

Can Social Entrepreneurs End Gender Inequality? A Critical Discussion with Social Entrepreneurs

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Abstract

On International Women's Day in 2023, we organized a virtual panel discussion featuring three social entrepreneurs. The aim was to delve into the diverse organizational and contextual approaches employed by these entrepreneurs in addressing gender inequality. This article serves as a condensed summary of the enlightening conversation, featuring insights from the co-founder of Botanic Treasures, the Founder of Sana Crown, and the Director of International Relations at the University of the Gambia. The discussion commenced by highlighting the shared challenges confronting women in Ethiopia, Gambia, Kenya, and the USA, where our esteemed panelists operate. Subsequently, we explored practical solutions in alignment with the United Nations theme, "DigitALL: Innovation and Technology for Gender Equality," aimed at empowering women. Our choice to spotlight social entrepreneurs is rooted in the wisdom of David Bornstein, who once remarked that they possess the unique ability to identify resources where others see only problems. These entrepreneurs perceive communities as sources of solutions, not passive beneficiaries. They operate with the premise of competence and unleash the latent resources within the communities they serve. The overarching question we grapple with is whether social entrepreneurs are the key to eradicating gender inequality.

The Virtual Discussion

Opening Remark (Sally, Moderator)

In 2022, a study (Bolotny & Emanuel, 2022) revealed that, on average, women earned 17% less than their male counterparts. This pay gap was particularly pronounced in the United States legal industry, where men earned an average of 59% more than women (Tyson, n.d). Notably, women of color were disproportionately affected by this wage disparity. In rural areas, for instance, Black and Hispanic women earned just 56 cents for every dollar that White and non-Hispanic men earned. To put this into perspective, a 20-year-old woman pursuing a full-time year-round career could potentially lose over \$400,000 over 40 years (Haan, 2023).

Moving beyond the United States, in Africa, women have shown remarkable entrepreneurial spirit, owning a third of all businesses across the continent. Women make up 58% of self-

employed and contribute 13% to the continent's gross domestic product (*How Female Led Startups in Africa Can Uplift the Continent*, n.d). However, these entrepreneurial efforts often involve low value-added activities, yielding limited marginal benefits and returns. African women tend to focus on necessity-driven entrepreneurship rather than seizing broader opportunities, which can restrict their creativity and economic growth prospects.

Moreover, gender disparities persist in corporate leadership. A report from the African Development Bank Group in 2022 revealed that only 15% of African formal sector firms have a woman serving as a managing director, while 32% have varying degrees of male-female ownership (Bank, 2019). These disparities underscore the enduring presence of gender inequality across diverse countries, affecting employment, entrepreneurship, and ownership opportunities.

As we convene today to address this pressing issue, we eagerly anticipate insights and recommendations from our esteemed panelists on combatting gender inequality. Now, I will invite each panelist to introduce themselves, share insights about their respective organizations, and articulate what gender equality signifies to them.

Elizabeth (Botanic Treasures): Hi everybody. I'm Elizabeth. I co-founded Botanic Treasures, a Health and Wellness company with a strong focus on land restoration. That's because of what we use to develop our health products. The company was formed because I was stressed after having my baby girl, and I didn't have breast milk. While my husband was in the field, he advised me to use moringa. In 2007, moringa was a more foreign idea than it is now in Kenya.

Botanic Treasures came home with a little paper bag. I used it, and within hours, I was fresh. I had my dignity back because breastfeeding is a big deal in Kenya. So that's how the company was born. I went to forestry to find out more because we take pills to stop milk production, but we don't have pills to replace milk when we get a baby. So, I discovered it. A smart solution for a lot of issues, including malnutrition, which in sub-Saharan Africa is at about 200,000,000. Moringa is good. It's used for water and sanitation. A rich ingredient used for animal feeds and human food.

When I look at where we are in terms of gender, I think. For the years we've been in existence, we've transitioned because of the challenges we faced, and that's because we work with our growers. We have about 500 smallholder farmers that we have been working with for about seven or more years.

Almost 70% of the workers on the farm are female, especially during the rainy season. We have as many as forty women. We decided that the best thing was for us to have a female manager, and that is what we did; so we had a lady who had just been growing through the ranks and managing. We noticed that women feel safer having a female farm manager, so we increased the number of female farm managers.

Sally (Moderator): Thank you for the introduction, Elizabeth. Sana, you are next.

Sana (Sana Crown): Good morning and good afternoon to everyone. Thank you to the Social Enterprise Research Group for having me, and Sally, of course, for reaching out. It's a pleasure to be here. My name is Sana Ahmed. I'm a consultant, a social entrepreneur, an activist, and a freelance writer. My work is mission-driven, from being a director and founder of Africa Summit, which focuses on empowering African designers and brands, to launching my social enterprise - Sana Crown.

We know globally how powerful fashion is and how it crosses cultural boundaries. I wanted to utilize fashion in my background to bring about my passion for tackling gender inequality. This idea was sprung after a trip to Ethiopia. Sana Crown essentially bridges the gap between fashion and social impact by donating a portion of our profits from each of our sales to helping young girls in Ethiopia have access to education and lifting those barriers, whether it's through funding their education, providing uniforms or tablet, really any barriers that we see that young girls in rural areas and Ethiopia may face.

Our goal is to tackle gender inequality and education through collaborative efforts. We partner with the school in the northern region of Ethiopia to do so. That's a little bit of a background about me. I know Sally, you asked what is gender equality. It is when gender is no longer a reason or a barrier to various things like education. Of course, it's an idea, and it sounds very simple, but unfortunately, it has been over a decade of us trying to really tackle this, and for me, it's just having a fair shot as women, no matter what region in the world you're in and gender not being a part of that barrier.

Mbakeh (Director of International Relations): Thank you very much, Sally. I'm Mbakeh Camara, and I have a dual role here – one as a staff member at the University of the Gambia and the other as a social entrepreneur. I'll delve into the latter role in more detail later on. I deeply appreciate the significance of women's roles, largely influenced by my wife's experience as a young professional. This personal connection ignited my passion for advocating gender equality. I firmly believe in the importance of gender equity because I observe that women often lack the necessary support and face unequal opportunities. Now, as for my journey in the realm of social enterprise, it all began during my time as a student at the Islamic School in Casamance. However, the concept took shape during my studies at Oxford Brookes University, where I formulated my approach to addressing malnutrition. I had little knowledge of social enterprise back then, but I've since gained a profound understanding of its meaning and potential.

My social ventures center around the principle of community ownership. In my case, women take the lead in operating a mini-market, and the model emphasizes a 60% community ownership and 40% individual ownership split. We aim to educate people, particularly women, about these opportunities. Women in our community possess boundless potential, which often remains untapped due to negative perceptions they hold about themselves.

Sally (Moderator): Thanks, Mbakeh, for highlighting the use of the term gender equity instead of equality. I will now pass over to my colleague, William, for the first question.

Q. From your role and observation of your communities, what are the common challenges facing women today? (William, Moderator)

Elizabeth (Botanic Treasures): When we visited the community where we grow our raw material, we discovered men earn more, yet women do more. This was our first observation, but we didn't want to make rapid changes because it was important to understand their social fabric. Then, we started paying the women equal to what the men earn. However, this was especially difficult when we employed couples because now the wife is earning the same as the husband. It appeared that some of the men wanted to demand some of the money from their wives. So, we encouraged the women to consider a cooperative. We call them chammas, like women's groups. And they formed their women's group to do their table banking. We also encouraged them to create a support circle for them to be able to support each other and to have more assets because, in any African setting, everything belongs to the man. We felt we needed to bring some gender parity and economically empower women.

Sana (Sana Crown): From my role and observation of the communities I work with, one of the common challenges facing women today is the underrepresentation of women, particularly young women, in the workforce. In Ethiopia, where I work in education and women's empowerment, we've identified several key challenges:

- **Lack of Representation:** Women, especially young girls, often do not see enough role models or examples of women in technological or AI-related careers. This lack of representation can lead to a lack of aspiration among young women to pursue such fields.
- **Limited Access to Education:** Access to quality education in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields can be limited for many young girls. This can be due to various factors, including inadequate resources, gender biases, and societal expectations that steer them away from STEM subjects.
- **Gender Bias and Stereotypes:** Gender biases and stereotypes still persist, discouraging women and girls from pursuing careers in technology and AI. These biases can manifest in subtle ways, such as discouraging girls from taking an interest in these fields or assuming that they are not suited for them.
- **Lack of Supportive Programs:** There may be a lack of programs and opportunities specifically designed to encourage and support women in technology and AI careers. This includes mentorship programs, scholarships, and networking opportunities that can help women advance in these fields.
- **Post-Graduation Challenges:** Even if women manage to pursue education in technology and AI, they may face challenges in finding suitable job opportunities and advancing in their careers. Gender-based discrimination and unequal opportunities for career growth can be significant obstacles.
- **Awareness Gap:** Many young girls may not be aware of the diverse range of career possibilities in technology and AI. Raising awareness about these fields and the potential they offer is crucial for inspiring more women to consider them as viable career paths.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach. Initiatives that focus on promoting STEM education for girls, challenging gender stereotypes, providing mentorship and support, and creating inclusive workplaces are essential steps toward increasing the

representation of women, particularly young women, in technology and AI careers. Additionally, creating accessible pathways for post-graduation opportunities in these fields can further empower women to pursue and thrive in these roles.

Mbakeh (Director of International Relations):

I concur with Sana regarding the importance of effective communication. As a social entrepreneur deeply committed to driving change, it's essential to recognize that having all the necessary resources is not always the case. Consequently, I often make personal sacrifices to ensure that those I collaborate with understand the intricacies of the process. Occasionally, they may misconstrue my intentions, assuming financial resources drive my involvement. This communication gap poses a significant challenge for me.

In addition to this challenge, women encounter other obstacles, such as limited participation in politics. With the valuable support of the UNDP as a champion of gender action, I undertook research focused on the role of women in politics in the Gambia. The research aimed to identify policy measures to enhance women's involvement in the political sphere. Crafting policies that promote women's development and gender equality within political parties is of paramount importance, especially in light of the persistently low levels of women's political participation in Africa. Mentorship plays a pivotal role in fostering increased participation.

Q. As you know, the government often uses policies to address gender inequality. How and in what ways is your organization addressing gender inequality? (Sally, Moderator)

Elizabeth (Botanic Treasures): Policies have been sabotaged over and over. Under the previous government, in Kenya, we have a 2/3 gender rule for government female inclusion across the sectors. But that has never really come to fruition. The discussion is still ongoing. But the President is trying because he knows women are a force. We are the ones who decide which President goes into office because we are more than men.

But there are other actions the President is taking, like the Hasler Fund, where you can borrow money with your smartphone. The lender can gauge the amount to borrow you according to your Mpesa transactions. They can gauge what amount of money to lend you to do business. So that has put more money into women's hands. That is the best thing that could ever happen because of restoration; right now, the amount of tree cutting is through the roof because people cannot afford the LPG gas. The prices were very high. So, what that means is in the rural areas, it will be cheaper to cook with gas because it's going to come down from something like 1300 to like 600 or is it 400 shillings, that's like \$4 or \$5.00. So that means there'll be less tree cutting but also means the women have more time to do things other than cutting firewood.

As I mentioned before, our organization is working on restoration and empowering women economically. We have moringa, vegetables, and so many nutritious foods in our environment. We (my husband and senior farm managers) had to explain to the communities the importance of the resources. Then we started inviting them to come to our resource center. For lunch, we served Moringa vegetables, and that led to acceptance and implementation back home. My background is in film. I returned to study nutrition to improve my knowledge about the food

compositions and their effects on a healthy body. This allowed me to learn how to cook the vegetables and incorporate them into their maize and beans. And they loved it. And now they're starting to warm up. We started in 2018 in this area, so they are warming up to the idea. And now they're seeing it's an opportunity. Through our grant funding award, we planted moringa in schools and educated young people and teachers about the benefits of this nutritious tree.

Sana (Sana Crown): I tried to understand the practice of social entrepreneurship by studying various companies and what they do to create impact. I did my thesis on social enterprises, so I understood the practice, and I came to learn about a brand called Sitti Soap. They employ women in various regions in the Middle East. The structure and approach of the organization allowed me to think about what type of social enterprises I wanted to establish. What is also important about this work is accountability and monitoring. You can also pursue certification if you classify your business as a mission-driven or social enterprise. In North America, there are specific programs and organizations that certify businesses, which helps verify that these businesses are indeed making the social impact they claim.

One crucial factor we examine through our work is unconscious biases, which help us uncover the underlying reasons for gender inequality. For instance, in the Northern region where we operate, families often face the difficult choice of sending either a young girl or a young boy to school due to limited funding. Unfortunately, they tend to prioritize sending boys to school. Consequently, we are addressing the fundamental reasons behind this preference. What leads them to choose a young boy over a young girl?

We are addressing these barriers by providing funding to remove the need for individuals to question why these barriers exist. It's crucial to confront these ideologies and establish programs designed to combat them. Additionally, when considering solutions to promote gender equality, I believe social entrepreneurship is a valuable approach. We previously discussed the lack of funding available to women, which is a prevalent issue in this industry as well. Women involved in social entrepreneurship tend to have a more significant impact. They actively address numerous challenges and generate resources and employment opportunities for women. Consequently, empowering women in the field of social entrepreneurship by increasing funding and creating opportunities for business growth is a meaningful step toward addressing the root causes of gender inequality and finding solutions.

Mbakeh (Director of International Relations): A prevalent issue we often encounter is unconscious bias, which sometimes affects us all. It necessitates introspection and self-awareness. The remedy lies in reminding ourselves of this bias, achieved through advocacy and heightened consciousness. As a social entrepreneur, I seek to address unconscious bias by actively promoting women in leadership roles, emphasizing that merit should be the sole criterion. Our society mustn't judge individuals based on their gender; instead, we should evaluate them based on their job performance. Furthermore, mentorship plays a pivotal role, especially in regions like ours where women are more prominent. They serve as guiding figures who help shape and empower young individuals.

The younger generation must have access to mentors who can assist and empower them throughout their journey. This way, we can begin to combat gender inequality and inequity. The

primary agents of change in this solution are women themselves, and I am heartened to hear about the initiatives undertaken by Elizabeth and Sana in their respective organizations.

Q. What can other stakeholders, such as government and community leaders, do to end gender inequality? (William, Moderator)

Elizabeth (Botanic Treasures): Given the social norm and what has been there generally across the country and in this community, we have implemented cooperatives. The women are in cooperatives at the farm. We encourage community women leaders to take action, but we are there to encourage and empower them through the process.

The lives we are transforming and the livelihoods of the communities that we work with have led to our mission-driven status. More organizations like ours will create better change and try to tackle this issue because we put the communities at the center of what we do. But formally, nobody is registering as a social enterprise. So, that needs to change to see the bigger changes in those communities.

In the county we are operating in, there are lots of rivers that come from Mount Kenya, and that's why we chose that particular location. It's a very dry area, and the community is mainly into livestock keeping, but they have water flowing, and they don't use this water because they lack the knowledge. We've gone into that community and are onboarding them on a water project because they don't have a cash flow.

Also, if the government can have an irrigation scheme and they say, OK, can we have an acre as we have told them, can each farmer group plant for us half an acre, the 1500 farmers in this region? You can imagine the economic boom, suddenly you are being called Safaricom the leading mobile phone provider, this is because when we pay our workers on Saturday, and they visit the shopping center, they have bargaining power. So, other than goats and chickens, we are now transforming the community by providing a stable income.

Sana (Sana Crown): We want to engage more with our local institutions and government programs to bring more resources that we can provide to the organization we work with in the northern region of Ethiopia. We are tapping into our local community and bringing more resources to develop programs and mentorship. We talked a lot about mentorship today, and it's really important. Mentorship allows young women to see what's possible for themselves. It allows the community and Ethiopia to see what's available and what women can be and tackle some of those ideologies and feelings for the young girls in those regions. We are currently collaborating with a local institution to advance our mission. One of our core principles is active listening. Rather than making assumptions about their needs, we prioritize listening to the voices of young girls in the region and our partners in Ethiopia. This allows us to identify their specific requirements, the issues they want to address, and the barriers they encounter.

Mbakeh (Director of International Relations): Everyone must shoulder the responsibility, particularly in discussions surrounding unconscious bias. We have a significant obligation to educate our youth about this concept. Regrettably, there is a lack of understanding among many, which is why our institution is actively promoting gender equity. Our students, as

future leaders, must comprehend the challenges that some women face in their careers. We aim to foster sensitivity and support among them on this critical issue.

Within the university, we are engaged in research efforts in collaboration with the Gambia Chamber of Commerce and Industry and other companies. These research initiatives are designed to inform organizational policies on gender equality. Additionally, the university is committed to supporting women-owned businesses and implementing mentoring programs, as previously mentioned. Our collaboration with the United Nations Population Fund on a mentoring scheme is particularly significant. Research has consistently demonstrated that women often encounter difficulties advancing their careers without role models. We aim to enhance their performance and career prospects by providing them with mentors.

Summary

We started the virtual discussion with a critical question - can social entrepreneurs end gender inequality?

The critical insights from the panelists demonstrate that gender inequality should be challenged, and the focus should be on gender inequity. The key takeaways from this event include:

1. **Awareness and Education:** Recognizing the importance of educating society, especially youth, about unconscious bias and gender issues.
2. **Policy Influence:** Social entrepreneurs can be pivotal in influencing policies within organizations and institutions to promote gender equity.
3. **Mentorship:** Implementing mentoring programs, particularly for women, to provide guidance and role models for career advancement.
4. **Collaboration:** Local communities and organizations collaborate to improve opportunities for women. Also, universities and the government are working on collaborative research on gender equality (and equity), enabling data-driven policy changes.
5. **Empowering Women in Politics:** Supporting and promoting women's political engagement for improved representation.

Overall, the consensus is that social entrepreneurs have a significant role in challenging and ultimately ending gender inequality through proactive initiatives and collaboration.

Acknowledgments

We thank the attendees and panelists for their invaluable contributions to the virtual discussion on International Women's Day in 2023. Your insights and expertise added immense depth and significance to our exploration of gender inequality from diverse perspectives.

The wisdom you shared, drawn from your experiences at Botanic Treasures, Sana Crown, and the University of the Gambia, shed light on common challenges women face in various contexts. Moreover, your thoughtful deliberations on practical solutions aligned with the UN's

theme of “DigitALL: Innovation and Technology for Gender Equality” were truly enlightening.

We deeply appreciate your dedication to addressing gender inequality and your commitment to empowering women. Your presence and expertise made our event a resounding success, and we look forward to continued collaboration in the pursuit of a more equitable world.

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