Social entrepreneurs mostly male, but female presence should not be discounted

It is probably no surprise that the gender representation in the entrepreneurship landscape is skewed towards men, but the gender imbalance is even worse in the social enterprise sector, where empathy is supposed to rule over profitability.

According to a recent research report from Barclays Wealth & Investment Management, only 39 per cent of employed high net worth females in Asia are businesses owners or entrepreneurs - a stark contrast to half of the men who are.

In the social entrepreneurship scene in Singapore, the figures are even more dismal: out of 258 social enterprises, 21 per cent are run by women entrepreneurs, says the Social Enterprise (SE) Association.

This imbalance in gender ratio, especially in social entrepreneurship, is attributed by some to the juggling game that women are still more caught up in as opposed to men.

"Generally, women's multi(ple) roles take their toll on them when it comes to both career and starting a business. More can be done in this area to support us in our passion," says Teo Mee Hong, executive director of the SE Association.

However, these figures do not necessarily imply a weak female presence in the social entrepreneurship circle. Says Associate Professor Audrey Chia, co-director of National University of Singapore Asia Centre for Social Enterprise & Philanthropy: "I think we have to look beyond just numbers and scale. If you look at, say, the top social entrepreneurs who have been recognised and awarded - for example, by
Schwab Foundation or by Ashoka - you will see there are more men than women. (However), each social entrepreneur is free to choose the cause and communities to be helped. Women may choose not to go for scale but for deep impact on certain communities."

Indeed, the empathy in women is often what drives them to become social entrepreneurs. Says Associate Professor Paulin Straughan, a sociologist at NUS: "Generally, on all accounts, women tend to appeal more to their emotions (compared with men) because of socialisation, and because of how parents expect girls to be more sensitive in behaviour since childhood. In adulthood, this translates into them becoming more attuned to social concerns, and thus, this places females in good stead for social entrepreneurship."

In terms of challenges, it is generally agreed that both male and female social entrepreneurs face largely similar ones.

As Associate Professor Albert Teo, director of the NUS Chua Thian Poh Community Leadership Programme, puts it: "Social entrepreneurs and social enterprise managers (whether male or female) must constantly grapple with meeting both the financial bottom line and the social bottom line - that is, they need to constantly check that they are indeed running their respective social enterprises with both a capitalist mind and a socialist heart; these contradicting objectives are often not easy to reconcile. By contrast, their counterparts in the for-profit, business sector (whether male or female) need only to focus on the financial bottom line."

In terms of industries, however, there seems to be a difference. "Very often, in a business, we say that the team needs a woman's touch. This is true especially in the areas of services," says SE Association's Ms Teo, who cites examples such as teaching and consultancy.

Although Prof Teo does not detect any significant patterns in terms of the specific industries chosen by the two genders, he spots differences in the workers employed. "Males are more likely to run social enterprises that employ ex-offenders, while females are more likely to run social enterprises that employ economically disadvantaged women."

On the issue of a glass ceiling for women social entrepreneurs, Prof Teo thinks it is not a problem. "Social entrepreneurs and social enterprise managers are currently quite a rare breed in Singapore. At present, not many are motivated to set up and/or run social enterprises, which address various social problems either in Singapore or other South-east Asian countries. When such individuals (whether women or men) do step forward, most of us look up to them with awe and respect.
We are not likely to diminish the status and standing of female social entrepreneurs and/or social enterprise managers, vis-à-vis their male counterparts."

But is either sex likely to be the more successful social entrepreneur? Prof Teo thinks that neither males nor females are more likely to simultaneously possess task orientation (that is, managing organisational tasks effectively and efficiently) and people orientation, in terms of looking after the social needs of the communities they work with.

And how does one judge the success of a social enterprise? "It's not just about money or scale; it's about impact on the community or the cause," says Prof Chia.