**Spain's jobless women become the boss to beat the recession**

**Record 800,000 businesses set up by female entrepreneurs in the past five years to counter unemployment crisis**

* [Ashifa Kassam](http://www.theguardian.com/profile/ashifa-kassam) in Madrid
* [theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com/), Monday 3 February 2014 18.39 GMT

When it comes to finding a job in [Europe](http://www.theguardian.com/world/europe-news), not all citizens are born equal. If you are Spanish you have a one in four chance of being unemployed, rising to one in two if you are young. And if you are a young woman in [Spain](http://www.theguardian.com/world/spain)? The odds of finding yourself among the ranks of the unemployed are even higher, at 54.7%. Now however, young Spanish women are finding their own solutions to the crisis, discovering an entrepreneurial streak that has resulted in a record 800,000 businesses being set up by women in the past five years.

Take Almudena Velasco. She lost her job on a Monday morning. Despite her 16 years of experience in advertising, the economic crisis meant her chances of finding another job in the industry were slim. So on the Wednesday Velasco, 41, ploughed her life savings into starting her own ad agency.

Or Izanami Martínez. After she came up with the idea for NonaBox, a monthly box of goodies tailored to pregnant women and new mums, Martínez, 29, found investors, quit her job and launched her business all in one week. What started as a venture in her living room has grown into a 22-person company that spans five countries.

"In a startup if you have a good idea you can see it happen in two or three days," Martínez said. "In a big company, you have to go to a committee and then another meeting, it takes a very long time. It's kind of frustrating."

Twenty years ago Martínez watched her mother go from bank to bank, looking for a loan to finance her dream of building a private school. Now it's much easier for entrepreneurs, she said.

"Even since we started three years ago, I see so many changes. There are a lot more startups, more venture capitalists every month and there's a system that's really starting to work," she said. "It's not like Berlin, of course, but there's starting to be some events."

"The crisis allowed women to seriously consider becoming entrepreneurs, something many had never thought of before," said Joan Torrent Sellens, head of the Open University of Catalonia's business school. In the past decades [Spanish women have made headway in government and the public sector](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/sep/22/swiss-women-in-parliament-spain), but lag behind in entrepreneurship, creating less than 20% of businesses. When analysing the same figures during the crisis, Torrent Sellens stumbled across a surprising result: the number of businesses created by women had nearly doubled during the crisis, to just under 40%.

The statistic, said Torrent Sellens, is a silver lining to Spain's years of economic turmoil. As the crisis hit the country's business community, destroying millions of jobs and reversing years of economic growth, it forced a rethink of priorities. Social media networking, product innovation and marketing became key values – all strengths that many Spanish women had developed on the margins as they sought to move forward in the hierarchical, male-dominated world of Spanish business.

At the same time, he said, technological advances put multinational corporations on the same footing as small, socially networked businesses.

"These days you can act like a big business without having a lot of employees," said Torrent Sellens. "The crisis allowed women to ask: 'Why do I have to be a director at a multinational, earning a third of what my male counterparts are earning when I can create my own business and lead my own project?'" he said. " The crisis gave them an alternative, their own way of breaking through the glass ceiling."Beatriz Sigüenza said the main impediment to starting a business in Spain was "your own family and friends". As she sought out an entrepreneurial niche, her friends urged her to look for a "real job". Today she describes her business, Kibo, as the Ikea of creative consulting, selling tools to help businesses stimulate creativity in the workplace. "You have so many friends waiting for you to fail, waiting to say: 'I told you so.'," she said.

Her parents still hoped she would go back to being an employee, she said, laughing. "I'll tell them about a presentation to a big company that went really well and my mother will say, 'Great, tell them to hire you.'"

Inundated with stories of female entrepreneurs struggling to create businesses with little support from their friends and family, Mercedes Wullich founded The Women Station, a co-working space that caters exclusively to female-led companies, in 2012. "It was absolutely necessary to have a space only for women because women entrepreneurs, in the past few years, have had to overcome major societal barriers – whether they be cultural or educational."

With its open layout and big windows, the space is meant to be welcoming, a contrast to the sometimes cold world of business. "For many of these women, starting a business isn't a choice but an obligation," she said.

As Spain's government struggled to rein in spending, it slashed jobs in the public sector, once the country's largest employer of women. Companies have also been shedding jobs, pushing Spain's [unemployment](http://www.theguardian.com/society/unemployment) rate to 26.3% for men and 27.1% for women. "The market isn't offering these women the jobs they need, but they still have to earn a living," said Wullich.

From the days of Spain's civil war, when women fought alongside men and were granted certain property rights, to the rule of General Francisco Franco, who banned divorce and frowned on the idea of women working, Spanish women have seen their rights ebb and flow during the past 100 years. Franco's death in 1975 ushered in the transition to democracy as well as a push to put women's rights in Spainon par with western European counterparts. Recently [proposed legislation to limit abortion rights](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/18/spain-reform-abortion-fury) has many in the country worried about a rollback of women's rights.

Some attitudes persist, says Almudena Velasco. When she started her advertising business in 2010 she would often attend meetings accompanied by her sole employee, who was male. "The clients would only speak to him directly for the entire meeting, as if he was the one taking decisions," she said. She learned to stand up for herself. "These days they know better," she said.

Her experience echoes that of Monica Ceño Elie-Joseph. Thirteen years ago she opened The Lab Room, a spa in Madrid. "People would walk in, take one look at me and say: 'OK, where's the owner?' When I introduced myself they would ask: 'But who started this business – your father? Your husband?'"

That's not to say the new crop of Spanish entrepreneurs will have it easy. Spain still falls in the bottom half of the World Bank ranking on the ease of starting a business. It is 142nd out of 189 countries. Typically, it takes 10 procedures, 23 working days and costs about €1,100 (£910) to start a business in Spain. "Bureaucracy is a nightmare. You have to go to so many places for so many papers," said Ceño Elie-Joseph.

Relief may be on its way. In May the federal government approved a bill aimed at facilitating the creation and financing of businesses and fostering entrepreneurial spirit. Proposals include millions of euros in funding, a scaling back of red tape and tax breaks for entrepreneurs.

When Ceño Elie-Joseph speaks to women across Spain, she is often asked if it's worth it. "For me it's about creating a project I love and living in a city with lots of sunshine," she said. "But my best friend owns a hairdressing salon in New York. And he always says to me: 'Monica, if you were living in New York you would be a millionaire by now.'"

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/03/spains-jobless-women-become-boss>