

Women of the world

Sisters of Maya

In the Yucatán jungles of Mexico, lives are changing for the better, thanks to a trailblazing farm where women dare to dream.

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Clockwise from left: Harvesting jackfruit; collecting dried winged beans; worker María Lucía Cón Reguena outside a local church; Opposite page: María and Teresa de Jesús Cón Reguena at the farm.

I'm sitting in the back of a pick-up truck with three Maya women and, although it's so hot Mexico's Yucatán jungle appears to be steaming, that isn't the reason I'm blushing. They are telling some of the dirtiest jokes I've ever heard – and because I'm a fledgling Spanish speaker, they're illustrating them with the help of the heritage vegetables piled under and around us.

The women are on their daily commute from the *petite pueblo* (village) of Espita to Mexiza de Indias, an agriculture project that supplies restaurants and hotels with rare fruit and vegetables, some so rare they are in danger of dying out. The project combines ancestral knowledge such as the 'Three Sisters' companion planting method – beans act as a natural fertiliser, squash maintains soil humidity and keeps other plants low so the corn can absorb maximum light – with regenerative techniques designed to combat increasingly severe weather conditions. And arguably the most progressive thing about the project is that it encourages Espita's female residents to take on paid work.



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"Although younger women regularly have jobs in tourism in [the city of] Valladolid or on the Riviera Maya, those in their forties and fifties see women's place as in the house," says Martha Elena Chan Tuz, who was born in the pueblo and co-owns the farming project alongside her Spanish husband, Gonzalo Samaranch Granados.

"They perceive farming, in particular, as something men do. However, our workers are realising that earning their own wages gives them choices."

Martha has always been a trailblazer in the community. She worked as a housekeeper in her twenties, and has designed her own line of clothing, which is sold at a local hotel.

Clockwise from below: Lydia Maria Char Ceme and Maria cook tortillas; Martha Elena Chan Tuz, who co-owns the farming project, has driven positive change in the community; harvesting chrysanthemum; Maria was the first female worker.

Today, she celebrates the winds of change that are blowing through Exipta. *Mestiza de Indias* launched in 2015. In 2021, a Women's Institute that provides support for survivors of domestic violence opened its doors. In 2022, the town elected its first female mayor. Yet Martha is reluctant to admit to the significant role that both she and the farm have played in all this. She is much more interested in introducing me to her team.

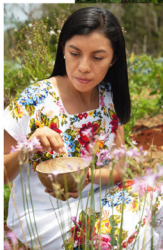
After pointing out a behemoth jackfruit tree, she leads the way to the thatched kitchen, her *huipil* (embroidered tunic) as crisp as snow against the dusty floor. It's harvest day and the lean-to is a hive of activity. Maria Alba De La Flor Pech is sorting a rainbow of freshly harvested carrots. Tereza de Jesus Cén Bequena is podding dried winged beans for replanting next season. Lydia Maria Char Ceme is



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— Martha Elena Chan Tuz

Clockwise from left: The farm has changed the village's gender dynamics; fruits and vegetables are grown using traditional farming methods and supplied to local businesses; Maria was the first female worker.



making tortillas from heritage purple maize. The slap, slap, slap of her hand on dough becomes like a heartbeat as we chat about how their work has changed their lives.

Maria, who divorced her husband six years ago due to his issues with alcohol, was the first female employee to join the project and still plays a vital role in recruitment. It isn't easy – on my visit, just these three women are working at the farm regularly. Although she often receives insults while walking to work from those with more traditional beliefs, Maria's wages have allowed her to support her daughter's education.

"Yes, farming is tiring but there are things that are much harder than work," she says. "My daughter dreams of being a lawyer and my wages make that a possibility. I'm currently saving up for a computer so she can continue her studies."

Both male and female workers at *Mestiza de Indias* earn 415 pesos

(\$36) a day, double the minimum wage, as well as sick pay for themselves and their families and a weekly box of produce.

For Tereza, the biggest impact has been the shifting power dynamic within her relationship. "It's the custom in our village for women to serve men – to wash their hands, bring them food, clean the house. My husband complains that I don't do enough anymore but since I'm earning the money, I force him to help me."

As the day burns on, the rhythm of the farm plays out gently. Workers with faces shaded by hats as broad as wagon wheels trudge back and forth carrying baskets of vegetables: Buddha's hand lemons, red okra, purple sweet potatoes.

When the sun reaches its pinnacle, the women gather in the kitchen to eat tortillas stuffed with fire-roasted eggplants, garlic flowers and salt from the nearby village of San Felipe.

Martha quietly spoons homemade salsa mocha on everyone's food with flicks of her delicate wrists before serving herself.

"I feel like the mentality of the women in Exipta has changed in a positive way," she says with her trademark modesty. "Now they know anything is possible." **AWW**