

DaringCircles

by the Women's Forum for the Economy & Society

#Women4Business

Leading through adversity: Women entrepreneurs and Covid-19

A series of interviews by the Women4Business Daring Circle

Interview with Gina Diez Barroso
President and CEO, GRUPO DIARQ

 **WOMEN'S FORUM**
FOR THE ECONOMY & SOCIETY

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#Women4Business Interviews

How are women being impacted by COVID-19, and how are they leading to address the challenges faced by others? To learn, The Women's Forum for the Economy and Society is conducting a series of interviews with women entrepreneurs and ambassadors for women's empowerment around the world.

These interviews are unveiling unique insights into the far-reaching impacts of Covid-19, and the diverse ways these inspiring women are responding to the crisis with leadership and innovation.

Beyond recovery: designing an inclusive world

In the face of the new reality instilled by this pandemic, we are bound together more than ever. Let's dial up our solidarity as we design an inclusive recovery: for the women who continue to be disproportionately affected, and for everyone else who needs their leadership and positive impact. This crisis has reminded us of how critical our work is: of the urgent need to reshape the world together, driven by our **common purpose** to accelerate inclusive progress.

We care. We share. We dare.

Gina Diez Barroso, President and CEO, Grupo Diarq

Gina Diez Barroso is a successful entrepreneur, innovator and philanthropist. She is the founder and CEO of Grupo Diarq, one of the most important international design, architecture and real estate companies in Mexico. Gina is also the founder and president of CENTRO; the first university in Mexico focused on creative studies with a strong emphasis in business and entrepreneurship, and the president and co-founder of Dalia Empower; a global initiative created to empower women under a unique educational methodology. In 1992, she founded Fundación Diarq, a non-profit organisation that works toward eradicating domestic violence and preventing bullying in schools. Her second non-profit is Pro-Educacion CENTRO foundation, which grants merit-based scholarships for creative studies degrees. Gina Diez Barroso is an active board member of several companies, a member of various high-profile women's networks, and is the representative of Mexico at the W20.

As well as being a successful entrepreneur, some of your work involves supporting others in achieving their full potential.

What was your main inspiration and motivation for the career paths you have chosen?

Do you feel that being a woman has influenced this?

It started from being part of the committee of 200.org, an organization which I have been part of for 19 years. This is a group of 200 women business leaders of the world, I am the only Latin American woman belonging to this group. We all have very successful businesses, networking is a very important part of C200. The group is divided into 3 sections: one documents where women are in the world, for example where they are in legal or decision-making on government positions, sits on boards etc. Another group handles the foundation, we give scholarships for MBAs, we have a program where we select women who are at \$15 million revenue and we help them to reach \$25 million revenue. The third area which I am involved is education. We go to top universities in the world and we talk to MBA and PhD women. Especially to US universities like MIT, Stanford, Yale, Harvard and other Ivy League, also universities in Europe like LSE, IE, London Business School among others. We usually speak with a group of 40 to 50 women, not on the business side (they can google us!), but about our human side, on how to balance our lives.

We try to help them feel they don't have to leave their career path when they get married or have children - not to choose whether to have a family or to be a successful professionally. 88% of the women in the committee of 200 Women have families, this helps to show that you can reach both paths in life. I have been doing this for many years, every time I went, I found women who were graduates at Stanford, Harvard or PhD at MIT, with outstanding academic skills, yet they had doubts about showing leadership, they were very conflicted about being able to follow their career path and being able to balance their personal lives. I realised that it did not matter where they studied or how many degrees they had; they still did not have all the soft skills needed to succeed in life. It was then when I decided to dedicate my next chapter - which I imagined for my retirement because I would like to retire at some point - to education for women, to provide the soft skills they need to succeed but could not find in a university. I found my purpose in education 18 years ago, when I started my own university I was frustrated on the lack of innovation in the classrooms. They were still teaching in an old fashion while the world was going forward.

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How is the sector you work in and specially your business being impacted by COVID in Mexico? What are the biggest challenges you are facing, now and in the future?

My two strongest sectors are real estate and education. Although education has been hit, the impact was much less. We are helping families with financial problems, we lowered the tuition fee by 20%, and we are providing them either with scholarships or no interest credits for 48 months. We are doing everything in our power to avoid students to drop out for financial difficulties. The real estate sector is having a tough time. Even if you can develop your project you will not be able to sell it. We had to stop in Mexico, for example, if you develop inexpensive housing, the market is difficult, but it is being sold, though the margins are slim. High-end property has completely stopped at this point. The real estate sector is going through a difficult time, and I think it will stay like this for at least a year to 18 months. I was ready to start several projects permits were ready, but I decided not to go ahead. I do think we have to be much more cautious. The big problem is not for the developers; the problem is for the workers, most of our workers are at the bottom of the pyramid and they all have family. They are part of the informal economy; this is a very serious issue at least in Mexico. The government needs to spend on infrastructure to start the economy rolling.

How is your business adapting to the changing situation, and how are you leading this?

First of all, we are not getting rid of any employees. The first three months, starting from March, we paid full salary. From July, we lower 50% of the salary. We are not going to start working until September or October, In the meantime, we will lower 50% and ask for 4 hours a workday. There will not be much to do, but we do not want to fire anybody. As for real estate developing, what we want is probably to change zoning, to develop more affordable housing. But for that, you need the government's permit, and the permit process in Mexico is very slow. They could help in changing zoning: for example, if you have land with a permit for constructing 50 apartments of 200m square each, you could double the number of apartments and lower the area to 100 m², but you would need a permit. You would be able to sell the small apartments much faster. Therefore, we need to work together- government and private sector to make this happen. This is the only way we can build the right housing for people faster and keep the sector going. I think that could be done and can be very helpful for everybody. I have a piece of land that was going to be used for constructing high-end housing, but now I think I am going to build a school for nurses. Because I have a commercial permit, and I realise there is a need for nurses, not only for Mexico but also for the world. I never imagined I would be doing that, but I will partner with someone who knows how to run a nursing school to do be able to that.

What kind of actions are needed from institutional actors to enable successful economic recovery which is inclusive of all businesses?

One of the main actions is that we should invest in healthcare and infrastructure. It is very important to start moving the economy in Mexico. We need to work different, to understand and be ready for the new reality. I am convinced that business as usual will not happen; For example, there are not enough well-trained nurses in the world. Mexico can be a provider, it is famous for the willingness to serve, we are outstanding, in hotels, in tourism in service in general. That is in our soul. Once you have that already, you can train these people professionally in other skills, for that, I would love to have an alliance with a company from any part of the world who has excellent academic skills in medical personnel, to build a university for nurses.

Do you see any positive opportunities arising from this crisis, for women entrepreneurs and business leaders?

I belong to an organization in Mexico called CCE, where most of the top companies and sectors are represented. Mexico has an amazing opportunity in

relation to trade between USA and China. We can take advantage of the trade tensions and provide United States with goods and products that were coming from China but due to the tariffs and the freight the price is not accessible anymore. Mexico is a very important manufacturer and producer of goods to US. Not only in the famous “Maquiladoras” of apparel, but also in automotive technology and aerospace, an interesting example is that 80% of the TV screens in the world are being manufactured in Mexico. It was very important for Mexico the signing of the new trade agreement with USA TEMEC the old NAFTA between Canada, US and Mexico, it is an opportunity for trade development in Mexico.

Now we are still in the middle of the storm, difficult to see the end, but I think we have to look for a perfect turnout once everything is finished. First, I think the world needed a drastic change, we will end up with a much better world; our priorities definitely have to change. I do think women have different way of risk-taking than men. We act completely different, we are very resilient, we can handle multiple tasks at the same time. We have to work together with men to move the needle, men and women need to collaborate.

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This pandemic has proven that women can handle crisis successfully we just have to see the women that are leading countries like Germany, New Zealand, Finland etc. As always, women need to prove themselves before we are given a chance. And now we have proven that women can handle one of the worst pandemics in the whole world successfully, so I think that after this is over, we deserve to have important positions and corporate leadership. I think it can be an incredibly good new world. I am very positive about what will come.

Another advice I often give to women and men, but I think women take it much more easily. You have to bring creative thinkers into the C-suite. Your leadership in design needs to be sitting in the C-suite and in the board room, now more than ever, we have to be creative, to change the way we did business in the past, to re-invent our company and our products. To design a new supply chain to be more creative in all sectors of the company. What would you do if they give you the permission to go back to the so-called “normal”? will you do what you did in the past? It will never be the so-called “normal” again. I have been with another group of women called Women Presidents Organization (WPO), which works with women entrepreneurs and presidents of companies. When we talk among each other, we are literally doing think tanks for our companies now on how to understand the human behaviour once this is over. If you understand the behaviour of your customers and of your end-consumers, you will be successful in business.

When you have a think tank, you need to have a think tank with completely diverse thinkers. For example, your think tank could have a young person, an entrepreneur, a scientist, a minority group, a person who is completely trans-national thinker, a person in finance, that will make a difference. That is an opportunity for richness and innovative thinking in a think tank. I do think women are very powerful on this. Men sometimes do not take time to think about the value of diversity, this is an advantage in the future of women. In the case for showing the power of women, in Mexico we did a demonstration on March 9, after International Women’s Day on March 8. The name was “A day without women”, and the women did not go to work or consume anything, to reveal the importance of their contribution to the economy. I do believe that this is an amazing opportunity for women to show solidarity, In the near future. The ecosystem for women entrepreneurs is going to grow, some of them will find themselves with no job after the pandemic is over, they are going to have to start a business, start innovating and in many cases be the provider.

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What key message would you like to share with other women leaders at this time?

I would try to tell them it is very important that if you reach a leadership position, it is our obligation to bring other women up. Sometimes when we get to the top, we forget that you struggled to get where you are. At Dalia Empower, we have been doing incredible initiatives to put more women in the pipeline. For example, I started an initiative called Inspiring Women. I sent an email to 150-200 women around the world to share their inspiring sentences and asked them to send this to another woman that they think could be an inspiring woman. You have no idea the number of people helping. We also have a mentoring program, masterclasses called Dalia Masters, amazing women willing to help and teach. You would never have imagined the women and men that said yes to being in Dalia Masters and become a role model for other women. Therefore, the message more for the women: Find your power, get to the top and bring another woman. That is the only way we will help each other.

We tell them that once they have a board position, they have an obligation to bring another woman onto that board as well. We need to have that chain of positive reactions between women. Get rid of stereotypes, and other things that we have to carry due to culture and education. It is ok to have a partner and to have children, or to have a partner and decide not to have children, to be alone or not, to work or to stay at home, It is ok to have and do whatever you want.

Last but not least, it is ok not to be ok in this pandemic. Women can try to control everything, to try to make sure that everything is fine. We want to control that we are fine, the children are fine, the husband or partner is fine. Women feel they must be strong, they cannot suffer and should not cry. We should not be ashamed to be vulnerable; it is ok not to be ok. If you want to cry, say “Hold on, I need to cry for 10 minutes”, every tear is medicine and it will heal, go to your room and cry as much as you want. Come out everything would have been fine. Tears heal when you let them out, we are all humans. Never give up!

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The Women4Business Daring Circle is a global coalition of partners, with an ambition to promote and accelerate women's economic empowerment in business and supply chains.

The Daring Circle is led by P&G, in collaboration with BNP Paribas, Bouygues, Exxon Mobil, L'Oréal and Publicis Groupe. The Circle is supported by Knowledge Partner Kearney, Insight Partner Clifford Chance, and Institutional Partners WEConnect International and UN Women. Expert Partners include Accenture, BY.O Group, founder of Catalyst at Large Suzanne Biegel, HEC, senior expert in gender Meg Jones, and founder of the Global Business Coalition for Women's Economic Empowerment Linda Scott.