



Who Are Social Entrepreneurs? Connecting the Stories of Women in the Global Textile and Apparel Industry

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Who are social entrepreneurs? The Ashoka Innovators for the Public (2016) website defines social entrepreneurs as “Individuals with an innovative solution to society’s most pressing social problems. They are ambitious and persistent, tackling major social issues and offering new ideas for wide-scale change”. The Schwab Foundation (2016) identifies these entities as achieving large-scale change, utilizing business systems, and overcoming traditional practices for the improvement of society with the goal of solving the complex problem of poverty. Patrick O’ Heffernan (2017) of the Skoll Foundation defines a social entrepreneur as ‘Society’s change agent: a pioneer of innovation that benefits humanity’ who ‘takes direct action and seeks to transform the existing systems.’ These current definitions of social entrepreneurs appear limited in view, delineating social-entrepreneurs as outside elites with special qualities and their work to be complex and lavish. The existing definitions of social entrepreneurs fail to capture and illustrate multitudes and diversity of social entrepreneurship. As suggested by McKenzie, Ugbah, and Smothers (2007), re-thinking and re-envisioning of social entrepreneurs can help recognize and promote multiple forms of social entrepreneurship.

As with the definition of entrepreneur, social entrepreneurship needs refashioning to address the multiple types of intentions (feasibility and desirability) to act, opportunities, and capacities. The present interpretation lacks a holistic standpoint. Each of the above definitions focus on the leader versus the change agents and implies large-scale modifications as the work of social entrepreneurs. Are the only individuals capable of providing solutions the privileged of society? Are not the well-established micro agent methods relevant? Do we only interpret the individual who gives up the opportunity to earn profits as self-sacrificing? A holistic view of social entrepreneurship can help address the questions and include the variety of solution to social problems (e.g., the activities of individuals living in poverty and having developed less formalized methods of approaching their immediate concerns). To develop a holistic view of social entrepreneurs, it is critical to define social entrepreneurs not only from the top down but also from the bottom up. Consideration must be given to the very individuals traditional social entrepreneurs aspire to empower. Solutions to complex problem require a mix of talents and methods (Light, 2006). Dominant definitions of social entrepreneurship emphasizes an imperialistic view and lacks the individual agency of those living the problems of poverty daily.

The scenario of analysis of the textile and apparel (T&A) industry, which is the backbone of most economies (Dickerson, 1991), shows that micro-entrepreneurs (ME) engage daily in

solving the complex problem of poverty, unemployment, exploitation, and other social issues through self-employment. Predominantly, women are working in the T&A industry to support themselves and their families. They are by their very nature practicing social entrepreneurship. An analysis of 2015 data on Barbadian female apparel MEs supports the notion that participants were in essence, social entities that endeavor to abet immediate families, communities, and nations. The ME owners were self-sacrificing, providing training, mentorship, and economic enhancement to those within and outside their networks, solving the “low hanging fruit” problems in the retail and craft sectors of the global T&A industry. Muhammad and Khoza (2015) found that women in their study did not base success on the likelihood of failure. Instead, they were resilient and optimistic about making their respective businesses thrive as a means to elevate their conditions, embodying the very definitions of social entrepreneur. Although the work of ME owners practically address social concerns, the way social entrepreneurs are defined do not include these types entrepreneurs.

The purpose of this concept paper is not to dispute current definitions of social entrepreneurs but to help make definitions more holistic, by recognizing the contributions of the multiple types of people and organization who attempt to solve societal concerns. Expanding the traditional definitions of social entrepreneur allows inclusion and acceptance of those who do not fit the traditional definitions using the T&A industry as a scenario of analysis. We suggest that social entrepreneurship should not be exclusive to formalized business concepts but representative of the diverse forms of poverty alleviation. Lastly, all enterprises need support for their initiatives. Expanding the definitions of who are social entrepreneurs reduces the likelihood of rejecting those who make a difference in their immediate communities. This understanding and awareness can serve as a foundation to empower all entrepreneurs in local communities.

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