
Women social entrepreneurs driven by impact rather than scale



By Grace Segan

Many women are turning to social entrepreneurship because they tend to work more with their hearts, says American serial social entrepreneur and Ashoka Fellow Christina Jordan.

Women tend to be very nurturing and their work is an extension of how they see the world.

According to Jordan, the gender differences come in when it comes to scale. “From my experience in social entrepreneurship, there seem to be more men who take on more large-scale initiatives than women do. That doesn’t necessarily mean that women’s initiatives are not successful; it’s just that they don’t necessarily tend to be driven by the same desire for ‘big’. Women seem to be driven by the desire for impact that’s tangible to them.”

The founder of Evolutionize It, a social enterprise that aims to bring about social change worldwide, through collaboration, facilitated several discussion groups at the Women’s Forum in Deauville recently. Speaking to INSEAD Knowledge on the sidelines of the forum, Jordan said the gender difference was evident during a discussion on women’s entrepreneurship: “There was a

general consensus which resonated with the group that women tend to be limited by our own thinking. We don't automatically go after 'large' and 'big' and 'successful'. We don't assume that we are going to be successful on a large scale in what we do and we tend to think smaller than maybe we should."

Kalpana Sankar, Chief Executive of India-based social enterprise Hand-in-Hand, says that balancing social performance with financial performance targets is like walking a tight-rope. Nonetheless, women have to come to terms with the drastic changes in the microfinance space, wherein more IPOs and private equity funding seem imminent. Women realise that they have to produce results on a scale on a par with male-run microfinance organisations.

Succession and post late stage

Another gender difference is that women social entrepreneurs tend to plan for their own succession. Or if they don't have a plan, they know that their work demands them to eventually step down and hand over the reins to the stakeholders.

It's also true that women social entrepreneurs in particular tend to invest "every single bit of money" that they have in their projects, including what should provide for them in their old age such as their assets and family money. "They tend to invest everything they can get their hands on in their project which leaves them quite vulnerable at the late stages of their career," says Jordan.



Sankar concurs and adds that it is difficult for women to negotiate their financial package and for them, the cause is more important than the financial returns. “It is possible that I end up in a similar situation (as Jordan mentioned) because as a woman I cannot help my basic giving nature. My work in this field is more of an inner calling rather than a commercial proposition.”

According to Sankar there is a glass ceiling in the microfinance sector amid rapid commercialisation and women managers in microfinance institutions need to face up to the challenges of a competitive environment. Women leaders and managers in India still face social constraints while lobbying and networking professionally. It appears that there are increasingly fewer women leaders in microfinance due to rapid commercialisation in this sphere. “Women prefer to retain the social ethos in this field and hence are not able to come to terms with this rapid change. If commercialisation is the new way to go, they may prefer to plan for succession at the earliest possible opportunity.”

Jordan says that it is good that there are a lot of organisations that are stepping in to support late-stage social entrepreneurs who have shown that their projects have the capacity to scale up. However, they are not extending that support yet to beyond that late-stage phase, when women especially are leaving the successful ventures they have created to start again elsewhere. “We really need to figure out how to deploy their expertise because their experience is extremely rich,” says Jordan, “and could be used to help up and coming social enterprises.”

<http://executive.education.insead.edu/social-entrepreneurship>

INSEAD Social Entrepreneurship Programme

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