

## **The Social Entrepreneurship Field & Gender Issues: A High Potential Intersection for Change**

**By:** Zeynep Meydanoglu Ertan\*

\*Country Co-Director, Ashoka, Turkey

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### **Abstract**

The social entrepreneurship field appears to be doing much better in terms of women's representation and leadership in comparison to other fields and sectors. Yet, despite this success, female social entrepreneurs continue to operate in an unfavorable, male-dominant environment which significantly disadvantages women. In this article, we leverage the compelling results of Ashoka's Global Fellows Studies from 2018 and 2021, as well as a series of in-depth interviews conducted by Ashoka's Next Now Gender Equity team to go more into detail on the barriers female social entrepreneurs face. We argue that systematically attending to these barriers has the potential to elevate the social entrepreneurship field to the next level in terms of how it defines impact, leadership, system change, and ultimately, success. This is more urgent than ever in today's pandemic-stricken world.

### **Introduction**

Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world.<sup>1</sup> As a social construct, gender comes with rigid, idealized, and naturalized gender roles, as well as a hierarchical order between the sexes, where the male is deemed superior and more suitable to hold power. How these social dynamics play out for female leaders in the material world is striking. As of September 2021, only 25% of all national parliamentarians are women,<sup>2</sup> while there are only 26 women serving as heads of state and/or government globally.<sup>3,4</sup>

Although it also fails to meet equality on many fronts, the social entrepreneurship field appears to surpass the levels of female representation and leadership in government and business. In 2021, the Ashoka Fellowship consists of 39% female social entrepreneurs, while social entrepreneurs awarded by the Skoll Foundation and the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship between 2005 and 2020 are 38% and 29% female respectively. As of November 2021, one out of these 3 organizations had a female CEO, while their boards comprised of 57% female members.

Yet, Ashoka's 2018 and 2021 Global Fellows Studies reveal that there is still much to be done to foster a social entrepreneurship field and environment that is more gender equal and conducive

to female leadership. In the following sections, we depict the major challenges faced by female social entrepreneurs, as well as how and why they need to be supported to elevate the social entrepreneurship field as a whole.

### **Gender Trouble in the Social Entrepreneurship Field**

Drawing from the qualitative and quantitative data from the 2018 study, Iman Bibars notes in her [article](#) that:

“The most common challenges shared by women Fellows were that their sector was heavily dominated by men, that they were discriminated against for their appearance (particularly if they were also young), that they were not listened to or given decision-making power in group situations, and that fundraising and networking were easier for their male colleagues”.<sup>5</sup>

These issues were further underlined with quantitative data showing that female Ashoka Fellows tended to spread their ideas only locally and/or nationally, while male Fellows were more likely to spread their solutions internationally. While women Fellows on average were active in four countries, the global average for men was significantly higher at 6.8 countries.

Three years on, Ashoka’s Global Fellows Study of 2021 shows that many of these issues persist. Despite representing the world’s leading social entrepreneurs, female Ashoka Fellows are still likely to face barriers in investment and access to funding, discrimination and stereotyping, and industry gender bias and lack of representation. In the 2021 Ashoka Global Fellows Study, female social entrepreneurs are using for-profit or hybrid models much less compared to their male counterparts (7% vs. 13% for for-profit models and 27% vs. 33% for hybrid models) showing a strong inclination towards not-for-profit models (66% vs. 55%). Most female social entrepreneurs (52%) also report that the Ashoka Fellowship stipend was the first significant funding they received. This is more than what male Ashoka Fellows report (42%), indicating lower economic opportunities in the sector for women.

The Ashoka Global Fellows Study of 2021 reveals another interesting fact: female social entrepreneurs find the activation of changemakers and striving for an “Everyone a Changemaker” world more relevant in their work than their male counterparts (70% vs. 56%). This indicates that they are more likely to trigger system change through distributed leadership, seeking indirect impact and mindset shift by empowering others. Additionally, female social entrepreneurs seem to benefit more from the Ashoka Fellowship in terms of strengthening their new idea and improving financial sustainability: 69% of female Ashoka Fellows report this vs. 62% of male Fellows.

Female Ashoka Fellows taking part in an interview series conducted by the Next Now Gender Equity team add another dimension to the issue, highlighting that female social entrepreneurs face gender-based discrimination at work and are also burdened by the unequal distribution of house and care work and by society’s perception of their life experiences such as motherhood or menopause. One female social entrepreneur from Africa mentions that:

“We should build our home, family differently. A successful family is a successful society. We need to be team players, team builders. We need mutual support, not a specific work for a specific gender. We women should be natural, be ourselves and reject the artificial roles we are supposed to play. If we are tired running the house, we should say it, etc. And the man should then take over. This is what I also tell my husband.”

Another female Ashoka Fellow highlights her experiences with age and gender:

“I’m 48 years old. I’m in menopause. I would say that it’s been in this period, over my 40s, that gender has become an issue in my working life. Before that, I had the luxury, because my area of focus and identity was so wrapped around the purpose of my life which was around disability inclusion. And I will say this, being questioned on the fact that I wasn’t a mom has been very hurtful. And very difficult. And this is something I don’t talk about very much.”

### **A New Hope: New Awareness Levels, New Initiatives**

Despite the persistence of a less favorable environment for female social entrepreneurs at every stage of their journey, recent years have also seen increased levels of awareness on the issue. This is evident in the increased number of events, dialogue opportunities, and initiatives to identify and address the gender-specific challenges faced by female social entrepreneurs in the field. Moreover, we are seeing initiatives drawn from women and non-binary experiences to redefine success and system change in the social entrepreneurship field itself.

The most concrete example of such initiatives is Ashoka’s Women in Social Entrepreneurship (WISE) which was launched in 2019. This is a global initiative whose goal is not only to uplift female social entrepreneurs, but also to reframe the definition of success in social impact from a gender perspective. Since then, WISE has brought together hundreds of female social entrepreneurs for dialogue, published key reports on their challenges, and celebrated successes of female social entrepreneurs. Perhaps most importantly, the WISE initiative has also criticized the success metrics of the private and development sectors, which only take into consideration immediate revenues and physical expansion as signs of success. In doing so, WISE not only celebrates female social entrepreneurs, but also shifts the field’s understanding of success to one that values the deeper, mindset level and relational shifts that female social entrepreneurs tend to focus on.

Furthermore, several social entrepreneurs have turned to feminist practices to bring about a similar change in the social entrepreneurship field. In the 2020 report,<sup>6</sup> Ashoka Fellow Tatiana Fraser proposes that bridging system change practice and intersectional feminist practices comes with many creative possibilities for impact and learning for the entire field. At Systems Sanctuary, she and the team help community leaders face complex challenges of the moment, such as climate change, the COVID-19 crisis, racism, rising economic inequality and gender-based violence as better leaders who can move away from traditional-hero style leadership

towards more relational approaches. In doing so, they demonstrate how the knowledge and wisdom inherent in the feminist and system change practices can serve to strengthen each other's efforts to shift unhealthy systems towards an equitable, sustainable, and more just world.

### **Conclusion: Invest in Female Social Entrepreneurs for Systemic Change**

In this article, we took a detailed look at how female social entrepreneurs continue to operate in an unfavorable, male-dominant environment which significantly disadvantages them and we briefly compared the social entrepreneurship field to others such as government and business. We also put the spotlight on several exciting new initiatives resulting from new awareness levels and aiming to put a more intentional focus on female social entrepreneurs' lived experiences, as well as using women's experiences to redefine how system change practice looks like.

The strong tendency of female social entrepreneurs to empower others, combined with the fact that the support they receive makes a much bigger impact on themselves and their sustainability, makes female social entrepreneurs hold very high potential as changemakers to invest in for social impact and systemic returns. If the social entrepreneurship field can interact with women's experiences with awareness and an intention to transform itself for the better, it would become more system changing and impactful not only for female social entrepreneurs, but also for their male and non-binary counterparts and hundreds of millions of beneficiaries the social entrepreneurship field serves.

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