

## **A Methodological Problem Associated with Researching Women Entrepreneurs**



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### **A B S T R A C T**

This article highlights one of the most significant methodological problems of researching women entrepreneurs and understanding the female entrepreneurial experience, which is related to the definition of what is a women entrepreneur. The article outlines the state of research on women entrepreneurs, presents the diverse definitions used in research, conceptualizes the different aspects related to the definition of a woman entrepreneur, and proposes future directions for developing research on women as entrepreneurs.

**KEY WORDS:** women entrepreneurs, entrepreneurial activity, employment, self - employment, methodological problem

### **Introduction**

As a result of the acknowledgement that enterprise creation is related to economic growth and employment, major efforts have been carried out throughout the world during the past few decades to stimulate the generation of entrepreneurial activity (Weeks & Seiler, 2001). Entrepreneurship normally refers to the activities associated with being an entrepreneur (HarperCollins, 2003) and although it is a relatively recent area of research, has been one of the fields of research that has expanded the most. Specifically, since 1970, there has been a growing interest in the entrepreneurial activity of women in the world as a result of the great

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growth in business start-ups by women, and based on the assumption that women encounter difficulties in starting and operating a business that are different from those faced by men (Neider, 1987). Women entrepreneurs have been identified as a “major force for innovation and job creation” (Orhan & Scott, 2001, p. 232).

Even though entrepreneurship has become one of the fastest growing fields of research over the past decades, there is no single generally accepted definition of its meaning, and the term has been used in many research studies with varying variety of definitions. The problem becomes more complex when dealing with research that is conducted in different languages and in different contexts, where there might not be a direct translation for the terms used. For example, there is no agreement on the translation of the term *entrepreneurship* into Spanish. Some use *espíritu empresarial* (HarperCollins, 2005), *empresarialidad* (Argentina), *empreendedorismo* (Brazil and works carried out by the Inter-American Development Bank) (United States Agency of International Development [USAID], 2005) or *emprendimiento* (Perú).

This confusion regarding terms often leads to the inability to compare different research studies about women entrepreneurs, and thus hinders the understanding of women’s entrepreneurial activities throughout the world.

Given the importance of a common and precise definition of what is a woman entrepreneur, the goal of this article is to present the diverse definitions used in previous studies, as well as to conceptualize the different aspects related to the definition of a woman entrepreneur.

### **Criteria Used to Define a Women Entrepreneur**

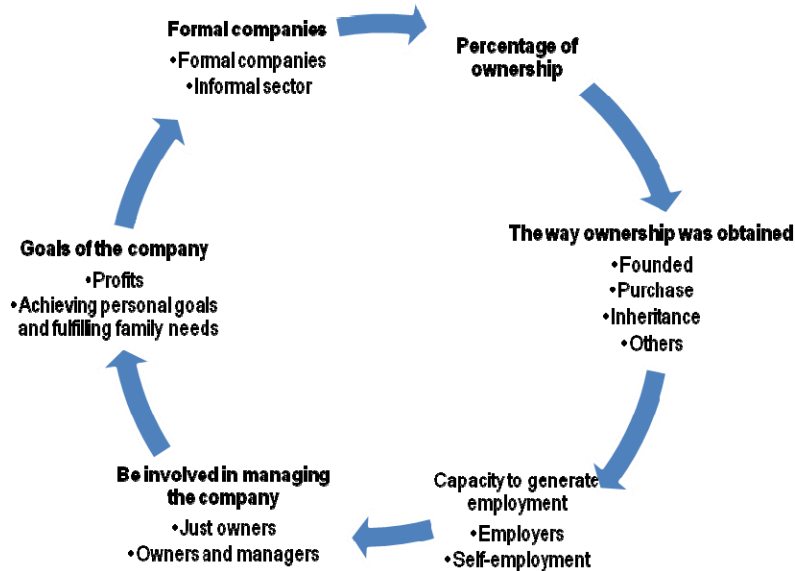
In women entrepreneurship studies, there is no single generally-accepted definition of what an entrepreneur is. The definition of a *woman entrepreneur* varies from one research study to the other, and the various studies of entrepreneurs, specifically women entrepreneurs, do not exhaustively analyze the different criteria related to the definition of a woman entrepreneur. These criteria are (Figure 1):

- (a) What is the percentage of ownership of a company that women must control in order for the company to be considered women-owned? Some studies establish that women should own at least

50% of the company for it to be considered a women-owned enterprise, while other studies do not make that distinction.

- (b) How do the studies take into account the amount of "women entrepreneurs in the shadows," including wives and partners of entrepreneurs who participate in the management of the enterprise even though their names do not appear as owners?
- (c) Should research on women entrepreneurs consider only those companies founded by women or should they also consider companies that have been acquired by women? Some studies consider that the term entrepreneur applies only to people who start new enterprises, while other studies consider that the term entrepreneur refers to the owners of companies, without distinguishing the way ownership was obtained (purchase, inheritance or founding).
- (d) Should research on women entrepreneurs include self-employment or must women be able to generate employment for others in order to be considered entrepreneurs? Some studies find that the term entrepreneur refers only to employers, while others consider self-employment a business itself.
- (e) Should research on women entrepreneurs take into account the fact that they are actively involved in business management or can women entrepreneurs simply be the owners of a company without being connected to the management of the company? Some studies consider that the term entrepreneur only refers to the owners of a company, making no distinction about the management of the enterprise, while other studies consider that the entrepreneur, in addition to having ownership of the company, should also be involved in managing it.
- (f) Should research on women entrepreneurs take into account the goals of the company? Some studies consider that the term entrepreneur should only be applied to people whose goals are to obtain profits and make their businesses grow, and exclude the owners of small businesses created with the main objective of achieving personal goals and fulfilling family needs; while other studies make no distinction between them.
- (g) Should research on women entrepreneurs consider only the formal sector of the economy or also include the informal sector?

Figure 1: Criteria to Define a Women Entrepreneur



## Research on Women Entrepreneurs

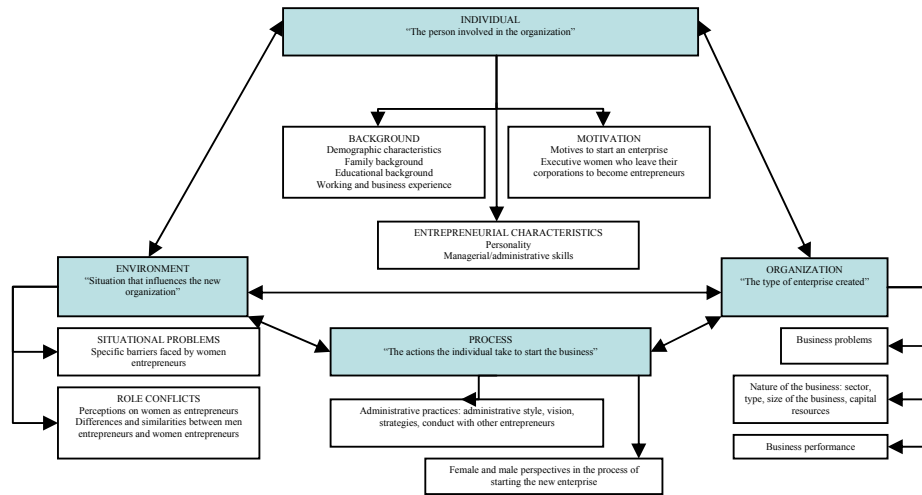
The research conducted on women entrepreneurs is quite extensive in developed countries, especially in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, but there is not much knowledge of women and their enterprises in Latin America. Specific studies have been conducted, however, of women entrepreneurs in France, Singapore, Russia, Ireland, Puerto Rico, China, Turkey, Hungary, South Africa, Israel, Poland, Germany, India, Lithuania, Greece and Australia.

In order to analyze the main trends emerging from these studies, articles have been classified according to Gartner's (1985) conceptual framework for the creation of new enterprises: namely the concepts regarding the individual, the environment, the organization and the processes. Figure 2 shows the map of the literature and presents the main trends that have arisen from the research on women entrepreneurs and their enterprises. The individual aspects refer to the person involved in creating the new organization and include demographic information, background, motivation, working and educational experiences, as well as psychological

aspects. The organization refers to the type of enterprise created, which includes its strategy, organizational characteristics, the type of enterprise, structure and the problems faced. The process considers the actions taken by the entrepreneur to start up the enterprise, and includes the identification of opportunities, the search for resources, the construction of the organization, the administration of the enterprise, and the response to the environment. Environment refers to the situation affecting and influencing the organization, and includes legal, political, governmental, sector and technological aspects (Gartner, 1985).

Most studies on women entrepreneurs were focused on the individual. The initial studies were devoted to learning about the background and organizational characteristics of women's enterprises. However, most recent studies consider wider research on the problems faced by women entrepreneurs, their administrative practices, perceptions of women as administrators, their abilities for achieving success, gender differences, conflicts between their enterprise and family roles, and the vision they have for their enterprises. Methodologically, most studies are based on surveys and case studies, which are mainly descriptive and use available samples since there are no databases on women entrepreneurs, and they frequently do not associate research with theory. Other methodological issues include the lack of instrument validation, the existence of a sole source of information, a tendency to generalize behaviour and characteristics among different types of women (women who create new enterprises, women who take charge of the family business, and differences in age, industries and size) (Brush, 1992). Despite all these issues, such studies have produced knowledge upon which theories of women entrepreneurial activity are based and are being further developed.

Figure 1: A Literature Map of Studies on Women Entrepreneurs and their Enterprises - Main Trends



**Some General Definitions of Terms: Entrepreneurship, Entrepreneur, Enterprise, Organization, Business, Manager, Employer, Enterprising, Self-employment**

The term *entrepreneurship* is defined as: “*The state of being an entrepreneur or the activities associated with being an entrepreneur*” (HarperCollins, 2003). There is no agreement on the translation of the term entrepreneurship into Spanish. Some studies use *espíritu empresarial* (HarperCollins, 2005), *empresarialidad* is used in Argentina, while *emprededorismo* is used in Brazil ((United States Agency of International Development [USAID], 2005).

The term *entrepreneur* comes from the French verb *entreprendre*, which means “*undertake*” (Harper, 2001). The concept appeared for the first time in 1437, in the French *Dictionnaire de la Langue Française* and it was associated with the adventurers who travelled in search of opportunities or with men in military expeditions (Landstrom, 1999).

At a basic level, an entrepreneur is defined as “*someone who starts their own business, especially when this involves risks*” (Cambridge

University Press, 2008); “a person who owns and runs a business - not necessarily a new, small, growing or successful business” (Oxford University Press, 1998). The term *empresario* is equivalent to the English term *entrepreneur* (HarperCollins, 2005) or as: “Titular propietario o directivo de una industria, negocio o empresa” (Real Academia Española, 2001) [Owner or member of the board of directors of an industry, business or enterprise].

From an economic perspective, the entrepreneur is related to a certain degree of risk and is defined as “*A person who risks capital and other resources in the hope of substantial financial gain*” (Oxford University Press, 1998). From a sociological perspective, an entrepreneur is defined as an innovative individual: “...*entrepreneurship, as defined, essentially, consists in doing things that are not generally done in ordinary course of business routine*” (Schumpeter, 1934, p. 254).

The term *enterprise* is defined as: “*An organization, especially a business, or a difficult and important plan, especially one that will earn money*” (Cambridge University Press, 2008). The term *enterprise* translated into Spanish is *empresa* (HarperCollins, 2005), defined as: “Unidad de organización dedicada a actividades industriales, mercantiles o de prestación de servicios con fines lucrativos” (Real Academia Española, 2001) [Organizational unit dedicated to industrial, mercantile or service activities *with profit-making ends*]. An *organización* [organization] is an: “Asociación de personas reguladas por un conjunto de normas en función de determinados fines” (Real Academia Española, 2001) [*Association of persons governed by a set of rules that are based on specific ends*].

The term *business* refers to: “*The activity of buying and selling goods and services, or a particular company that does this, or work you do to earn money*” (Cambridge University Press, 2008). The term *negocio* translated into Spanish is *business* (HarperCollins, 2005) and is defined as: “Aquello que es objeto o materia de una ocupación lucrativa” (Real Academia Española, 2001) [*The object or matter of a profitable occupation*], without necessarily implying an organization.

The terms *enterprise* and *business* are sometimes use interchangeably, but they are not the same. The term *enterprise*, (*empresa* in Spanish) refers to *organizations dedicated to industrial, commercial or service activities with profit-making ends*; and the term *business* (*negocio* in Spanish) refers to *that which is the object of a profitable occupation, without necessarily implying an organization*.

The term *manager* is defined as: “*To be responsible for controlling or organizing someone or something, especially a business*” (Cambridge University Press, 2008). The Spanish term *gerente* or *administrador* is equivalent to the English term *manager* (HarperCollins, 2005) and is defined as: “*Persona que lleva la gestión administrativa de una empresa o institución*” (Real Academia Española, 2001) [*Person who manages the administration of an enterprise or institution*].

The term *employer* is defined as: “*A person or organization that employs people*” (Cambridge University Press, 2008). The Spanish term *empleador* is equivalent to the English term *employer* (HarperCollins, 2005).

The term *enterprising* is defined as: “*Doing new and difficult things, especially things that will make money*” (Cambridge University Press, 2008); The Spanish term *emprededor* is equivalent to the English term *enterprising* (HarperCollins, 2003), such as the person: “*Que emprende con resolución acciones dificultosas o azarosas*” (Real Academia Española, 2001) [*Who resolutely starts difficult or risky actions*]. According to the definition, the term *enterprising* does not necessarily imply that the initiative has consolidated into the creation of an enterprise. The term *enterprising* is used in the Minniti et al. (2005) studies, who calculate the *Total Entrepreneurial Activity rate* and define *enterprising* as “*Any attempt of new businesses or creation of new enterprises, such as self-employment, reorganization of a business, or the expansion of an already existing business by an individual, group of individuals or an already established enterprise*” (Serida et al., 2005, p.5).

*Self-employment* is defined as: “*Not working for an employer but finding work for yourself*” (Cambridge University Press, 2008), which does not necessarily mean being the owners of an enterprise (Smith-Hunter, 2003, p. 14). The Spanish term *autoempleado* is equivalent to the English term *self-employment* (HarperCollins, 2003),

## **Definitions Used in Research on Women Entrepreneurs**

The term *women entrepreneur* is difficult to define as there is no accepted definition in the academic sector or in the common language. Entrepreneurship, as an area of study, has been researched by experts from several disciplines, including sociology, psychology and economics, each



with a different definition. Academic writings use a variety of definitions for women entrepreneurs. Some consider women entrepreneurs as:

- (a) Only women who establish new enterprises (Bennett & Dann, 2000; Hisrich & Brush, 1986; Inman, 2000; Schwartz, 1976, Smith-Hunter, 2003), while others refer to enterprise owners, without taking into account how they obtained ownership of them (Aidis, 2002; Izyumov & Razumnova, 2000);
- (b) Only women who are employers (Hisrich & Fulop, 1994; Inman, 2000; Smith-Hunter, 2003) while others include self-employment as an entrepreneurial activity (Aidis, 2002; Izyumov & Razumnova, 2000; Voeten, 2002a);
- (c) Women who not only own, but also manage their enterprises (Aidis, 2002; Inman, 2000; Lee-Gosselin & Grise, 1990), while others emphasize only ownership without taking into account the person who manages the business operations or has an important administrative role (Bennett & Dann, 2000);
- (d) Women who establish a business in order to obtain profits and growth (Bennett & Dann, 2000), excluding proprietors of small business, who are defined as "... those who establish and administrate a business with the main objective of achieving personal goals; where the business is the main source of income and consumes most of their time and resources, and where the proprietor sees the business as an extension of their own personality and related to their family needs" (Carland et. al., 1984, p. 358).

Schwartz (1976) defined the entrepreneur as "an innovative individual that creates and builds a business that did not exist before" (p. 47). Schwartz (1976) also defined an entrepreneur as "an innovative individual who creates and builds a business from nonexistence" (p. 47), which implies that an entrepreneur creates a new enterprise. Hisrich and Brush (1986) defined an entrepreneur as the person who "creates something different of value, dedicating the necessary time and effort, taking the financial, psychological and social risks, and receiving the monetary rewards and personal satisfaction" (p. 4).

According to these definitions, entrepreneur can only refer, *strictu sensu*, to a person who founds an enterprise or business. From a wider perspective, it can refer to the ownership of enterprises, regardless of the way such ownership was obtained (founding, purchase, inheritance)

(Hisrich & Brush, 1986). According to Cooper and Dunkelberg (1981), a person may also have become an enterprise owner in one of several ways: (a) by founding an enterprise; (b) by purchasing the enterprise from a person outside the family; (c) by family succession, including the purchase of the enterprise from a family member; or (d) by promotion or incorporation into the enterprise by the owners. The foundation of an enterprise implies taking personal risks and the capacity to innovate when conceiving and creating a business, and taking the initiative to establish something new. The purchase of an enterprise also implies taking risks and requires the initiative to find and agree to buy an enterprise, however, it requires less creativity and vision than detecting opportunities or obtaining the necessary resources to create an enterprise. To become the owner of an enterprise through inheritance, promotion or incorporation into the enterprise, implies even less personal risk (even though the obligation, reputation and other personal aspects may be involved), and does not require the innovation needed to obtain the necessary resources to create an enterprise (even though it may require a lot of inventiveness to expand an already existing enterprise).

Lee-Gosselin and Grisé (1990) studied women entrepreneurs in Canada and they operationalized the term *women entrepreneur* according to the following criteria: they must own at least 1% of the enterprise, be responsible for at least one managerial function (marketing, accounting, human resources or other) and work in the enterprise. Inman (2000) studied Afro-American women entrepreneurs in the United States and considered the following criteria: women should own more than 51% of the business, have less than 500 employees, have founded the business (excluding purchasing or inheriting enterprises), administer their business, work full time in the enterprise and receive the greater part of their income from the enterprise.

Bennett and Dann (2000) define entrepreneur as “a person who has established the enterprise as a new venture, where growth is intended, for the prime reason of generating profit and achieving personal satisfaction” (p. 78). To operationalize this definition, they divide the term into three parts: create a new enterprise, guide it towards growth, and motivation.

According to Izyumov and Razumnova (2000), any business in Russia is an entrepreneurial adventure due to the lack of financial and legal infrastructure and to the associated personal risk. Therefore, these authors use without distinction the terms *micro-enterprise*, *small business*, *self-*

*employment and entrepreneur*, given that in transitional economies such as Russia's, the distinction among these terms is unclear.

Aidis (2002) argues that the concept of entrepreneur is connected with an innovative behaviour, a situation that may not be present in enterprises at a particular moment in time, and that is difficult to prove; the term *business proprietor* was preferred in the study, i.e., individuals that have their own businesses and that are actively involved in their operation. This definition does not take into account how proprietorship was obtained, or distinguish between employer and self-employed (self-employment considers the owner to be the only worker).

An interesting approach is the one used in Vietnam as part of the project *Training for Women in Micro and Small Enterprises, Phase 2* (Voeten, 2002a), which distinguishes women entrepreneurs from those involved in commercial activities in order to survive. The document developed a set of criteria to classify women's entrepreneurial activities: whether or not it is a women's enterprise; whether women were pushed or pulled to the enterprise; whether or not women would leave the enterprise if they were offered a permanent job; whether or not the enterprise is formally established; whether or not they are ready to pay for training in administrative matters; whether or not they wish to expand their enterprises; whether they hire personnel; whether they take risks or reinvest in their enterprises; whether or not the enterprise and personal finances are separated; whether or not the business has some kind of accounting record.

The analysis of Smith-Hunter (2003) was conducted according to the dimensions of *the proprietor of a small business*, and separated the concepts of administrator, entrepreneur, self-employed and employee. For Steinhoff and Burgess (1989), the entrepreneur is the "person who organizes, runs and takes the risks involved in operating a business" (p. 14). For Stoner and Freeman (1992) a manager is "someone who has formal authority to play a series of impersonal, informational and decision-making roles in a particular unit" (p. 13). For Smith-Hunter (2003), an entrepreneur is associated with the creation of a new business and they may choose whether or not to administer it. If they choose not to administer it, the entrepreneur will only act as an investor.

The self-employed are persons who work for themselves [*not working for an employer but working for himself*] (Cambridge University Press, 2008). Under this concept, even when the *proprietor of the business*

is regarded as *self-employed*, a *self-employed* individual is not necessarily the owner of a business. To be considered as the *proprietor of a business*, such business must be established as an enterprise, i.e., an organization that pursues certain ends. Individuals who work for themselves and who have not constituted an enterprise are self-employed, but they are not proprietors of a business (Smith-Hunter, 2003).

The employee aspect is closely linked to the enterprise aspect. An employee is a "Persona que desempeña un destino o empleo" (Real Academia Española, 2001) [*person who carries out an assignment or job*]. While the owners of some enterprises take their income from the business' profits, others choose to assign themselves a salary for their job, turning themselves into employees.

Taking these dimensions into account, Smith-Hunter (2003) considers that enterprise proprietors run their businesses as administrators; they risk, invest and create their businesses as entrepreneurs; they employ themselves and, in many cases, they are also employees in their own business when they assign a salary to themselves. "This multi-dimensional view of the small business owner is extremely important because it allows us to look at the complex nature of the various dimensions of the small business proprietor" (Smith-Hunter, 2003, p. 16).

### **Proposal for the Definition of Women Entrepreneur**

The following is a definition of a women entrepreneur being proposed for use in future research: *Women entrepreneurs include women (who) own 50% or more of a formal enterprise (regardless of how they obtained the ownership), who are actively involved in their operation as managers or administrators, and who generate employment for themselves and for other people.*

To operationalize this proposed definition, and based on previous studies (Bennett & Dann, 2000; Inman, 2000; Lee-Gosselin & Grisé, 1990; Voeten, 2002a), it has been divided into eight criteria that must be fulfilled in order for the person to be considered a *woman entrepreneur*. The criteria are:

- a) A woman must hold 50% or more of the ownership of the business (shares, voting participation or entrepreneurial activity as an individual), regardless of the way the ownership was

obtained. This criteria has been established to separate an enterprise that is owned by women.

- b) The business must have more than two employees, to differentiate a women entrepreneur from a self-employed woman and because hiring personnel is an important step in the entrepreneurial activity.
- c) A woman must have an important administrative role in the enterprise at the time of the study.
- d) A woman must work full-time in the enterprise; this differentiates women entrepreneurs from those who do business occasionally.
- e) A woman must receive most of her income from the enterprise; this differentiates a part-time opportunity from a full-time commitment to the business.
- f) A woman must be linked to the enterprise for a minimum of two years, to ensure her having a strong commitment to her enterprise.
- g) The businesses must have been operating formally for two years or more, in order to differentiate short-term opportunities from a long-term commitment to the business;
- h) The enterprise must be operating formally at the time of the study. The term *formal* refers to the legal and tax aspects of the business, that is to say, enterprises that are considered legal are those that have legal economic activity, that function as companies or individuals with entrepreneurial activity, and that comply with most of their fiscal obligations, even if that does not necessarily mean that all their employees are formally hired and that the entirety of their sales is formally declared to the tax authorities. The enterprise's formality can be expressed through the incorporation of a company (by-laws) or through the entrepreneurial activity as an individual (income tax, municipal licence to operate or bills of sale).

The proposed definition of women entrepreneurs takes several types of entrepreneurs into account: women who are business owners and run their businesses as administrators; those who take risks, invest and create businesses as entrepreneurs; women who are self-employed but also generate employment for other people and who are also employees in their own business. The definition makes no distinction of the way in which ownership was obtained, nor does it differentiate the women whose goal is

to obtain profit and make their own business grow from owners of small businesses created mainly to achieve personal goals and fulfil family needs.

The proposed definition considers women whose enterprises have been operating formally for a minimum of two years, which can be taken as a measure of commitment to the enterprise, regardless of the financial results obtained. It considers enterprises where women are actively involved in an important administrative role through full-time dedication, that is to say, working as managers or administrators of their enterprises, as “someone who has formal authority to play a series of impersonal, informational and decision-making roles over a particular unit” (Smith-Hunter, 2003, p. 13). Finally, it considers enterprises from which women receive the largest part of their income, in order to distinguish women entrepreneurs from those who do business occasionally.

Questions to be posed in order to determine that a candidate for study meets the criteria for the definition of an entrepreneur are shown in Table No. 1.

*Table 1: Criteria to Define a Women Entrepreneur*

<b>Information</b>	<b>Question</b>	<b>Sources of evidence</b>
P1 Participation of the woman in ownership	Is it a women-owned enterprise (50% of ownership or more)?	If it is a legal entity, verify in legal documents. If operating as an individual, verify in tax returns or from a declaration by an interviewee.
P2 Formal activities	Do you operate your business formally?	Expressed in the articles of incorporation, Tax Returns, Consolidated Tax Record, tax documents such as Bills of Sales or Invoices, and/or municipal operating licence.
P3 Employees in the business	P3 A Do you have any employees? P3 B How many employees?	Verified by observation by the researcher and/or declaration of the interviewee.
P4 Time of operation of the business	How long has your business been established?	Expressed by advertising material, rental documents, tax returns or declaration of the interviewee.

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P5 Role of the woman in the enterprise	Does the woman have a vital role in the administration of her business?	Verified by observation of the researcher.
P6 Dedication to the enterprise	Do you work full time in your enterprise?	Verified by observation of the researcher and/or declaration of the interviewee.
P7 Main source of income	Is this business your main source of income?	Declaration of the interviewee.
P8 Time in the business	How long have you been the proprietor and conductor of the business?	Declaration of the interviewee.

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## Conclusions

The lack of knowledge of entrepreneurial activity represents an obstacle to understanding the phenomenon of women entrepreneurs. Increasing knowledge on women's entrepreneurial activity in the world will help us to understand the phenomenon and facilitate the implementation of support programs to help promote the creation of enterprises by women and to develop a favourable environment for entrepreneurial activity.

Research to date has not yielded comparative results that can be applied across different global contexts and as a result, the lack of a single generally accepted definition of *women entrepreneurs* in academic literature that includes equivalent terms in different languages has become a major obstacle to an understanding of this phenomenon.

This article proposes a single standard definition of *woman entrepreneur* that takes into account the different aspects of what it is to be a woman entrepreneur.

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