

Characteristics and socio-productive problems of women mezcal producers in Oaxaca, Mexico

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To analyze the characteristics and socio-productive problems of women mezcal producers of Oaxaca, Mexico.

Design/methodology/approach: A semi-structured interview was applied in the field to n=20 women mezcal producers to obtain the data for this study.

Results: The interviewees are middle-aged adult women with an elementary education level and a wide experience in the production of mezcal. Among them, 35% make all decisions in their business and at home. The main problems that they perceive in this activity are the price of mezcal (35%) and the shortage of agave (30%). Women face social limitations such as work overload at home, a lack of financial aids for production, and little involvement in rural organizations.

Study limitations/implications: More studies about women mezcal producers in Oaxaca should be conducted.

Findings/conclusions: Collective work and organization could be alternatives for women mezcal producers to improve their and their families' benefits and quality of life. Public policies with a gender perspective should be designed to meet the needs of women who participate in mezcal production.

Key words: Women, Rural, Gender, Mezcal production.

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INTRODUCTION

There are 14.7 million women (22.7% of the country's total) living in rural towns in Mexico, among whom 778,000 work in the primary sector. In fact, 15% of the country's total producers are women, who are also responsible for over 50% of the food produced (SADER, 2020). Moreover, rural women participate in multiple production-related activities such as harvesting food plants, backyard production and stockbreeding, handicrafts, and entrepreneurship activities (Laguna and Del Ponte Flores, 2019). At home, women are in charge of unpaid activities such as domestic chores, preparing food, taking care of children, collecting firewood, and carrying water (Ramírez, 2011; Rosales-Martínez and Leyva-Trinidad, 2019).

Even though rural women play an important role in production-related activities and in the preservation of their communities' natural resources (IMCO, 2020), they still face critical circumstances: their participation is not acknowledged and no opportunities have been created for their personal, social, and productive development. Their income still lags behind that of their male counterparts (López-Martínez, 2018). The average number of schooling years among rural women is 7.1, as compared to 10.5 among urban women; only 35.6% of women between 15 and 64 years of age have a paid job (INMUJERES, 2019). In addition, out of the 4.9 million registered owners of agrarian units, only 1.3 million are women (26%) (IMCO, 2020). In this respect, Rosas-Chávez and Rico-Rodríguez (2017) pointed out that country women remain in conditions of inequality, because they have no right to own land, since land ownership is usually limited to men.

Rural women's characteristics and problems vary widely depending on the production sector, the territory, and the economic resources that they count on for production. Statistics and gender studies in the rural context are fundamental for the design of policies, programs, and strategies that seek to improve women's benefits, income, rights to land ownership, and decision-making capacity (Acosta Reveles, 2008).

In the context of mezcal production—an activity seen as masculine and whose producers are known as “maestros mezcaleros” (male master mezcal producers)—most of the work is driven by women, but little is known about them. In light of this, we analyzed the characteristics and socio-productive problems of women mezcal producers of Oaxaca, Mexico, with the aim to broaden the existing knowledge about the attributes and limitations of the women who participate in this activity.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Our research was carried out in the Valles Centrales Region (Ocotlán de Morelos, Santa Catarina Minas), the Mixteca Region (Asunción Nochixtlán, San Pedro Tezacoalco, Villa Tejúpam de la Unión), and the Sierra Sur Region (San Luis Amatlán) in Oaxaca, Mexico (Figure 1). The field work was carried out during the years 2020-2021. A semi-structured interview was applied to $n=20$ women mezcal producers. Likewise, bibliographic sources on mezcal production in Oaxaca were examined.

Interviewees were selected using an intentional sampling, where the selection criterion was the women's full- or part-time dedication to the production of mezcal. To this end, the snowball technique was used to identify individuals of interest based on persons who know them (Martínez-Salgado, 2012). Therefore, women were selected according to other women's references to their experience and renown in the mezcal trade.

During the face-to-face interview with these women, we obtained data about their characteristics (age, education level, experience, and number of children), the kind of mezcal production activities they carry out, the varieties of agave they use, the number of times they cook agave per year (cooking or hornear), the commercialization of their products, governmental financial aids, and the problems and challenges they perceive in this activity. Special emphasis was given to obtaining data about the problems present in the activities carried out by women, and about women's perception of the potential solutions. An Excel[®] database was developed with the data collected through the survey.

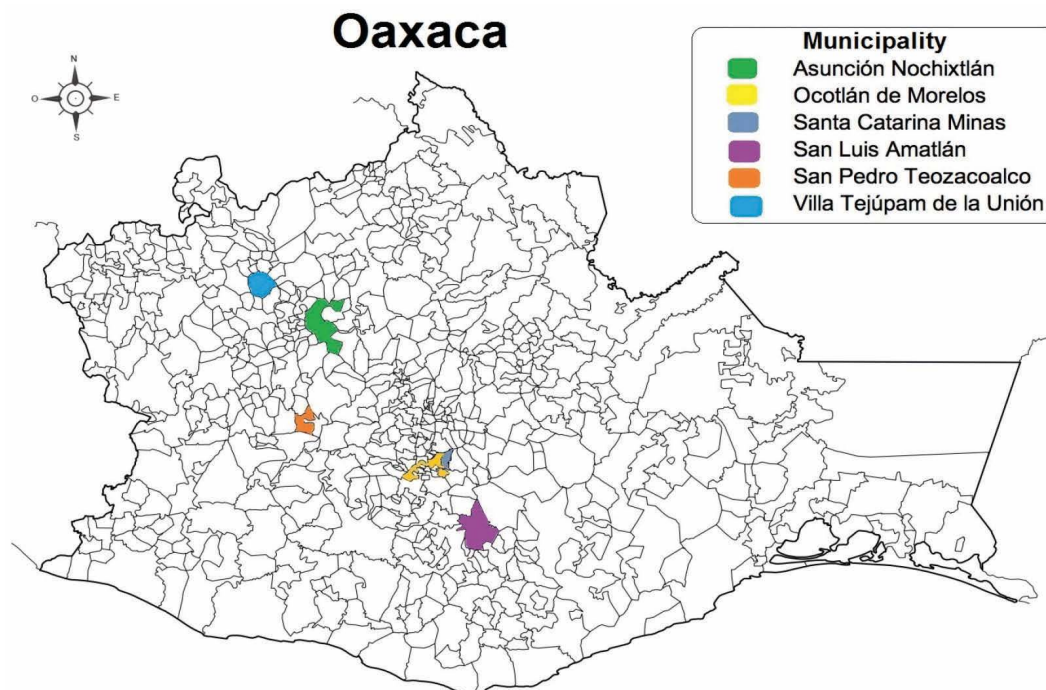


Figure 1. Municipalities of Oaxaca, Mexico where women mezcal producers live. Source: Own elaboration.

The variables were edited and classified into three categories (characteristics of women mezcal producers, characteristics of mezcal production, and problems/challenges). The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of women mezcal producers and of mezcal production

Interviewees live in conditions of marginalization: 95% lack a drainage system and 15% lack drinking water, although 100% do have electricity. This data matches the findings of Sánchez (2005), Vega-Vera and Pérez-Akaki (2017), and other authors, who have studied the social and economic conditions of Oaxacan families; they have observed that the boom in mezcal consumption in Oaxaca and the world has not had a favorable effect on the quality of life of the producers, who continue to live in moderate to very high levels of marginality.

Most of the women selected for the study are middle-aged adults (48 years old in average). However, there are older (85 years old) and some younger (27 years old) women who have just joined this activity. In average, they have 21 years of experience in the production of mezcal, although 25% of the interviewed women have produced this alcoholic beverage for over 30 years and have therefore ample experience and renown in this activity. Cuevas Reyes *et al.* (2019) report similar figures for low-scale productivity maguey producers, who had 47.4 years old in average and 18.5 years of experience.

Women mezcal producers have seven years of schooling in average, which corresponds to basic schooling or elementary education level, while 5% have a bachelor's degree. Age and

schooling years are important variables because recent research in Mexico has shown that women’s participation in the paid (non-farming) workforce is related to a higher number of schooling years and to the number of working age women (Mora-Rivera, Martínez-Domínguez, Jaramillo-Villanueva, and Chávez-Alvarado, 2017). In this respect, a higher education level would lead women to carry out non-farming activities, such as advertising and commercialization of mezcal.

In order to produce mezcal, women use 16 different biological varieties of agave (*Agave* sp.); however, they favor Espadín (*Agave angustifolia*) (65%) and Horno (*Agave americana*) (55%), the varieties that have the highest yield. Nevertheless, their sale price is lower: a liter of mezcal of these varieties costs around \$100 and \$150 Mexican pesos (4.8 and 7.3 US\$)^[1]. Another variety used due to its high demand and sale prices is Papalometl (*Agave nussaviorum*), which can reach a price of \$250 Mexican pesos per liter (US\$ 12.1). The plant, however, is more expensive, difficult to find, and takes years to reach maturity; moreover, the yield of this variety is lower (30%) according to the interviewees (Figure 2).

Table 1. Social characteristics of women mezcal producers of Oaxaca.

Variable	Average	Minimum	Maximum
Age (years)	48	27	85
Experience (years)	21	8	40
Schooling (years)	7	0	16

Source: Interviews applied to women mezcal producers in 2020-2021.

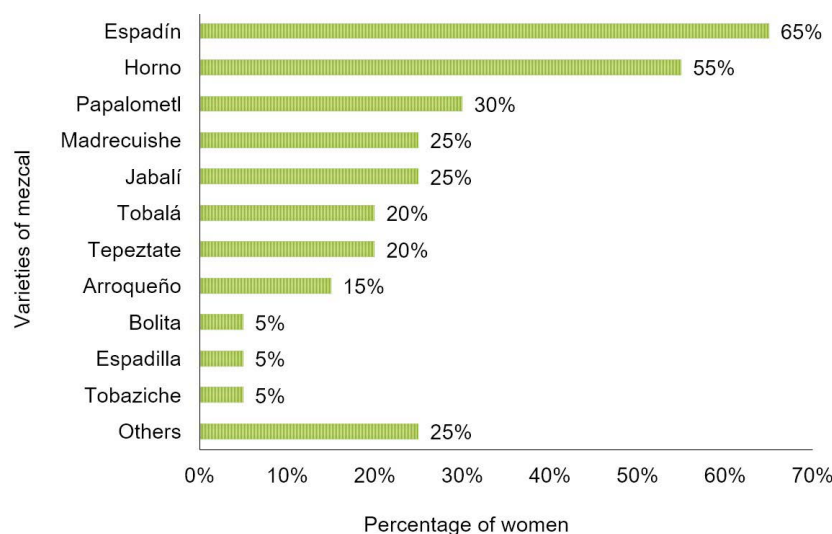


Figure 2. Biological varieties of agave (*Agave* sp.) used to produce mezcal.

¹ US\$ 1.0 is equal to \$20.6 Mexican pesos, March 1, 2022. Source: <https://www.banxico.org.mx/tipcamb/main.do?page=tip&idioma=sp>

The production of mezcal is the main economic activity for these women, who in average carry out six agave cookings per year. However, 20% of them do 12 cookings per year. This allows them to maintain a constant production throughout the year and, therefore, to cover family expenses. Cookings are usually carried out during the dry season, since they grow maize and bean during the rainy season, occasionally combining them with agave.

Harvesting and looking after the agave are among the mezcal-related activities that women are in charge of. Nevertheless, their own production or the production of community lands are usually not enough for cooking; therefore, they are forced to buy plants. According to 50% of the interviewees, the raw material used to produce mezcal comes from their own crops and they are even able to sell agave; however, they tend to focus more on processing mezcal, rather than on producing agave for sale. In this regard, 35% mentioned that all the mezcal they produce comes from agave they buy, while 15% pointed out that they grow half of the agave they use for mezcal and buy the other half.

Socio-productive problems of women mezcal producers

An aspect not be ignored —given the context of the production of agave/mezcal— are the difficulties faced by women as a consequence of the weaknesses attributed to their gender (lack of physical strength, submissiveness, among other social and cultural aspects). The inequality gap between men and women permeates the public acknowledgement — even within their own social circle— of women's participation in the mezcal production and other primary activities. Women in the rural sector are usually seen as secondary workers whose function focuses on complementing the household's income or else they are rendered invisible as unpaid household workers or producers for self-consumption (OIT, 2012).

The multiple activities and roles that women mezcal producers —as well as other women in the rural sector— must fulfill have contributed to their scant inclusion in rural organizations and involvement in full-time activities. Only 5% of the interviewees said that they belong to a rural organization and none of them mentioned having received financial aids for production, even though 25% of them are in charge of the whole production process.

Some interviewees said they have benefited from social or other kinds of aids to carry out non-farming activities. It should be noted that, in the Mexican rural sector, people usually must organize themselves in advance to have access to governmental aids (Martínez-García, Zapata-Martelo, Alberti-Manzanares, and Díaz-Cervantes, 2005).

Besides participating in the production process, women mezcal producers also take on the role of housewives and often help with the commercialization of mezcal. They often must split their time between preparing food and taking care of their children, on the one hand, and carrying wood and water, cultivating agave, cleaning and maintaining the *palenque* (traditional mezcal factory), cooking, watching over the mezcal distilling, bottling, and selling the final product, among other activities included in the production process, on the other.

In this respect, Acosta-Reveles (2008) mentions that simultaneously taking care of their children, their home, and extra-domestic tasks lead rural women to accept underpaid part-time jobs. These ideas are complemented with the data collected in the survey, according to which 90% of the interviewees declared being engaged part-time in the production of mezcal.

Women mezcal producers are in charge of multiple activities and 70% of them participate in the make decisions about mezcal production (Figure 3). This matches the findings of Vallejo-Román and Rodríguez-Torrent (2018) about women's participation in the labor market in Tlaxcala, Mexico. These authors found that over 53% of women reported having between two and three family-subsistence-related activities besides their job-related activities, and almost 8% mentioned having up to four occupations.

Something worth emphasizing is that 20% of these women are the only decision-makers in the business and at home, which implies a higher level of female involvement and empowerment in mezcal production. Moreover, 35% of them play an important role in managing the household's expenses and in the selling of mezcal. The social problems—such as migration and alcoholism among men—, as well as the fact of being single or widowed, has led women to take charge of production. In this respect, 20% of the interviewees declared being single, 15% widowed, and 65% married.

Some of the main problems that women mezcal producers perceive in their activity are the price of mezcal (35%), the shortage of agave (30%), and the shortage of agave and firewood (25%) (Figure 4). Therefore, the immediate challenges for these women are the design of strategies to increase the number of agave populations and plantations, and training in organizational and management skills to be able to obtain a fair price for their mezcal. The latter could be seen as part of the discontent felt by the primary sector producers in general about their lower earnings within production chains.

Women mezcal producers have an advantage: they are interested in collectively managing their activity in order to achieve a higher cost-effectiveness that will improve their quality of life. Therefore, it is important to launch actions or create spaces where they can interact, in order to lay the foundations of an organization or to build support networks with other women, as well as to formulate a common objective and achieve empowerment since, as some authors point out:

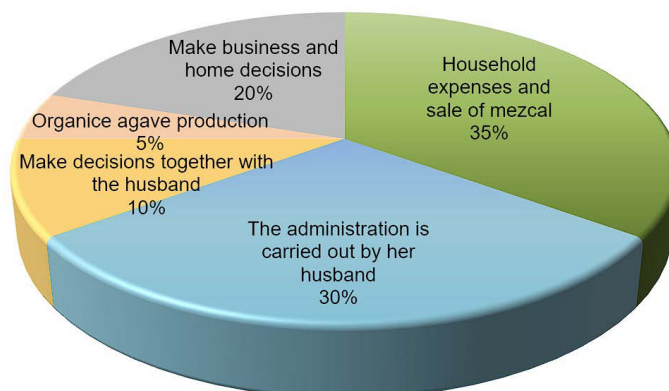


Figure 3. Women's decision-making in the production unit.

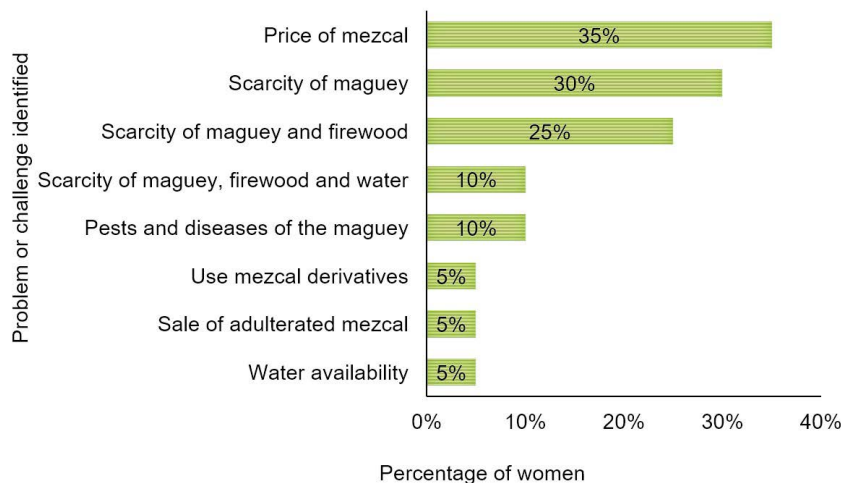


Figure 4. Main problems or challenges as perceived by women mezcal producers.

The social and economic sustainability of the rural sector requires that women take root. It is therefore imperative not only to create jobs, but also that women are able to enter and remain in the labor market, thus improving their working conditions and gaining access to opportunities that will allow them to break loose from their labor and social vulnerability (Valenciano, Capobianco-Urdiales, and Uribe-Toril, 2017).

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that women working in the mezcal industry are middle-aged adults, with elementary education, and a vast experience in the production of mezcal. Women mezcal producers carry out multiple activities that range from taking care of their homes to participating in the production, management, and commercialization of mezcal. In addition, they play an important decision-making role in their families' mezcal production units. However, the problems they face are not only related to mezcal; they also include social, time, and organization restrictions that keep them from having access to production opportunities and resources. Therefore, several challenges must be met, such as achieving women's social acknowledgement in the production of mezcal, as well as designing public strategies and policies that will contribute to drive the production of agave/mezcal forward, and obtaining a fair price for mezcal. In general, women mezcal producers face social and production problems. Solving them individually will require more effort and resources. Collective work and organization might therefore be an alternative to help them improve their and their families' benefits and quality of life.

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