

Five steps for developing a culture of female entrepreneurship in Latin America



By Leo Martellotto
and Jonathan Ortman.

JA Americas and the Kauffman Foundation have been focused on entrepreneurship for more than four decades. In celebration of Global Entrepreneurship Week, our President Leo Martellotto and Kauffman Fellow and President of Global Entrepreneurship Week, Jonathan Ortman, highlight key opportunities to support greater female entrepreneurship in the region.

When it comes to tackling poverty, it is no secret that addressing the needs of women is paramount. We know that empowering women has a multiplier effect—a greater percentage of money goes to the family, children have greater access to healthcare, and the amount of education children receive goes up. The list goes on. According to a recent Generation Jobless report, Latin America has made progress: women are more likely to be entrepreneurs here than anywhere else in the world. The challenge is that the rate of entrepreneurship among them is just 15 percent, while their participation in the labor force exceeds 50 percent in most Latin American countries. Growing these numbers can seem daunting when you realize that financial institutions only provide one-fifth of the necessary funding for women-led entrepreneurial opportunities. So, how do we grow the culture of entrepreneurship among women in Latin America?

Junior Achievement (JA) Americas and Global Entrepreneurship Week (GEW) have been working with entrepreneurs across the region for several decades. Together, we're focusing on building both culture and capacity for entrepreneurs to be successful. We

develop entrepreneurship programs and youth startup competitions, and we collaborate with schools, mentors, and businesses to teach entrepreneurship directly to students. Our experiences have demonstrated to us that there are simple steps that can be taken to improve the participation of women in building the economies of Latin America:

Start early and water often:

At JA Americas, we begin planting the seeds of entrepreneurship as early as first grade. Evidence shows that individuals who “catch the bug” of entrepreneurship in their youth are far more likely to start businesses later in life. Programs for young girls can be as simple as conveying stories that highlight female entrepreneurs. Or, they can be as complex as providing group activities building ventures with friends in the classroom.

Find them mentors:

Mentorship is a huge part of the JA model to support entrepreneurs, and we need more female mentors.

Mentors don't just support the business vision of female entrepreneurs; they help them further their self-belief. Mentors help girls and women stand up and say, “I have something to contribute to the economy and the community.”

Failure IS an option:

Too often in Latin America, we teach our children to avoid the risks that may bring about failure. But who has learned more? The child that jumps on his bike, in sight of his or her parent, and rides away without falling, or the child who jumps up, crashes, gets back up, and tries five more times? Resiliency is a universal characteristic of an entrepreneur, and we need to build a culture of embracing resiliency for our young women and girls. This can be accomplished by building networks of would-be business owners. JA does this with its alumni networks in Brazil and Peru, for example.

Network with Other Entrepreneurs

Global Entrepreneurship Week is a time each year when more than 25,000 events are happening around the world. Kauffman Foundation research suggests that exposure to entrepreneurs is a “significant factor” in whether an individual starts a business. Informal gatherings as well as networking events give aspiring young entrepreneurs the chance to connect and collaborate with their peers – helping each other take the

next step to unleash their ideas.

Entrepreneurship = independence:

We have seen firsthand the benefit to women and family when women join the ranks of entrepreneurs. With JA’s signature initiative for women entrepreneurs in Latin America, the Citi Foundation-funded Women 4 Development program, the focus is on supporting women as they take control of own their own economic

future. It begins with mentorship and business skills training, while partnerships with micro-lending institutions help their enterprises flourish. We witness the direct results: women invest their profits in their family, education, and food.

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Leonardo Martellotto

Leo Martellotto is the President of JA Americas, which currently serves more than 1 million youth in 31 countries.



Jonathan Ortman

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