

# EMPOWERING LOW INCOME WOMEN THROUGH DESIGN: HOME BASED FASHION ATELIERS

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## ABSTRACT:

Low income women are being trained to elaborate clothing. Most of them work in workshops and sell their production at a very low price to middlemen. A fair amount of women working in these places are married and have young children; however, it has been found that most of the husbands are immigrants working in the United States. This scenario makes the mother the primary caregiver in a single-parent household, forcing her to send her kids to a daycare, adding more stress to her slim finances.

The objective of this project is to empower these women through design and business practices to set up their home based atelier, as a unique and viable opportunity for them to get the needed training workshop at home and be economically independent. This in turn allows them to take care of the kids in terms of education and health, spending quality time with them and lowering the fixed expenses of daycare.

**Keywords: Empowerment, Design, Business**

## INTRODUCTION

Women in Nuevo Leon, Mexico, are looking for opportunities where they can balance family life and a suitable income so that they can support their families. The jobs available on the outskirts of Monterrey have been reduced in the last years, resulting in immigration to other countries and leaving these women uncertain of when their husbands would be able to send them any money. In view of these facts, NGOs have joined forces to present a solution to the situation.

There are two main groups of organizations involved in this project. On the one hand, there is the NGO, Altitud, based in Monterrey, Mexico, that works together granting micro loans as well as financial and administrative training. On the other hand, there is CEDIM, the University, which focuses on design classes that support the project with training in pattern making, business, marketing and design processes. Besides the knowledge acquired by these women, students are also positively impacted by getting involved with a different side of the fashion industry.

The interactive experience between students and the project in the communities displays a realistic and an eye-opening scenario onto a different path within the fashion industry, where the students get involved in finding better ways to optimize the labor and resources of women. For instance, if there is any creative inadequacy when solving or detecting design problems, they can ask the students for support, either to learn the skills or take up new ideas and solutions. Students learn

the process whereby these women build their startup on a very low budget and give them input on planning and setting up new companies in a challenging environment.

Bringing Design Thinking processes into action to analyze all the problems and develop new projects. Focusing on research to achieve a better solution to these women's startups. Moving the classrooms into the workshops in the communities where everyone learns from one another creating an educational experience in design, entrepreneurship and sustainability.

## 1. WHO IS INVOLVED IN THE PROJECTS?

The NGO, Altitud provides a micro loan to the women on the bottom of the pyramid who want to build their own startup; the NGO also gives them training to learn how to use the sewing machine and also basic administration so that business wise they know how to set prices and bookkeeping. They also provide a network of people that are already working with them so that if they need help all will cooperate and create this community of entrepreneurs. And lastly, they also help them to get clients and channels to sell the finished clothes. Previously there was also a Partnership with ShareValue a Swedish NGO but currently all the NGO support is given through Altitud.

The NGOs have developed this financing model also for Agriculture and recently have created a food truck initiative, but in the University we have only collaborated in the clothing division.

CEDIM, The University is an Architecture and Design School, whose pillars are Design, Business and Innovation. Students, staff and lecturers are committed to the projects being developed. Recently, UNESCO has given recognition of Sustainability, Innovation and Social Development to the University.

Together, the NGOs and the University are using design as a driving force for social change, improving economic and cultural conditions in the communities.

## 2. VALUES

Altitud had a clear set of values in supporting these women, and CEDIM has supported these values, so that the projects built together are aligned through the same core.

**Fair Trade:** *"Fair Trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect, that seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers.*

*Fair Trade is more than just trading: it proves that greater justice in world trade is possible. It highlights the need for change in the rules and practice of conventional trade and shows how a successful business can also put people first."* (<http://www.wfto.com>)

Fair trade is a relatively new term in Mexico and mostly found in the food industry, so this project is also aiming to introduce it in the textile industry.

One of the insights here was to skip the middlemen, since they are the ones taking a greater profit margin from the hard work done in the ateliers. In order to solve this, university students are conducting a research on Fair Trade certifications that can be issued locally or nationally.

**Social Marketing:** Lefebvre and Flora define Social Marketing as the design, implementation and control of programs that look to increase the acceptance of an idea or social practice in determined

communities. It uses concepts as market segmentation, consumer research, ideation, communication, incentives and the theory of interchange to maximize the reaction of the target groups. (Lefebvre and Flora 1988).

Marketing is also taught at the University; students are involved in communicating these values, so that the final consumers are conscious of what they get and what they pay for.

**Zero Waste:** *"Zero Waste is a goal that is ethical, economical, efficient and visionary, to guide people in changing their lifestyles and practices to emulate sustainable natural cycles, where all discarded materials are designed to become resources for others to use. Zero Waste means designing and managing products and processes to systematically avoid and eliminate the volume and toxicity of waste and materials, conserve and recover all resources, and not burn or bury them. Implementing Zero Waste will eliminate all discharges to land, water or air that are a threat to planetary, human, animal or plant health."* (<http://zwia.org>)

When university staff visited the workshops for the first time, they realized there were lots of scraps from denim fabric, which were considered to be only trash. So the University has started implementing the Zero Waste practice within the workshops.

The University is also introducing pattern making techniques that involve wasting the least amount possible of material and finding solutions to use all the fabric scraps to develop new products.

**Sustainability:** A recent study from 2014 conducted by IPSOS Mexico and MacBride Sustainability mentions the importance of sustainability on the consumer's mind. The results reveal that 61% of the residents in Mexico would not consume any product or service from a company, which is not committed to social causes or the environment. (Puon, 2014)

Daniel Goleman (2010) mentions the seven aspects that determine whether the products have a sustainable production.

1. The source of raw materials.
2. The energy consumption.
3. The kind of pollution and toxins that are generated in production and distribution chains.
4. The safety of the production and the possible effects to the workers and the communities.
5. Water consumption and natural resources.
6. The improvement management of other environment aspects related to the production or industrial processes.
7. The relationship with local communities.

**Empowerment:** *"Empowerment is the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Central to this process are actions, which both build individual and collective assets, and improve the efficiency and fairness of the organizational and institutional context which govern the use of these assets."* (World Bank <http://web.worldbank.org>)

The three projects in which the University and NGO have worked together are consolidating the goal of building a sustainable economy for the families involved in these initiatives.

**Education:** One of the objectives is to keep the young children of these families at home so that these women can raise a family both economically and educationally. Taking these kids and babies to a daycare will incur an expense that right now is not the best option for the families. During one of the visits to the ateliers we saw that the older daughter was helping taking care of and playing with the younger kids. This initiative also gives the women the chance to teach their values to their family, keeping alive traditions and knowledge handed over from mothers to kids.

Education as a value is the main pillar of the projects being developed. Most of these women have a basic education, so both the University and the NGO are giving them support with administrative and technical training to improve their skills.

**Replicable:** To be able to apply this project to other areas of Mexico and Latin America. So far, it has been applied to only a limited territory in the northeastern state of Nuevo León. The NGO has a mind to expand to other rural areas of Mexico in the near future.

**Social Impact:** Having the consistent goal of fostering positive social and economic change.

Altitud in Numbers:

**554** persons have been trained for administration and production

**329** jobs have been created and kept

**94** ateliers have been created by women in Nuevo Leon

**97%** of the micro loans have been recovered

### 3. PROJECTS

Altitud is consistently supporting these women, with financing and training. The cooperation between CEDIM and the NGO has gradually grown over the last 18 months. ShareValue had already a cooperation from Beckmans College of Design in Sweden due that ShareValue was looking for help from academics and that the NGO was founded in Sweden, where Sustainability and social projects are a big concern. We have also been granted a funding from Linnaeus-Palme Project in which there will be an interchange of students from both Design Schools. CEDIM has already started three pilot projects with the NGO: two of them were already concluded and the third one is in progress. The deadline for the third project is May 2015.



Photo 01: First visit to the ateliers in General Zuazua, Nuevo Leon.

### 3.1 PATTERN MAKING WORKSHOP FOR ATELIER OWNERS AND THEIR EMPLOYEES

This was the first approach between the university and the NGOs. At that point, the only people involved in the project at the University were staff: the fashion design program director, the fashion design program coordinator and a pattern making lecturer.

The university organized a series of free pattern making weekend workshops in the campus. Some of the ateliers had to outsource this service at a high price, and changes in patterns were also quite expensive. All the content was adapted to the needs of these users, so that the ateliers' workers could learn the basics and how to modify patterns. Atelier owners and employees put forward their doubts, and by the end of the workshop they realized they could solve most of their pattern problems, which meant that in the future they wouldn't depend on outsourcing for pattern making, enabling them to solve their problems autonomously.



Photo 02: In CEDIM pattern making workshop.



Photo 03: Two atelier owners in the workshop.

### 3.2 PATTERN MAKING AND MODIFICATIONS

This project was the 'real life' project assigned to the third semester students of the Fashion Design Degree program. At CEDIM, students learn the contents by working with real projects, so that they

keep in touch with the real world through a real experience which shows them the roles they can develop as designers in the near future. The methodology of real projects has been implemented in the university since 2008, offering students a true vision of the current situation in the design environment.

During the third semester, the students learn how to modify the patterns of basic clothing pieces. They learn it in the classroom and afterwards they take it to the ateliers. At the end of the project, they donate the work they've developed to the ateliers.

One of the goals is an exchange of skills between the young designers and the women involved in this project and vice versa. It is also an eye opener for the students to see the current situation of these women who are part of the fashion industry, and what process they followed through to launch their start-ups.

This project had three phases:

a. Research

During this stage the students understood the methodology of the NGOs and the interaction with the ateliers. They interviewed the women to detect their needs in pattern making and pattern modifying.



Photo 04: Visiting the atelier during the research on the pattern making needs.

b. Development

The students use their findings to make a plan together with their teachers, so that the content of the lecture and the needs of the ateliers are established. This way they can achieve a win-win project.

### c. Execution

Students learn the entire basic pattern making techniques and how to modify them. They also develop patterns for the ateliers.

Students analyzed the target market of the ateliers and developed a collection of basics, which was also donated so that the women could use it in their own production.

## 3.3 LAUNCHING KATITZI CLOTHING AT HOME

This is a Multidisciplinary Design Project which is the final degree project assigned to a group of thirteen students from six out of the eight courses that we teach at the university: Fashion Design, Graphic Design, Industrial Design, Digital Art, Marketing and Architecture for Interior Spaces. They are tutored by one project leader and rely on advisors from all the degree courses.

This project has to be accomplished in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> semesters: during the 8<sup>th</sup> semester students make all the research, and all through the 9<sup>th</sup> semester they develop or prototype all the proposals from the six courses.

Katitzi Clothing is an existing brand whose design team is based in California. The production is carried out in some of the ateliers with which Altitud has cooperated to launch businesses for low-income women in Mexico. The collection is currently sold abroad, in the United States having the biggest number of consumers in California. In Mexico the current sales channel used and the online platform ([www.kichink.com](http://www.kichink.com)). The challenge now is to sell the clothes in our country, promoting sustainability, fair trade and delivering to the final consumer a product with design and quality.

Students started working using the design tools extracted from the book *Design for Growth*, which follows the Design Thinking mindset of the University.

### THE FOUR QUESTIONS AND THE TEN TOOLS

1. Visualization: using imagery to envision possibilities and bring them to life.

- *What is?*

2. Journey Mapping: assessing the existing experience through the customer's eyes.

3. Value Chain Analysis: assessing the current value chain that supports the customer's journey.

4. Mind Mapping: generating insights from exploration activities and using those to create design criteria.

- *What if?*

5. Brainstorming: generating new possibilities and new alternative business models.

6. Concept Development: assembling innovative elements into a coherent alternative solution that can be explored and evaluated.

- *What wows?*

7. Assumption Testing: isolating and testing the key assumptions that will drive the success or failure of a concept.

8. Rapid Prototyping: expressing a new concept in a tangible form for exploration, testing, and



refinement.

- *What works?*

9. Customer Co-Creation: enrolling customers to participate in creating the solution that best meets their needs.

10. Learning Launch: creating an affordable experiment that lets the customers experience the new solution over an extended period of time, to test key assumptions with market data. (Ogilvie and Liedtka 2011)

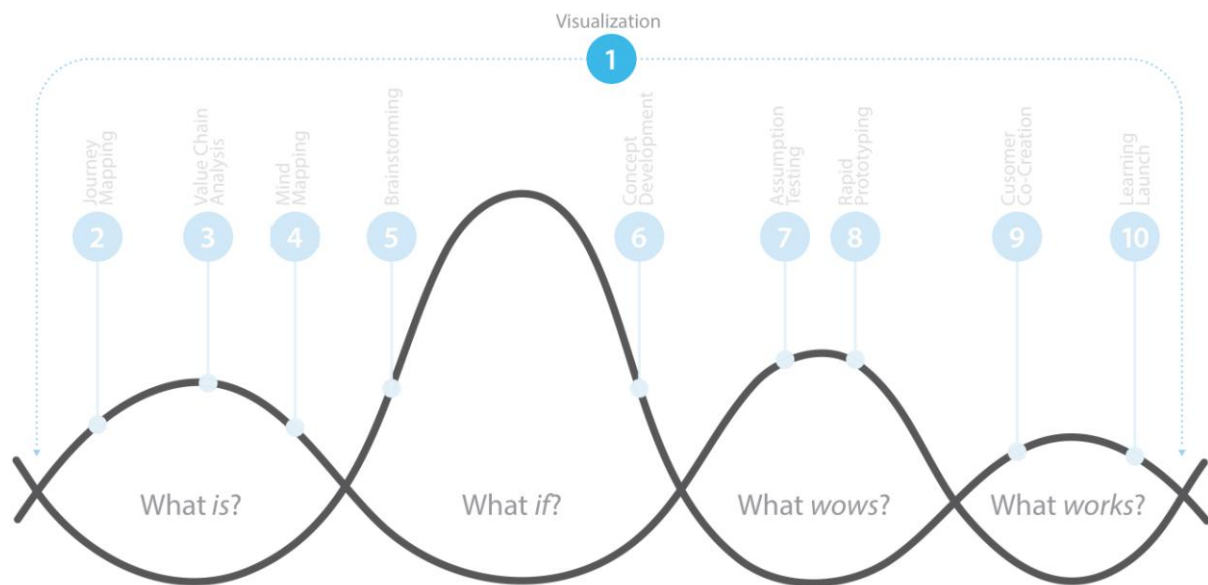


Figure 1: Four Questions and ten tools. (Ogilvie and Liedtka 2011)

The project is on a very early stage; so far they have worked in this for seven weeks. They have started brainstorming on which paths to take. Investigation is extremely important in order to confirm that the proposals are according to the users and the consumers needs. They have also visited institutions that provide the certification required and also for material sourcing and develop their collection.

### 3.3.1 THE CONSUMERS

Historically the consumers only checked the prices, performance and convenience of the products when purchasing. Nowadays they also consider how the products are sourced, manufactured, packaged, disposed and also how the workers were treated. Everything matters. (Ottman, 2011)

Currently students are conducting a research to understand the national consumer better and develop a strategy so that this brand has a stronger impact aligned with what the local consumer is looking for. This is being done with a survey of 400 potential consumers of the brand. All of them women, the age range of age was from 13 to 54 years with a vast majority between 19 and 25 years.

So far, they have been able to verify that local consumers are concerned with where their clothes are made, their quality and whether the people involved in their production are treated with respect.

Other of the insights is that Katitzi logo is not perceived as a clothing brand in Mexico, they mostly think it's an Accessory or Make up Brand.

The general *frequency of buying* per year results:

24% of the whole group buys every 4 months

21% every 6 months

20% once a month

20% every 2 months

11% twice a month

4% once a year

In this question they had the chance to select more than one option of which clothing pieces they look for.

49% T-shirts

40% Short dress

34% Tank top

23% Leggings

15% Pencil skirt

11% Jeans

6% Formal blouse

4% Formal trousers

These percentages are very useful for defining the product mix they will prepare for the collection next semester.

And in terms of which pieces they buy more, 49% looks for T-shirts, 40% casual short dresses and formal clothes gave very low percentage.

The Research International Ltd. realized a study in 1996 in United Kingdom, which resulted that 86% of the consumers have higher opinions of companies that give back to society. 64% of consumers think that is the company's responsibility to be committed in cause marketing activities. In another study by the same group, in 1998 they could see that 70% of the Chief executives and Marketing staff already thought that cause marketing would have more and more importance in the future. (Marconi, 2002)

It has been found that same the percentage in 2014 in Mexico of Sustainable awareness was 61%, instead in the UK in 1996, where 64% consumers were already concern about the causes and social responsibility. This is a very important reason why marketing will have a strong role in this project, in order to implement more consciousness on the Mexican consumers.

The research part will be finished first week of December 2014. In January 2015 they will start executing all the design solutions to the insights that they will find. Also the first semester of 2015 will be the interchange between Beckmans and CEDIM students with the support from Linnaeus-Palme project, to help in this project.

Having the deadline of presenting the whole project in May 2015.

### 3.3.2 THE COMPETITION

Students have found a project in Mexico City, Fabrica Social (social factory in Spanish), with a similar initiative and model, with a different approach, this project started in 2006; so far they have had an excellent acceptance from the consumers and supporters of ethical and sustainable initiatives. Geographically they are working in different areas and the products are mainly hand made by indigenous people of our country, preserving the traditional handicrafts. Supporting Fair Trade and social responsibility, this brand already has presence in museum stores, independent stores and online. When you buy something from Fabrica Social, you know who did it, where and how many hours were spent on it. Not many brands do this so they are creating a positive impact with this awareness. They are against mass production or industrializing their products.

Fabrica Social, is conserving the artisans crafting skills also known as Slow Design. Altitud is training women to work in production and building they own projects. Both are respecting sustainability, fair trade and social responsibility.

### 3.3.3 NEXT STEPS

Follow up with the investigation; develop a concept for the collection; marketing strategy; sales channels; promotion and place.

All the students will work on defining the deliverable that will be reviewed by academics and the NGO.

Analyze all the risks of launching Katitzi with social and sustainable responsibilities in Mexico.

Funding economic sources to develop the prototypes.

Get the seals and certifications to be a Social and Environmentally Responsible company. Students already found the local organism that issues this certificate. And they are investigating which international certifications are also recognized in the home country.

Find where the students can source the fabrics and raw materials locally in order to reduce the carbon footprint, to accomplish the regulations of the seals and certifications that can be issued nationally.

Keep looking for academic partnerships with NGOs since these activities provide a good deal of experience and show the students how to work with ethical values to build better projects.

Conduct a research to confirm if a new clothing line or adapt the existing one is needed so that the new local consumer, the values of Katitzi, the process is sustainable and are aligned to create an economically profitable project.

One of the strategies from Altitud is to contact Fashion Design incubators in Mexico and internationally so that other designers know that the NGO has this social impact ateliers where the production can be developed. Also there is a long-term project to start in CEDIM an incubator focused on Design Disciplines.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

The experience of cooperating with these women has been very positive for all the areas involved. Students have seen and experienced the difficulties of starting up their own fashion ateliers in a harsh environment filled with many challenges. At the same time, they have seen that it is possible, and in the future they want to work together with these women and build more projects.

Students have grown more aware of the local situation in the fashion industry that is so close, less than 60 kilometers from their homes. They are conscious of the impact they can make in these communities. Working together with these women has minimized the distances: the social differences become irrelevant, because they all share the same goal, and this creates a strong commitment between both parties.

The women in the ateliers are grateful for all the help they've received, and they put to practice their newly gained knowledge as soon as they can. The students are more conscious of integrating sustainability and fair trade into all their projects. The creativity and problem solving techniques acquired from the students give the women plenty of tools to keep growing their home based businesses.

During these 18 months in which CEDIM and Altitud have worked together, some of the ateliers have grown and hired more people due to the increasing demand of work.

The learning experience for our students goes beyond the content that could be given inside the classroom. When the students and companies commit to share positive values and cooperate with those in the bottom of the pyramid, the projects built contribute to the communities and also their own future.

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### **Videos**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dIx2Ey5sYvM#t=10> Youtube Video explaining Altitud with English subtitles

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rst2RBRQOfk> Youtube Video of the ateliers course in CEDIM

### **Websites**

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<http://www.beckmans.se/> Beckmans College of Design

<http://www.cedim.edu.mx/> CEDIM Design University

<http://www.fabricasocial.org/> Fabrica Social

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<http://katiziclothing.com/> The US website of Katitzi Clothing

<https://www.kichink.com/stores/katizimexico> Mexican platform for Katitzi's online store

<http://sharevalue.se/> ShareValue

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