



INSIGHT BRIEF

The Double Shift: Navigating Leadership of Food Businesses and Family in Central America

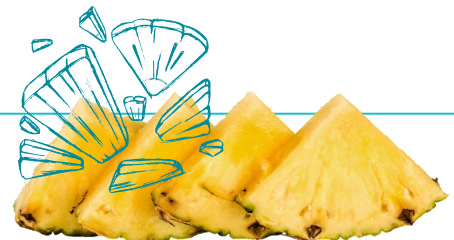
Mid-way through our first Food Maximizer program, our El Salvador Director shared unsettling news: Elena¹, a business owner deeply committed to her handcrafted bakery, was dropping out due to serious health issues. Like many women entrepreneurs, she couldn't delegate her responsibilities, leaving her under immense pressure. Even before her illness, Elena was on the verge of burnout, juggling business strategy sessions with Bpeace experts, school runs, and managing her bakery, barely holding it all together.

Soon after, our Guatemala Director reported that program management was becoming increasingly difficult due to frequent cancellations—many of our small business leaders or their close family members were grappling with health issues. Several participants expressed feeling overwhelmed, struggling to manage the mental and physical demands of their businesses and personal lives. This was something new for Bpeace—such heightened levels of stress had never surfaced in these numbers before.

A report by Endeavor Brasil², a global organization that supports high-impact entrepreneurs, in March 2024 echoed our experience, highlighting the severe toll of the entrepreneurial lifestyle, revealing that 57% of entrepreneurs experience high stress. Women entrepreneurs in the foodservice industry—restaurants, catering, and food delivery—which make up a significant portion of our Food Maximizer program, are especially vulnerable. Between long working hours, regulatory instability, and managing perishable inventory, the business leaders in our cohort faced a daunting task. Indeed, the Endeavor report found that 76.5% of female entrepreneurs reported high stress and entrepreneurial burnout levels, compared to 54.5% of men. With 45% of Bpeace's foodservice portfolio led by women entrepreneurs, their experiences underscore a troubling trend: they are not only managing the intense demands of their businesses but also balancing family responsibilities—a dual burden we refer to as “the double shift.”

We conducted a survey among our women entrepreneurs, and the results were clear: 86% identified balancing work and family as their top concern, far outweighing challenges like limited

1. We use the name 'Elena' to respect the privacy of the business leader whose story we share.
2. Endeavor Brasil. Health and Performance of High Impact Entrepreneurs. March 20, 2024.





access to financing (57%) and the lack of female role models in decision-making positions (53%). The constant strain of caregiving was amplified by demanding work schedules (100%), pressure to always be available (75%), and difficulty to set boundaries or ask for help. As Daniella from Guatemala shared, “This isn’t just me; there are many of us constantly battling.”

The Struggles of Women Entrepreneurs: Overrepresented Yet Under-Supported

Despite their significant presence in the food industry, women leaders often find themselves marginalized. Several respondents recounted instances of prejudice, such as male colleagues or clients insisting that a man handle “technical” matters. Claudia from Guatemala captured this frustration perfectly, saying, “It’s excessively exhausting both mentally and physically, but it’s rarely talked about. When it is, women are often criticized as if we’re complaining for no reason, rather than receiving constructive empathy.”

These stories are backed by findings from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor² and other institutions, which show that women are overrepresented in consumer-facing industries, especially in Central America, and face higher barriers, including gender bias and a lack of visibility in leadership roles.

However, these challenges aren’t met without resilience. The women in our programs have developed critical coping mechanisms that not only keep their businesses afloat but also offer insights for the broader entrepreneurship ecosystem.

Coping Strategies: Lessons from Women Entrepreneurs in the Food Industry

- 1. Delegation and Team Building:** For many women, the ability to delegate was key. About 57% of our respondents identified delegation as a way to focus on personal development and leadership responsibilities. Elena’s story of being forced to step away due to illness, reminds us how vital it is to have a team in place that can carry the weight during unexpected challenges. While support like Bpeace’s helps develop this capability, the ultimate goal is for these women to build self-sustaining teams and operate independently. Strong talent management support is essential to ensure they’re not left to manage alone, both in everyday operations and major disruptions.
- 2. Community and Peer Support Networks:** Our survey also revealed a significant gap in support networks, with 86% of respondents indicating they didn’t feel part of a community of women in the food industry. Yet, those who did engage in mentorship and peer networks reported a stronger ability to navigate both personal and professional challenges. Rebeca, who leads a restaurant in El Salvador, is one of the few who feels part of such a community, and she shares that it has helped her “to feel like I truly belong in the industry.”

3. [Global Entrepreneurship Monitor \(GEM\) Report "Women's Entrepreneurship 2018/2019: Thriving Through Crisis"](#)





3. Tailored Mentorship: Mentorship continues to be a key priority, with 100% of respondents participating in mentoring and trainings such as Bpeace's Food Maximizer to develop their skills and personal growth. These women invest in themselves, putting in the work to become the best leaders they can be. However, we must make mentorship and training more accessible, offering flexibility to accommodate their time constraints and personal commitments. A blended approach that combines coaching and mentoring on both professional and personal topics is essential to truly support their holistic development.

Overcoming Barriers to Thrive in the Food Industry in Central America

Despite the pressures, the women we work with have found ways to grow their businesses and take on leadership roles in their industries. From our Food Maximizer initiative, we learned several strategies that can help women in the food industry thrive:

- **Building Personal Brands:** 62.5% of women emphasized the importance of building a strong personal brand, particularly through social media, as a tool to increase visibility and grow their businesses.
- **Cultivating Strategic Alliances:** Forming partnerships with other businesses and key players in the food supply chain was highlighted by 75% of women as a critical success factor.
- **Developing Essential Hard Skills:** For leading a successful business in the food sector, key skills include customer service and sales, strategic planning, problem-solving, data analysis, and decision-making. About 50% of women identified these as vital for effectively growing their company.
- **Managing Family Business Dynamics:** With 68% of Food Maximizer cohorts being family businesses, addressing family-related obstacles is essential. Developing formal protocols to manage family dynamics and conflicts is a key strategy for ensuring smooth business operations and sustaining leadership effectiveness.

As we continue to support these remarkable women, it's clear that fostering a strong network and providing tailored development opportunities are key to their success. To truly uplift women leaders in the food sector, we must prioritize their growth in talent management and create supportive spaces for peer engagement. Bpeace is committed to integrating these practices into our programs and advocating for them throughout the industry. Our goal is to ensure that every woman entrepreneur has the support she needs to not only overcome challenges but also drive innovation and thrive.





Strengthening Support Networks for Collective Progress

As Bpeace's Food Maximizer program continues to evolve, it's clear that addressing the business needs of women in the food sector isn't enough—there's an urgent need to tackle the challenges these leaders face in balancing their personal and professional lives. We're excited to share that Elena has made a remarkable recovery and rejoined our program in September 2024. Her journey exemplifies the resilience and determination of women in this industry.

As Ana from Guatemala puts it, "I am working to diversify the company and ensure that women are the ones leading." This ripple effect of support and empowerment drives meaningful progress, but Bpeace can only do so much on its own. To create lasting impact, we need the entire entrepreneurship ecosystem to step up. Peer networks must do more to create supportive environments for women leaders, where they can learn, share, and grow together. Funders, too, need to put their dollars where their commitments to gender equity are—by investing in blended program approaches that focus on both personal and professional development. By rallying the entire entrepreneurship ecosystem—peer networks, funders, and industry leaders alike—we can build a foundation where women like Elena, Rebeca, and Ana not only succeed but become the architects of a transformed and thriving food industry in Central America.

Let's expand this ripple into a wave of lasting change—together.

BPEACE: Bpeace creates jobs and helps small and medium-size businesses (SMEs) in crisis-affected communities grow by pairing them with highly-skilled volunteer business experts. We believe that employment is the bridge to education, poverty reduction, improved health and ultimately less violence.

FOOD MAXIMIZER: Small and medium-sized businesses in Latin America make up 95% of businesses, generate 70% of formal employment and can play a transformative role in upstream, midstream, and downstream aspects of food value chains, providing needed goods, services, and information.

If provided with the right technical assistance to close knowledge gaps, along with market linkages, support for the food ecosystem and access to finance, these businesses can make a significant contribution to food security across the region. In 2023, Bpeace partnered with the Argidius Foundation to deploy Food Maximizer, a 3-year initiative with a sectoral focus on the food value chain, in order to accelerate the growth of 128 high-growth, niche, and dynamic SMEs in Central America.

The essence of Bpeace's Maximizer program is customized consulting targeted to the specific growth challenges and opportunities of each business. This customized consulting is carried out by seasoned volunteer experts who, along with local consultants, shepherd the SMEs through a combination of careful diagnostic process, demand-driven group learning, individual customized consulting and networking facilitation. The impact expected consists in job creation, increased revenues and profitability, and new capital mobilized in food systems.

