

In this context, organizations, defined as entities that provide structured support through programs, resources, and networks, emerge as key actors and actors in promoting women's empowerment in the artisanal sector (Aguilar *et al.*, 2008). The impact of organizations on the lives of artisan women is significant and complex. Various studies show that their participation contributed to improving their income, skills, self-esteem, confidence and leadership capacity (Araiza, 2004). However, little is still known about how the internal structure and strategies implemented in organizations directly affect this process.

Authors such as Bhandari (2017); Salazar *et al.* (2022); Verzosi and Carbajal (2023) pointed out some factors that limit the effectiveness of organizations, such as internal conflicts, socioeconomic barriers, and external organizational culture. In this framework, the objective of this essay was to theoretically analyze the way in which organizations contributed to the empowerment of artisan women in the personal, close relationships and collective dimensions, as well as the positive effects and challenges they face in each one.

The analysis was conducted based on a literature review in the Scopus, Web of Science and Scielo databases, using keywords and subsequent reading of texts that were categorized according to three dimensions: personal, close relationships, and collective.

Empowerment and organization

The concept of empowerment has evolved over the decades. In its beginnings, during the feminist movement of the 60s, it focused on challenging traditional gender norms to achieve equal rights and opportunities (Álvarez, 2003). The pioneering findings by Rowlands (1997) promoted growing academic attention to this process, highlighting three main dimensions: personal, close relationships and collective.

Over time, the concept has transcended from a limited, politicized vision to a broader one. From the perspective of feminism and gender studies, authors such as Batliwala (1995); Mosser (1989) agree that empowerment involves strengthening self-confidence, independence and the ability to make decisions and control resources. This approach underscores the importance of autonomy and capacity building in various spheres of women's lives.

Research, such as that by Román-Calderón *et al.* (2016), warns that the term has been misused and instrumentalized, particularly by international organizations that have adapted it to political and economic interests, distorting its original meaning and in some cases, perpetuating inequalities. Therefore, it is essential to recover a comprehensive vision that considers the factors that drive or inhibit the development of and for women, their real needs, and their impact on different dimensions of their lives.

For its part, the organization has been defined from various perspectives. Weber (2002) describes it as a formal structure with predefined rules and roles to achieve specific objectives, allowing activities to be coordinated and directed towards common goals. Taboada (2023) emphasizes that cooperation and effective communication among its members are key elements for organizational success. Encalada and Atoche (2017) conceptualize it as a pattern of formal relationships and roles oriented to the fulfillment of common objectives.

In the rural artisanal sector, organizations are constituted as spaces where women converge for economic and productive purposes. They represent spaces for questioning and reflection on the conditions and positions they occupy in the public and private spheres. Women's participation in organizations impacts their living conditions, access to markets and knowledge, and their social and economic status.

Empowerment in the personal dimension

For Rowlands (1995), this dimension is an individual process in which women develop confidence and self-sense, acquiring control over their lives. Batiwala (1997) indicated that this dimension entails a profound internal change, moving from limited or subordinate self-recognition to a position of leadership and autonomy, which can be achieved through the organization.

Among the positive effects identified in the literature review (Table 1), it was highlighted that the integration of women into organizations strengthens their self-esteem, thereby favoring the development of new competencies and leadership. Aguilar *et al.* (2008); Robinson *et al.* (2019) pointed out that organizations made traditionally ignored talents visible, whereas Littrell and Dickson (2006) stressed that interpersonal interaction and shared learning improve self-perception and confidence.

Table 1. Positive effects and challenges that the organization has on the personal dimension.

Activity	Dimension	Authors
Positive effects	Skill development	Littrell and Dickson (2006); Aguilar <i>et al.</i>
	Self-esteem and confidence	(2008); Aguilar <i>et al.</i> (2011); Figueroa-
	Training	Rodríguez <i>et al.</i> (2014); Robinson <i>et</i>
	Income improvement	<i>al.</i> (2019); Villanueva and Villagómez
Challenges		(2019); Castillo <i>et al.</i> (2020); Guzmán
	Additional burden of responsibilities	(2021); Verzosi and Carbajal (2023);
	Domestic and organizational harmony	Contreras <i>et al.</i> (2022); Soto and Díaz
	Technology gap	(2020); Ojha and Mishra (2016); Bhandari
	Low educational level	(2017); Bidegain and Scuro (2020)
Based on the bibliographic review.		

In Mexico, Figueroa-Rodríguez *et al.* (2014) documented that participation in organizations drives more informed decision-making and reinforces personal appraisal. This phenomenon was also reported by Villanueva and Villagómez (2019); Ortega *et al.* (2018); this study directly linked business success to the strengthening of self-esteem.

Guzmán (2021) study highlighted that the recognition and revaluation of ancestral knowledge and techniques are essential within this dimension, especially in contexts such as crafts, where creativity acquires a significant symbolic value. When organizations provide tools and knowledge and even motivate the questioning of gender positions, artisans strengthen their self-esteem and security, encouraging their creativity and innovation, because they revalue their knowledge and experience.

Similarly, Verzosi and Carbajal (2023); Aguilar *et al.* (2011) highlighted the importance of specific business development programs implemented by organizations, which directly promote strategic competencies and leadership skills in artisan women. Reciprocally, the organization is favored by a team motivated to meet its objectives.

The organizations also impose challenges on the artisans. Castillo *et al.* (2020) point out that literacy and access to technological platforms promoted by organizations favor the learning of communication skills. Nevertheless, in rural regions, where there are more female artisans, access can be limited, affecting communication with their customers, opening markets, improving their administrative processes and marketing strategies; the digital divide becomes a significant obstacle, limiting social cohesion and participation in commercial and management networks.

Bidegain and Scuro (2020) emphasized that technological ignorance excludes women from decision-making and marketing spaces, reproducing internal inequities. Lack of literacy also leads

to exclusion, especially when organizations tend to favor individuals with a higher level of education, usually men, over illiterate or low-educated women. Gender inequalities can also be perpetuated if they lack adequate management or an inclusive approach (Soto and Díaz, 2020; Contreras *et al.*, 2022).

This problem has historical roots in rural areas. Bhandari (2017) shows that, since union times, women faced structural restrictions that limited their development. In the contemporary sphere, Ojha and Mishra (2016) argue that even in highly creative sectors, such as crafts, organizations can maintain barriers that devalue female artisanal work compared to male artisanal work, hindering their empowerment.

Empowerment in the dimension of close relationships

The personal dimension generates significant transformations linked to family relationships (called 'close relationships'). This dimension addresses how women establish equitable bonds free of domination in their immediate family environment (González and González, 2021). For Rowlands (1995), at this point, not only do relationships change, but also power structures within the family nucleus, moving from relationships of subordination or dependence to more equitable ones.

In this category, some advantages of artisan women's participation in organizations were identified (Table 2). One of them is the indirect promotion of negotiating domestic responsibilities and strengthening family relationships. For example, a greater economic contribution to the household reduces dependency and even allows them to negotiate with men (whether father, spouse, or even sons and daughters).

Table 2. Positive effects and challenges that the organization has in the dimension of close relationships.

Activity	Dimension	Authors
Positive effects	Family well-being	González and González (2021); Sosme and
	Transmission of knowledge and skills	Casados (2016); Robinson <i>et al.</i> (2019)
	Economic stability	
Challenges	Family conflicts	López <i>et al.</i> (2022); Barreda and Gandara
	Inequality of domestic and care tasks	(2007); Turock (2013); Villanueva and Da
	Poor access to land and property	Costa; Taiza (2015); Villagómez (2019)
Based on the bibliographic review.		

This led to the reconfiguration of family roles and the balance in power relations within the home (Sosme and Casados, 2016). The improvement in individual skills and the greater decision-making power promoted within the organization have a favorable impact on coexistence and the resolution of family conflicts in the domestic sphere (Robinson *et al.*, 2019). This situation translated into a greater ability to express opinions, establish agreements, and actively participate in family decisions, which contributes to more dialogued and less hierarchical relationships.

Among the challenges identified in this dimension, López *et al.* (2022) warned that the unequal distribution of pay and wages, as well as the lack of recognition of their work, weakens motivation. The lack of equity, together with macho approaches or those that lack inclusivity, can be transferred to the family environment, causing conflicts of coexistence in close relationships. Women, feeling devalued in their organizational environment, tend to replicate these dynamics of inequality in their family environment, affecting their interpersonal relationships (Barreda and Gándara, 2007).

The harmony between domestic and work responsibilities is another obstacle. Turok (2013); Villanueva and Villagómez (2019) agree that the double workload (domestic and organizational) assumed by many female artisans, combined with traditional gender hierarchies in the home, reinforces these barriers by limiting the time and energy available for their work activities. These limitations are exacerbated when organizations lack policies of tolerance or empathy towards the situation of female artisans, failing to offer harmony measures that consider their family responsibilities (Da Costa and Taiza, 2015). Paradoxically, organizations can reinforce this

exclusion if they condition their access to and ownership of various resources, excluding women who most need access to benefits and opportunities within the organization (García and Cruz, 2023).

Empowerment in the collective dimension

The empowerment of artisan women can manifest itself in different dimensions, without a fixed order between them (Vázquez-Luna *et al.*, 2013). In this dimension, the construction of support networks and solid links with the organizational group, together with the sense of belonging, becomes a fundamental pillar of the process (Shanmugam and Ramakrishna, 2008). This dimension facilitated collective development and strengthened women's capacity to make visible problems that affect their social well-being (Hernández, 2018).

Organizational networks that foster a participatory environment offer multiple benefits at the collective level (Chuquín, 2023). These networks create educational and employment opportunities, enabling female artisans as a group to increase employability and community participation (Table 3). Studies by Zapata and Suárez (2007) underlined that collaboration with governments and non-governmental organizations expands the reach of organizations in the process of collective empowerment, fostering more inclusive environments.

Table 3. Positive effects and challenges that the organization has on the collective dimension.

Activity	Dimension	Authors
Positive effects	Autonomy and decisions, support networks, social recognition, organizational participation, leadership, influence on policies, cultural preservation, valorization of heritage and access to microcredit and financing	Vázquez-Luna, <i>et al.</i> (2013); Shanmugam and Ramakrishna (2008); Hernández (2018); Chuquín (2023); Zapata-Martelo and Suárez-San Román (2007); Fernández (2018); Morales (2017); Delgado (2010)
Challenges	Discrimination, organizational conflicts, gender stereotypes, misalignment of interests, low political representation, leadership, union control, loss of authenticity, limited access to markets, lack of productive resources, cultural appropriation	Sarria <i>et al.</i> (2018); Pucci (2022); Hoinle <i>et al.</i> (2013)
Based on the bibliographic review.		

At the intergenerational level, Morales (2017); Fernández (2018) agreed that these networks strengthen community support, especially for older female artisans, which contributes to organizational sustainability and the transfer of knowledge from one generation to another. For example, technical and financial training programs offered to older women ensure that their artisanal knowledge and experiences are preserved within the community (Delgado *et al.*, 2010).

However, it is important to question whether these programs really value traditional knowledge on an equal footing with modern technical knowledge. In many cases, artisanal work is perceived as an activity that must be adapted to be profitable, when in fact it should be recognized as legitimate knowledge that supports community cultural identity.

Artisan women also face other social and cultural barriers that limit their collective empowerment. In the rural sector, Sarria *et al.* (2018) highlighted that traditionally entrenched gender roles, which subordinate women within organizational structures without a gender focus, restrict their access to development and leadership activities within organizations. Pucci (2022) noted that this problem is the primary obstacle to achieving women's empowerment, despite the efforts of organizations to promote internal changes.

Factors such as restricted mobility, resistance to the adoption of modern technologies, and unequal access to training are other major barriers (Hoinle *et al.*, 2013). Overcoming these challenges requires a multidimensional approach that not only challenges traditional gender norms but also

raises awareness among organizations and communities about the importance of gender equality in the artisanal sector. In addition, interventions must be accompanied by a conscious effort to include women at all levels of decision-making, training, and leadership.

Conclusions

This essay shows the importance of organizations in the three dimensions of the empowerment of artisan women. A greater number of studies were found on how the organization has positive effects and challenges in the personal and collective dimension of empowerment, perhaps because these can be identified more easily; on the other hand, in the case of the dimension of close relationships, fewer studies were found since they deal with changes in the private sphere of women, its analysis is more complex.

In the personal dimension, organizations contribute to strengthening aspects that enable women to position themselves better, both within and outside the organization, based on better decision-making derived from the confidence and skills developed. In the dimension of close relationships, changes are produced in the distribution of roles and responsibilities within the household. In the collective dimension, participation in organizations promotes support networks, greater cultural visibility and access to new markets.

Nonetheless, common challenges persist, such as the educational and technological gap, as well as the lack of organizational transparency, which limits the scope of empowerment, in addition to gender stereotypes. To move towards more equitable empowerment, it is essential to integrate a gender perspective into the organization's internal regulations and training, promote harmony between family and organizational life, and value traditional knowledge through intergenerational mentoring. It is recommended that future research assess the long-term economic and cultural impact of these practices and explore the role of technology in strengthening the female artisanal sector.

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