

Dismantling barriers faced by women entrepreneurs in Brazil

by David Harrold

Recent years have seen a growing awareness of the challenges faced by women around the world. The #MeToo movement sparked by a Hollywood scandal has evolved into transformative global conversation and action. Women from all walks of life are sharing their stories of injustice and everyday sexism, and the barriers they face – once invisible – are being illuminated in all manner of societies and industries.

Creative and social enterprise has been no exception to this trend. Jodie Thorpe, Research Fellow in the Business and Development Centre at the [Institute for Development Studies](#) – where gender issues in international development have been top of the agenda for 30 years – has naturally welcomed these conversations. But, she notes, ‘there have been a lot of questions as to how to approach these issues on the ground’.

In Brazil, such questions for women entrepreneurs are particularly acute. Deeply embedded cultural attitudes and discrimination pose huge practical problems in terms of access to funding and support: for a woman in Brazil, the process of starting and sustaining an enterprise is beset with obstacles. But these obstacles are now starting to be acknowledged and addressed. The Business and Development team at the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) recognised a ‘moment of growing understanding of these exclusionary norms.’ IDS sought to help advance these conversations, by taking their own international learnings on enterprise and gender and ‘translating them into Brazilian reality’, working with entrepreneurs and investors to enact practical solutions.

To effect this change, they needed to work with an organisation that shared gender as an institutional priority, with influence among investors and entrepreneurs on the ground. Jodie recounts that ‘Brazil was a country where we’d had a lot of ad hoc interactions for a long time’ but wanted to establish a more systematic presence. Their collaboration with the [Aspen Network of Development Entrepreneurs](#) (ANDE) was precipitated by a personal connection. An alumnus of the IDS Global Business and Development MA, who had worked at the Brazil Chapter of ANDE after graduating, had stayed in close contact with her tutors through the alumni network. Through this connection, her tutors had an awareness of ANDE’s work and influence in Brazil. ‘When this opportunity came up to collaborate through the British Council, with a focus both on gender and on enterprise, for us it was ideal,’ says Jodie.

ANDE is a global network supporting small and growing businesses in emerging markets with almost 300 members worldwide, including more than 30 active member organisations in Brazil. Rebeca Yoshisato, Brazil Chapter Analyst at ANDE says the partnership came at a good time. ANDE had ‘always worked with gender through various initiatives around the world’, and it was a core priority of their 2019 strategy.





A panel discuss 'applying a gender lens to entrepreneurship' – © ANDE

The partnership engaged a range of organisations, involving them in a series of events intended to encourage discussion, interconnection and action within the ecosystem. These one-day workshops saw representatives from creative and social enterprises, investors, incubators, accelerators and networking groups come together to focus on 'factors that create and perpetuate inequality from a gender perspective, as well as some of the strategies that have been tried and tested in other parts of the world', Jodie says. Bringing this broad sweep of influential organisations together with entrepreneurs to discuss actionable strategies was powerful, as the social and creative enterprise ecosystem can seem quite diffuse. As Rebeca sees it, 'at this moment in Brazil, there are lots of people working on this topic but in somewhat isolated ways. We are trying to build something cohesive'.

At the close of these larger projects, the attendees were invited to select issues they felt required deeper exploration, through interactive webinars. The partnership then provided ongoing support throughout the year to around 100 creative and social enterprises through these webinars. The level of engagement, Jodie says, was encouraging: 'the majority of participants took the time to follow up consistently.'

A topic which arose across events and webinars, was the difficulty of bridging the gap preventing better communication between women entrepreneurs and investors. To tackle barriers like unconscious bias against women-led businesses,



they increased their efforts to influence the investor community in what Jodie describes as ‘more of an advocacy role’. This included working closely with ANDE’s Impact Investor Working group. Additionally, they drew upon IDS’s contacts in the UK, where an event for investors was hosted in December, in a bid to increase international awareness of Brazilian enterprise.

Both Jodie and Rebeca agree that big challenges stem from the scale and complexity of issues relating to gender in Brazil. Jodie says, ‘The difficulty of talking about gender is that different individuals have very different experiences - there are other divides, and these divides intersect’. With Brazil’s huge ethnic and cultural diversity, and stark income inequality, the disparity in experience of different women across the country can hardly be overstated. Rebecca agrees, noting ‘for white, middle class women, or black women living in the favelas, we have to think about things in very different ways.’ In the face of these complexities, the long historical precedent of gender bias, and the current populist backlash in Brazilian politics, Jodie is realistic about the rate of change. But, she draws optimism from the long view: ‘real transformation is not going to be resolved in a workshop, or by a yearlong project, but having those discussions is seeking the answers to some of the right questions, and I hope this community will interact without our direct facilitation.’

