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# Soil for Your Soul: African American Women & Social Entrepreneurship

Markova Casseus

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Soil For Your Soul: African American Women in Social Entrepreneurship

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at  
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors  
May 2016

Honors Capstone Project in Your Major

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## **Abstract**

This study seeks to take a look at the growing trend of African-American women in social entrepreneurship, more specifically their motivations for pursuing this career path. In the traditional business model, we find that women are underrepresented at every level of the corporate pipeline, especially in upper level positions. For African-American women, these numbers are even smaller. As such in the recent years, we have seen more and more women turning to entrepreneurship, with African-American women becoming the fastest growing segment of the women-owned businesses population. At the same time, we are also seeing a rise in social entrepreneurship, which led to my interest in looking at African-American women within that particular space. This project consists of research that looks at reports of women in the workplace, the leading factors for leaving the traditional business model for social entrepreneurship, as well as provides a rhetorical analysis of African-American women who are social entrepreneurs.

## Executive Summary

When we look at the traditional business model, women are underrepresented at every level of the corporate pipeline, with less than 20% of women holding positions within the C-Suite. The C-Suite is a widely used term used to describe a corporation's top senior executive positions. It is referred to as the C-Suite because most senior level executive titles begin with the letter "C," such as chief executive officer, chief operations officer, etc. When looking at the number of African-American women who hold these positions, the numbers are even smaller. In a study conducted by Sylvia Hewlett and Tai Green for the *Harvard Business Review*, 44% of black women felt stalled in their careers, and only 11% of black women in Corporate America felt like they had a sponsor, a powerful advocate in their career success. To offer more context, these black women expressed that they were underappreciated at their jobs, which made them feel like they were being stalled because their work was going unnoticed. In terms of the powerful advocate, it goes back to their networks. Typically individuals who advance at the top senior level positions know someone in those positions who can advocate on their behalf; someone who can attest to their work and why they should be considered for those positions. However, the majority of black women in this study felt that they did not have such support.

So we see in the traditional business model that women are not thriving. As such in recent years, we are seeing more and more women turning to entrepreneurship, turning their passions into profitable businesses. According to *Forbes*, African-American women are the fastest growing group of entrepreneurs in the United States. It would seem that entrepreneurship has offered an alternative way for women, especially African-American women to advance in the business world.

While we are seeing a rise of women-owned businesses within the field of entrepreneurship, there has also been a rise in social entrepreneurship. According to Ashoka, the largest network of social entrepreneurs worldwide,

“Social entrepreneurs are individuals with innovative solutions to society’s most pressing social problems. They are ambitious and persistent tackling major social issues and offering new ideas for wide-scale changes.”

In other words, these individuals create either for-profit or not-for-profit businesses whose central focus is making a difference in areas that directly impact our communities, not making a profit. Whether it is through medicine, environmental sustainability or financial literacy education, these individuals focus on the topics that matter to us most.

In today’s world, if you want people to invest in your business, they need to feel like you are invested in them and their needs. As such we are seeing more businesses practicing corporate social responsibility, and more individuals seeking careers in social entrepreneurship. It is important to note that though the two have overlapping themes, they are not the same thing. According to *Business News Daily*, “corporate social responsibility (CSR) refers to a business practice that involves participating in initiatives that benefit society”(Taylor, 2015). Examples include environmentally safe business practices and giving a portion of company proceeds to a non-profit. While CSR seeks to add a social component to the business, social entrepreneurship is built around a social component.

Social entrepreneurship is an interesting field because upon hearing the term, one would assume it is a non-profit organization. However, throughout my research I learned that the opposite was true. While two of my participants did own non-profits, the other five own for-profit businesses. One of those women however owned a combination of both. So there is a

misperception of the field that needs to be addressed. When looking deeper into this subject, we find that while there has been numerous research on social entrepreneurship, there has not been much written on women's contributions in the field, and even less that addresses diversity within the field itself. As such, I felt there was a lack of research in this area that deserved great attention given the kind of work these women are doing in this field.

For my project, I conducted qualitative based research, interviewing seven women who self-identify as social entrepreneurs, or whose work fell within the definition of the term, on their motivations for pursuing social entrepreneurship. Some of the questions I asked them centered on their business models, what they wanted others to know about social entrepreneurship, their passions, and the challenges they face within this field. I compiled their responses together in an assortment of themes that emerged when analyzing their responses. In addition to personal interviews, I sought to understand the problem put forth: women are underrepresented in business. In doing so, I looked at literature that discussed women in business, African-American women in businesses, social entrepreneurship, and black women in social entrepreneurship.

This research was important to me because I wanted to look at something that combined several of my passions. I am very passionate about the representation women, specifically black women, and giving back to the community. As such, it was only natural for me to look at African-American women in social entrepreneurship. However when I first started this project, I was having trouble trying to link the two together, and I came to realize that the reason why I was having difficulties in this area was because the numbers did not exist. While I could find numbers for how many African-American women are entrepreneurs, I found nothing that pointed out how many of those women were social entrepreneurs. This only motivated more to pursue this project because it appeared to me that nothing has been done like it before. While I cannot

accurately state the total number of African-American women social entrepreneurs, I can bring attention to their voices and the contributions they are making to this field. It is my hope that my research will add to the discourse of entrepreneurs and social entrepreneurs.



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## Preface

Acclaimed author Toni Morrison once said, “If there is a book you want to read but it has not been written yet, you must be the one to write it.” This quote has always been appealing to me because it implies that everyone has the potential to write or tell a great story. Each of us has the ability to expand our own voices, or bring light to the voice of others. Through her writing, Toni Morrison has managed to create a voice for black women in several different capacities. The value of her vivid dialogue for me is being able to see aspects of myself through the characters in her stories.

In the same way, I have taken my personal ambitions and desires and brought them into this project: highlighting the voices of black women and finding ways to give back to my community. Growing up, I always heard and saw the work of women who looked nothing like me, and when I became a student at Syracuse University, I sought to create a different narrative for myself. As such, much of my own writing has concentrated on women, and more recently, specifically black women. What drew me to writing about social entrepreneurship is that this particular project allowed me to explore two of my passions in one area. It is my hope to become an entertainment media mogul who self identifies as a social entrepreneur, so this project has really given me insight into some of the obstacles, challenges, and fulfillments I should expect to experience in the future. In the same token, I have had an opportunity to engage with other black women who are creating significant changes within the black community as well as in the world. As I listened to their stories and the contributions they have made through their work, I knew that my project was important. It was important for me to not only offer their voices to a community that may not be familiar with their work, but also to paint an image of how fulfilling a career in social entrepreneurship can be. Because it is a relatively new field, many people are unfamiliar

with the term. One of my participants was not even aware that her work fell within the definition of the term itself. Nevertheless, what many of the women expressed is the desire for other young girls to want to become social entrepreneurs. For them, it was not intentional; it just fell into their laps. But could you imagine what the field would be like if more young black girls intended to become social entrepreneurs? I think it would be a beautiful thing, and I dedicate this research project to them.

## **Acknowledgements**

This research would not have been possible if it were not for the amazing women that agreed to participate in my study. I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to you all and for allowing me to channel your voices in my paper. I would also like to thank the Communication and Rhetorical Studies department for their continual support in my academic achievement. Thank you for helping me grow into the scholar that I am today.

Professor Pough, thank you for being my mentor for McNair and my advisor for this capstone. I truly appreciate the trust that you gave me in pursuing this project. Timeka Tounsel, thank you for also guiding me every step of the way as I worked on this project. You have been a blessing in disguise through this entire process and I am so fortunate and grateful to the dedication you have demonstrated towards me as a student, scholar and researcher. To professor Buttny and Professor Kiewe, thank you for reading my project and offering your feedback.

To my honors community, thank you for being there for me and hearing me out when I started to  
drown ☺

### **Advice to Future Honors Students**

If you have something that you want to do, but have not found the means to learn more about it, create it. That is what having a capstone is all about. It involves taking your passions and desires and turning it into a project that you can be proud of. At some point this semester, I let everything get the best of me and as a result, I was not too happy about my capstone project initially. After speaking with the people in Honors, I was able to make this capstone really work for me while also impacting an area of study that is very limited. So my advice to you is to not only create what you see a need for, but make sure that whatever your Capstone is, that you are proud of it as a whole. Do not forget that Honors is there to help you. Do not make the same mistake I did and wait until the last minute to ask for help. If you pace yourself and show up for your capstone, your capstone will show up for you!



## ***Chapter 1: Background***

### **Introduction:**

#### **A Historical Perspective**

When we look at the success of today's female entrepreneurs, one might wonder why women have had so many difficulties in the traditional workforce environment. The reality is men far outnumber women in today's business landscape, which suggest a history of inequity. Examining the past can help us to understand how these women managed to get to where they are today, and more importantly, what made them choose entrepreneurship as their path. Given the rich history associated with women, there is something particularly unique about their experiences and what ties them to the bigger narrative of women in business. History also teaches us about the obstacles businesswomen have experienced in terms of gender roles and how that impacted their personal lives, and as professionals.

#### **The Cult of Domesticity**

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women's work was largely associated with the "cult of domesticity," which implied that a woman's place was in the home (Welters, 1966). Women were encouraged to focus their energies to tasks related to creating a nurturing household for their husbands and sons. They were also encouraged not to engage in anything, including reading, which would go against their "duties" in the home. As such, it was believed that women were not intelligent enough to work outside of the home to support their families (Elmuti, Lehman, Harmon, et al, 2003). These sets of beliefs combined with the common law during that time also impacted the types of jobs women were expected to have. In other words, women were seen to be suited for certain jobs more than others, a view that is still present today when looking at women in the business field.

## **1880's-1920's**

The years following the cult of domesticity are known as the rise of big business, due to the Industrial Revolution creating more jobs. Because of this, the United States economy improved drastically, but this was not without the participation of women in business. Interestingly, history suggests that many black women have historically worked outside of the home, even while their white counterparts did not (Thistle 2006). According to “Historical Changes in Stay-At-Home Mothers: 1969 to 2009” by Rose M. Kreider and Diana B. Elliot (2010), “Black women were about half as likely as White women to be a stay-at-home mother.” Though women began to find work outside of the home, the work they found was still categorized as positions “suitable” for women. In some ways, women’s contributions during this time period helped to redefine women’s place in business, though there is still much that needs to be done to balance the view of women compared to men in this field.

### **Understanding the Problem:**

#### **Women in Business**

As we can see from history, for generations women have been viewed and categorized as the weaker sex. This view has translated to women in business, and thus offers insight into the challenges women face in this particular field. According to the *Women in the Workplace 2015* study, a comprehensive study of the state of women in Corporate America, women are underrepresented at every level of the corporate pipeline. The comprehensive study was conducted by LeanIn.org and McKinsey and Company, who seeks to encourage female leadership and foster gender equality in the workplace. Despite the numbers having improved between 2012 and 2015, there are still a greater number of men represented in these positions. In 2015, we see women represented 45% of entry-level professionals, but only 17% in the C-Suite



(See Appendix). When we look at why so few women hold positions in the C-Suite, it is because fewer women hold roles that lead to the C-Suite. The *Women in the Workplace* study also touches on this and offers insights to help us look at it closer. A majority of women who work at the managerial level hold line roles, which are positions that focus on the core operations of an organization, such as productions and sales. However by the vice-president level, more than half of women hold staff roles, which are positions in functions that support an organization, such as human resources. As most women hold staff positions, it hinders their path to senior leadership. In some ways, it would appear that women's roles in business are considered temporary. Since companies have not seen the need to "appoint women as executives until now, quite a few companies "failed to foster women from a long-term perspective" (The Japan News, 2015). Individuals in the top management positions are people who are well trusted and most likely have been at the company for a long time. For there to be a shortage of women in this category should raise a few flags.

In addition to few women holding roles that lead to the C-Suite, part of women's obstacles in advancement can be found in their networks. Barbara Annis (2014) of *The Huffington Post* writes that men's behavior at times excludes women from informal networks, limiting their chances for mentoring and sponsorship. Annis illustrates this point by talking about golf, which would largely be considered a male sport. Men typically plan informal events like a golf outing for themselves. They do not think about whether or not their female employees would want to participate in these events. In some cases, women may very well want to join in for a chance to advance their own careers if not for any other reason. Generally, females network with mostly females, or a mix of males and females, while men mostly network with men. Since men hold a majority of the senior level positions, women need greater access to the men in these

positions, in hopes of gaining sponsorships or someone who can advocate on their behalf throughout the course of their careers. Lack of this sponsorship can serve as a huge impediment, especially in this industry.

Though improvements have been made, there is still much that needs to be done to balance the representation of men and women in this field. Based on the slow rate of progress, it could take 25 years to reach gender parity at the Senior-Vice President level, and more than 100 years in the C-Suite (Women in the Workplace, 2015).

### **Understanding the Problem:**

#### **Black Women in Business**

In general, we see that women are having difficulties thriving in business. However, when we look specifically at black women the numbers are even lower. Catalyst, a leading non-profit organization with a mission of progress for women through workplace inclusion, conducted a study on women of color in 2015. Their report found that black women made up 7.4% of employees in S&P 500 Companies, and hold only 1.2% of executive and senior level positions. When looking at CEO jobs, the report concluded that black women held only 0.2% of those positions.

Black women are severely underrepresented in business, but it is not because they do not have the desire to advance their careers. The report also reflected that African-American women felt strongly that holding a leadership position would allow them to positively influence their own lives and their field. They recognize that there is a level of power and respect that comes with the upper level positions, and it would give them a greater advantage to influence their field with their thoughts and ideas. However, despite their ambition and wanting to share their ideas with their colleagues, black women are still more likely to feel stalled in their careers at 44%

compared to 30% of white women (Hewlett & Green, 2015). In a study conducted by the Center of Talent Innovation, a non-profit organization that focuses on challenges and issues in the workplace, only 11% of black women in Corporate America say they have a sponsor, a powerful advocate invested in their career success. According to Hewlett and Green (2015), that is because “leaders tend to select, groom and promote individuals who remind them of themselves.”

Though it may be unconscious, black women seem to be almost invisible within business.

Valerie Purdue-Vaughns is a professor of psychology at Columbia University and examines how people’s brains are biased to ignore black women. Purdue-Vaughns (2015) writes,

“When many think about ‘black executives,’ they visualize *black men*. When they think about ‘female executives,’ they visualize *white women*. Because black women are not seen as typical of the categories ‘black’ or ‘woman,’ people’s brains fail to include them in both categories. Black women suffer from a ‘now you see them now you don’t’ effect in the workplace.”

What is made clear by the research is that women’s challenges in business are not one in the same. Black and white women have very different challenges and motivations as we can see by the numbers presented above. These women are aware of their challenges and the problems they will continue to face if they stay where they are. As a result, many have reached the point of doing something about it.

## ***Chapter 2: (Social) Entrepreneurship***

### **Black Women and Entrepreneurship**

In their research, Hewlett and Green (2015) found that the majority of the black women they interviewed “were raised by parents and grandparents who instilled in them this sense of not having a voice, and feeling they have a responsibility to go after it themselves and pave the way for other women to come up.” With the growth of entrepreneurship, it would appear that is exactly what they set out to do. According to *Forbes* magazine, “black women are the fastest growing group of entrepreneurs in the United States, owning 1.5 million business between them” (O’Connor, 2016). This number has increased by over 300% since 1997, indicating value in pursuing this field.

Black women who become entrepreneurs do so in order to turn their passions into profitable businesses (Ahmad, 2014). Here we see that they are taking those innovative ideas that went unnoticed in traditional Corporate America and using them as a vessel to create opportunities that were not present to them before, and to empower other women who look like them. Despite the challenges they faced, it can also be said that those challenges have made black women’s contributions to entrepreneurship quite impactful. It is predicted that by 2050, women of color will be the majority of all women in the United States. As our nation grows in diversity, the contributions from these groups stands to grow as well. If Black women continue to be the fastest growing segment of the women-owned businesses population, we can expect to see major growth from their contributions to our economy including the creation of job opportunities.

### **Social Entrepreneurship**

According to Ashoka, the largest network of social entrepreneurs worldwide, social entrepreneurs are individuals with innovative solutions to society's most pressing social problems." Recently, we have seen a "surge in the development of social enterprises, companies that use business principles to achieve social change" (Loudenback, 2016). In other words, social entrepreneurship is on the rise and according to Jason Haber, a self-described serial and social entrepreneur, a model for changing the world (Loudenback, 2016). Today companies are implementing social responsibility into their business practices because they realize consumers are more likely to invest in their product if they feel included in the vision of that product. There are other factors contributing to the rise of this field, including the rise of Generation Y, also known as millennials. According to Soushiant Zanganehpour, an expert on social enterprise, "this generation is a new, connected, socially-conscious, energized global cohort who finds this concept very appealing. This is demonstrated by the products they buy, and by the companies they seek to work for" (Chaaban, 2015). With millennials now the largest segment of the U.S labor market, there is great potential for them to make strides in this field. When we think about why millennials may be choosing social entrepreneurship, one needs to think no further than where their passions lie. Social entrepreneurship allows individuals to explore alternative approaches to business and social development, while also incorporating their values and passions into the most lucrative career for them. Andrew Swinand (2014), founder of Abundant Venture Partners, describes the key to making social impact happen as getting "the public, private and non-profit sectors together" (2014). Essentially that is a huge part of what social entrepreneurship is, and offers into the rich number of careers associated in this field.

### **Black Women in Social Entrepreneurship**

When we look at the literature surrounding social entrepreneurship, we can find studies that discuss who social entrepreneurs are, why they chose to become social entrepreneurs, the obstacles they face and the strategies they implement to overcome those obstacles. However, as Dr. Anne Laure Humbert (2012), a senior research fellow at Cranfield University points out, very little consideration has been given to the contributions that women make in the field of social entrepreneurship. She also points out that there is even less written on the diversity issues among social entrepreneurs, citing the work of one office, The United Kingdom Government's Equalities Office, as having examined the motivations and obstacles associated with women social entrepreneurs within the BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) communities. As such there is a lack of research in this area and given the work women have contributed to this field, it may be worth further exploring as another area of research in social entrepreneurship.

Humbert also points out that "women have had a positive impact on society through their involvement in the third sector, by putting topics such as children, family, women's health, violence and discrimination towards certain groups of population on the social agenda." If we look at some of our popular social movements today, black women have certainly made endeavors to bring attention to these topics such as actress Amandla Stenberg who has spoken out against culture appropriation in the media, Janet Mock who has had an influential role in amplifying the voice of people of color in the trans-community, and Alicia Garza, one of the creators of the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

With the growing interest of social entrepreneurship as a career, and the strides black women are making in entrepreneurship, this paper seeks to add to the discourse on entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship by considering the specific stories of a group of black women.

### ***Chapter 3: Methodology and Research Design***

#### **Methodology and Research Design**

This study is using discourse analysis as a perspective, whereby the statements of individuals are analyzed for their importance. Discourse analysis consists of descriptions, interpretations or explanations of discourses and what they mean for the subject at hand. For this study, data is based on written transcripts of seven recorded interviews. I have studied discourse analysis in previous classes and understand it to be a method people use to try to understand the world and themselves. In other words, there is much more going on when people communicate than simply transferring information. The data is analyzed for the deeper messages implied within the interviews to the wider research study.

While social entrepreneurship appears to be a fulfilling career path, it is no secret that any form of entrepreneurship comes with its challenges. While income is not the most important aspect of their ventures, social entrepreneurs still need income to maintain their business and to survive. Accessing funds for their businesses proves to be a challenge prominent among women; with African-American women business owners in particular expressing challenges when trying to obtain business financing (Ahmad, 2014). It is not uncommon for black women to invest their personal funds into their businesses for a variety of reasons including being turned down for loans (Ahmad, 2014). According to *Forbes*, “black women received only .2% of all venture funding in the past five years” (O’Connor, 2015). While the challenges of this field black women face are tough, it does not seem to be taking away from the pros of their career path. As such, I seek to answer what motivates black women to pursue careers in social entrepreneurship. To understand these motivations, I need to turn to these women themselves.

### Methodology: Before Recruitment Process

Before I began reaching out to anyone, I researched social entrepreneurship to ensure that I understood exactly what the term meant, and who could be considered a social entrepreneur. My research involved looking at past literature about social entrepreneurship, while also looking at recent articles written by experts in the social enterprise field. When I had a grasp on what to look for, I used the Internet to search for businesswomen who self-identified as African-American and as a social entrepreneur, or who's work fell within the definition of the term. I conducted further research on their businesses, to ensure that these women were indeed considered social entrepreneurs by other individuals as well. While an online presence was not necessary, it was very helpful in the recruitment process and in familiarizing myself with their work.

All research participants were contacted via email explaining the project and what I hoped to learn from speaking with them. My personal goal was to secure 5-10 interviews with women above the age of 18 years old. All participants were notified that their participation in the study was voluntary, and that they were allowed to pull out of the process at anytime. Interviews were planned to last roughly 30 minutes, with 20 questions planned.

### Methodology: After Recruitment Process

The recruitment process began in late November 2015 and concluded in February 2016. In total, I spoke with seven women who self-identified as African-American and whose work fit within the social entrepreneur rhetoric. The age-range of the participants was 25-55 years old. The interviews varied between in person interviews, FaceTime interviews and phone interviews. The conversations lasted anywhere between 25 minutes to an hour.

### Sample Questions (See Appendix for full list)



In speaking with these women, it was my hope that I would be able to connect the literature surrounding black women in business, why they seek entrepreneurship and ultimately social entrepreneurship directly to their responses. Below find a sample of questions that I asked during these interviews, and my reasons for asking that specific question.

| <b>Question</b>  | <b>Reasoning Behind Question</b>   |
|--|--|
| Why incorporate a social goal into your platform/initiative?                             | To learn more about their personal passions and how it connects to their motivations   |
| Does your venture target a specific group?<br>What needs does it seek to fulfill if any? | Literature tells us that black women seek entrepreneurship because traditional business does not allow them to thrive. I am curious as to whether or not their businesses serve as a way to target other black women such as themselves. |
| What motivates you?  | To compare the response of this question to what arises concerning their motivations in some of the other questions.   |
| How have your experiences in the business world been impacted by your race and gender?   | Race and gender play a huge role in the literature above. I am curious how each woman has experienced race and gender in their roles.  |
| What are some challenges you face as a social entrepreneur?                              | To address the challenges of social entrepreneurship, but more importantly to assess how those challenges play a role in the decisions they make concerning their business.  |

### **Research Participants**

Tonya Rapley, My Fab Finance

Tonya Rapley is the founder of *My Fab Finance*, a personal finance and lifestyle site. She became a certified financial educator after improving her credit score by 130 points in 18 months. The idea for her business stemmed from her own personal experiences in a financially abusive relationship. Her goal is to make finance a “brown girl thing” by helping millennial women of color take control of their finances. She recently quit her full time position to pursue *My Fab Finance* full time.

**Social Problem:** Financial Education

Sabrina Thompson, *KUU Productions*

Sabrina Thompson is a visual storyteller with producing, photography and filmmaking under her belt. She founded *KUU Productions*, to tell the stories of all the “underdogs” of the world. In other words, she seeks to uncover and bring attention to the stories of people not readily seen in mainstream media. Her personal passions have led her down several career paths, including a former TV producer on *Court TV*, former high school teacher and a runner up on the series, *Survivor*. She has worked on several projects including “The Social Series,” which sought to promote positive images in society through imagery.

**Social Problem:** Balanced representation in media

Lauren Carson, *Black Girls Smile, Inc.*

Lauren Carson is the executive director and founder of *Black Girls Smile*, a non-profit organization that targets young black girls and provides them with the resources they need to lead mentally healthy lives. She created this company based on her own experiences with mental health and depression as a child. Carson felt there was a lack of resources for young black girls, and so she sought to create them. Currently, she is employed full time while also running this organization.

**Social Problem:** Mental healthJacqueline Glass, *At The Well Inc.*

Jacqueline Glass is a licensed minister and founder of *At The Well, Inc.* This non-profit organization was her way of utilizing ministry to create change. Challenges in the workplace for women prompted her to create an organization that would empower women in their finances, health, and spirituality. *At The Well* seeks to empower women of color who are often considered to be at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. She is looking forward to running this organization full time in the near future.

**Social Problem:** Socioeconomic status opportunitiesDaphne Valerius, *By Her Productions*

Daphne Valerius is a producer and journalist, who seeks to show the impact of media on self-image, self-esteem and confidence of black women. She produced the award winning documentary, *The Souls of Black Girls*, which was supported by the late Dorothy Height. Her documentary also served as the centerpiece for the Proctor and Gamble “My Black is Beautiful” tour. She is currently working on the sequel of *The Souls of Black Girls*, and runs an online boutique store called “Her Apparel.”

**Social Problem:** Representation of black women in mediaLatham Thomas, *Mama Glow*

Latham Thomas is a maternity lifestyle maven, wellness and birth coach, doula and yoga instructor. Thomas created her company after becoming pregnant with her son. She saw a need to target young women before they are even considering pregnancy to take ownership of their bodies and care for their health. The goal of her business is to provide support for pre/post natal

women on their journey to motherhood, as well bridge the gap between optimal wellness, spiritual growth and radical self-care.

**Social Problem:** Women's health

Sheri Crawley, *Pretty Brown Girl*

Sheri Crawley is the co-founder of *Pretty Brown Girl*. Crawley and her husband created the company because they saw a need to address the harmful messages about skin-tone and beauty in the media. The term “pretty brown girl” started off as a form of endearment for her own daughters, who did not feel like they were beautiful. Since then, *Pretty Brown Girl* has transformed into a movement including products, workshops, conferences and clubs for girls and young women. Before *Pretty Brown Girl*, Crawley worked in Corporate America before she transitioned to entrepreneurship. Crawley has been an entrepreneur for about 15 years.

**Social Problem:** Harmful messages in the media

*These bios were self-crafted, based on information from personal websites and information provided during the interviews*

## *Chapter 4: Findings*

### **Findings**

After speaking with these women and hearing their stories, I noticed that there were a few themes that were prominent across each of our conversations. For the purposes of this paper, the data collected will be arranged into these themes.

#### Personal Connection

What was clear upon talking to each participant was that each one had a personal investment in the companies that they started. Whether it was about leaving behind a legacy, or having freedom to work on what mattered to them, each woman took a piece of them into their work daily. “The things that I hate motivate me,” shares Sabrina Thompson. “I always tell people. There are some people who are like ‘oh my God,’ I do not know what my purpose is. I say figure out what you hate and what really pisses you off... usually somewhere in that lies your passion.” For Thompson, her passion to fight against the injustices of the world led her to do the work that she has done throughout her life. Though she addressed how the things she hates has motivated her personally, she also highlights it can help others discover their passions. While individuals might not know that they like, they often can point out what they do not like, and that in turn can turn into another business, project or idea that can impact the lives of those around them. It is about creating that balance between work and passion.

In my interview with Latham, she discussed this notion of leaving behind a legacy:

“So we have to think about as we are growing businesses, what is the legacy that I am leaving? What is it that I want people to embrace? Not just that you know...I love that people are connected to Mama Glow and the mission. But it was founded by a black woman you know what I mean?”

Latham Thomas expresses a desire to leave behind a legacy that will touch the lives of others, a project that those coming after her can look at and embrace with a level a pride. Intrinsically within that desire, is who she is: a black woman. So while people are invested in the company's vision, it is as if she is pointing out that the vision is only as important as the person behind it. As such, she brings herself into her company, *Mama Glow*.

In other circumstances, these businesses have formed out of something that happened to these women personally. When I asked Lauren Carson why she founded *Black Girls Smile Inc*, she stated:

“Honestly my own personal journey. Umm, my...my own struggles with depression as a young African-American girl. I saw way too many voids (.) umm (.) Throughout my treatment, umm (.) education, support, resources and it was baffling to me that there was really nothing out there, no one talking about this, and umm, I felt compelled to try to be that voice for change.”

As a woman who had personally struggled with depression, she had a personal stake in this industry. She tapped into her experiences dealing with mental health and created a platform that would fill the voids she felt were present when she suffered from depression, which is particularly interesting given that her organization specifically targets black girls between the ages of 12-19. It is no secret that mental health is seen as “taboo” within the black community. As such, black women tend to minimize the serious nature of their problems. Carson had to remove that mask, in order to get the help that she needed, and used that to empower other young women to do the same. By addressing her personal struggles with depression, she is offering a narrative into how serious this issue is, and why it is we need to be paying attention.

## Values

It was evident that these women had values, and much of their values centered on some form of service - mainly how they can serve other individuals. It goes back to having the ability to create a social good through business. In some cases, it goes back to the environment that a person was raised in, the values that were instilled into her by the individuals who raised her.

Tonya Rapley stated:

“I have always wanted to change the world and make the world a better place. My parents are both in the military so they served the United States for 20 years each. I grew up in a family that essentially served (.) differently. So I just, I guess, it is just what I was put here to do...how I naturally gravitated to those things or helping others.”

Rapley was raised in a family that served the country. On a smaller scale, she is currently working on serving a community, of “millennial women of color, specifically, black millennial women.” Servicing others was something she lived and saw throughout her life. Because of her personal ties, having parents who are in the military, her values are rooted in what she saw. For many that may be the case. We often act or spark action as a result of the things we see happening around us, in our neighborhoods, on the media. Sometimes what we see can ultimately affect the way we view ourselves. Jacqueline Glass spoke about this when she offered some information about the girls who participate in the *At The Well* conferences:

“Most of the girls that come for the summer program, they are the only African-American in their class. They are the only minority in that AP course, in that high honors course, in that private school, in their grade...and sometimes they are looked at like ‘well you may be a token, you are not smart enough to be here.’ When really they are smart enough to be there but sometimes it affects their self-esteem. To not have other girls who

look like them to be a part of the program.”

In this particular scenario, Glass paints an image of young women who are personally affected by what they do not have around them, which can be equally as impactful as looking at what is. The conference participants appear to be African-American women who are consistently reminded that they are the minority. Essentially, Glass is serving an underserved population. *At The Well* seeks the ladies where they are and works towards meeting their needs.

The work is about other individuals, and how these entrepreneurs can better serve these individuals. In many ways their service to their clients can be described like a relationship: you put in what you hope to get out of it. Sabrina Thompson states:

“I really have not seen a successful business that has been only about the money. You have to have a charity arm to whatever the business. Umm, because at the end of the day, people want to feel like you care about them.”

Thompson recognizes that today, having a good product is no longer enough. There has to be a cause associated with your business, which can and most likely will turn into a profit later on.

She shared a story about a campaign series she did for Father’s Day:

“So I said my dad has been married to my mom some 40 some odd years (.) and I said I am going to gather him and 40 other men of the black community. Just meet me out by the pier and we are going to take pictures for you for free and you can have the pictures if you let me have the right to your pictures to put out this campaign.”

Thompson utilized her gift to offer a free service that later went viral on the Internet. The campaign was to give recognition to black fathers who are there for their families and dispel the image that the media feeds the public stating the opposite. Through this project, she was able to get work at companies such as *BET* because some of the men who showed up were the top



executives at their companies, who shared her work with others they knew. The campaign, which served as the first video in her “Social Series” campaign, on its exterior appeared to be just a project about fathers. But in reality, it offered an untold narrative that was much deeper. In a time where “Father’s Day” has become for some people “Single Mother’s Day,” Thompson turned a negative stereotype into positive imagery all over the Internet. By bringing 40 men together, she had created a sense of community. Though there was no exchange of money when the project happened, Thompson was able to get other projects for profit as a result of seeing an issue and doing something about it. She also added:

“The support I get is simply having genuinely fun relationships with the candidates I choose to put in my showcase. And there is no exchange of money. These people just want to see goodness put out into the world and they trust my work and it in turns always makes money.”

### Changing Perceptions

Whether it was within their communities, or branching out into others, they seek to drive action and offer another perspective to view these societal issues. As black women, some of the stigmas they face correlate directly to their race and gender in a particular industry. As such, in some instances, the women really deal with changing the perception of woman in their industries. When discussing her motivations, Tonya Rapley stated:

“Changing the perception of black women, so umm as far as black women in business. So making sure that I help change that perception of black women in business.”

She continues:

“I think that especially in today's day and time it is a lot of umm, Instagram model this, reality star turned businesswoman, stripper turned businesswoman, umm models... and I

feel like young children or young black women in particular or young black girls are being told that you (.) you know, you have to be uber sexy and plastic and umm on a reality show in order to be successful or grow your own business. And I want to...you can be smart, you can be fabulous, you can be attractive and not take your clothes off and be about your business. You can change people's lives and earn a decent living for yourself (.) and experience what you want to experience. So just letting them know that there is another way, another route to becoming a successful businesswoman.”

Rapley seeks to dispel the stereotypical roles that dominate the images of black women today. When she points out the platform of Instagram models or reality stars turned entrepreneurs, Rapley is also bringing attention to the industries that black women are typically associated with. When we think of the financial industry, a black woman may not necessarily come to mind for a lot of people, which in itself is an issue. This not to say that there is anything wrong with the women who are utilizing platforms such as Instagram or television to generate business, but to simply offer another perspective to balance it out. Social media and television need not be the only viable platforms for black women to be successful businesswomen.

In addition to the desire of changing the perception of black women in specific industries, there is also a need to address what these outside perceptions can do to us internally. For years black women have been victims of society’s “beauty” standards. Sheri Crawley shares:

“Us being divided as a people based on our skin tone (.) (.) and now that permeating through global society...you know associating negative connotations with darker skin women...umm and positive with ummm (.) lighter skin. Now the subliminal messages that are there from the beginning where European concepts of beauty are...are..umm..tremendously over-glamorized. Umm, to the point where girls do not (.)

(.) they cannot look...to televisions, to coloring books, to toy stores, to you know to magazine covers to see themselves. So we are very unapologetically filling in the gap.”

Recognizing the affect of these harmful images on young black girls, Crawley wanted to give young black girls a different perception of themselves. When discussing what needs her company seeks to fulfill she stated:

“Our need is to uplift, to encourage, (.) (.) to empower girls...umm, so that they can move past that and umm develop leadership skills and be stronger in their confidence, which you know...ultimately affects their decision making, their relationships, their career goals.”

She continues:

“She can walk with her head held high because she is confident. She knows that she is beautiful inside and out, she is not looking for validation from society (.) (.) from anybody else. ”

The lack of representation in beauty can lead to young girls feeling like their looks do not make them beautiful when that is not the case. Crawley makes that clear through her comments and the needs she seeks to address.

### Race and Gender

Another prominent theme that arose from the conversations was the intersectionalities between race and gender. When we look at early literature concerning race and gender as they relate to business, it was interesting to garner the perspectives of these women in how it effected them personally. In some instances, there was a feeling of non-progression. Latham Thomas maintains:

“It is like they are already running and you are at the starting line. It is like the gun has not gone off and those people are already ahead and you are still waiting on (.) like (.) for like the gun to go off (laughs) you know what I mean? Like, why am I still at the starting line and they are way over there? It is like that.”

What Thomas describes is a sort of unequal opportunity for black women in a race metaphor. While their colleagues are advancing through the pipeline, black women, are being stalled, waiting for the “gun” of opportunity to go off, so that they can advance in the race as well. Using a race metaphor suggests that black women are eager and willing to run the race, in hopes of making it to the finish line. Despite not working in Corporate America, this is the reality that Thomas may still face. Black women experience unique barriers that keep them from starting at the same level as their colleagues.

It is a reality that these women may experience some sort of discrimination because of their race and gender. As such, they may not always get taken seriously. Rapley shared:

“The fact that I am a black woman talking about finance, I think that some people might not take it serious or they say ‘oh you talk about money, how cute.’ Umm, I would say that yeah, some people might not take it seriously or the fact that I work with black people specifically on money, they feel like you know (.) we don't have money.”

This relates to the stereotypical roles and positions that are expected of women. Because she is a black woman working in finance, she faces the reality that some people do not take her seriously for that reason. Thompson discussed how as a black woman, she has experienced more pros and cons. Whether or not she may have been the “token” black person, she has decided to view those experiences from another perspective. She stated:

“I look at it from that perspective. Some people might be bitter but no, you take that and you flip it, you know (.) and at the end of the day, the work speaks for itself and so... they had to see my work first before they saw who I am. They did not pick me simply because I am a black woman, but it did not hurt me.”

At the end of the day, Thompson prioritizes her passions and lets her work demonstrate her abilities. Her ambition is clear and she utilizes it to navigate not how her business is impacted by her race and gender, but rather how her race and gender impacts her business.

In other instances, because of their target audience, black women have managed to work around the negative impact race and gender might have on their businesses. Crawley shares:

“In our case, it has very much been... a breath of fresh air to not...no longer be in a situation where I have to overachieve to prove that I am smart enough to compete in the corporate, you know American world. It does not...I do not have to go in between those worlds anymore. I can have my regular conversations with my clients, that because they are my sisters, because they are other black women, ummm and so (.), it has been...like I said, kind of...one of those things where previously there would have been a different answer if I was in a Corporate America or a setting where I built a social enterprise around something I did not live first hand.”

Though race and gender do not appear to impact her directly, Crawley uses *Pretty Brown Girl* to prepare these young women for the impacts race and gender may have on their lives either now or in the future.

Many of the women touched on the impact of race and gender in a variety of ways. One woman in particular, offered a very interesting account that differed from the rest. Valerius shared:

“My first supporters in anything that I do...have been white women. White women support me first, and honestly that you know...specifically with my film, white women supported me first and they come in the form of my teachers.”

She continues:

“That is the part that when I say we need to examine ourselves as black women, that is the part that I take ownership of. We do not support each other right away. We just do not. We want to think that we do.”

Though Valerius’ experience may not be synonymous of all black women, she raises an interesting point that deserves further evaluation. In some ways, Valerius is highlighting white women as her early sponsors. Her professors, were individuals that were invested in her career and education, and would advocate on her behalf. She also brings attention to a topic that has been discussed before, and that is how often women of color support each other. I believe that each of these women have the desire to empower other black women, but Valerius notes that not all black women may be wanting or willing to do that.

### Necessity

Many of the women also expressed the desire to create something out of nothing. Many frustrations from not being promoted or simply not getting positions that they were qualified for led these women to take action into their own hands. Explaining why she created *At The Well*, Jacqueline Glass shares:

“So, it was sort of out of a sense of despair if you will...of being turned down from jobs which I was overqualified for (.) and they would usually pick people who were under qualified. So instead of getting frustrated I would just, uhh (.) I thought it would be good to use that energy in a positive way.”

Glass did not see an opportunity for her to thrive and so she created that opportunity herself, which also allowed her to create social impact.

Their businesses also came out of simply not seeing the kind of education they were looking for within their respective industries. When asked why she started her businesses, Rapley stated:

“I created *My Fab Finance* because I needed to improve my finances & I did not feel like anybody was able to speak to me and my needs. Umm, I did not see a lot of the financial education I desired out there. And so I sought out to create a platform to provide what I wished there was in the market.”

Rapley, much like the other women, expresses that she has a certain way that she enjoys learning and what she would like to see done. When it did not exist, she took that opportunity and turned it into a business. Essentially she created her own opportunity that may not have been available to her otherwise. In turn her innovative desire transformed into a platform that would serve the needs of millennial women of color.

## *Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions*

### **Discussion**

The data collected concerning black women's motivations for pursuing careers in social entrepreneurship was consistent with recent research surrounding black women in business. Black women are not progressing professionally in the ways that they desire in today's traditional workplace (Hewlett and Green, 2015). This was expressed by Jacqueline Glass who talked about a feeling of despair from not getting positions for being "overqualified." The traditional business model is structured quite rigidly, in that there are certain positions workers must hold in order to move up to the senior level executive positions. Despite research indicating that black women are more likely to aspire to a "powerful position with a prestigious title," they are not getting them (Hewlett and Green, 2015). Entrepreneurship allows women like Rapley, the flexibility needed to pursue their innovative desires. She stated:

"I would say entrepreneurship chose me honestly. I knew I wanted to change the world... I knew I wanted to do it on my terms. I knew I wanted flexibility. And I just... the perfect job did not exist for me. So I in turn created what I felt was the perfect job for me."

Through entrepreneurship Rapley was able to create her own opportunities against a system that lets only but so many people in.

Aligned with their entrepreneurial spirits is the desire to make a social impact through their work, which is consistent with the literature concerning the social entrepreneurship field. Articles on Entrepreneurship.com have discussed the rise of social entrepreneurship and its popularity amongst millennials, which according to Pew Research, is the largest segment of the working population. While businesses are starting to notice that there needs to be a social



purpose attached to their business models, some might argue that women have been doing that before it was recognized as a real field. Thomas stated:

“This millennial generation is really oriented toward you know, impact... and I think that umm, most people who are you know, growing budding businesses or who have business that are serving (.) (.) in the last you know 8-10 years but certainly in the last 5 years (.) are really socially orientated. It is a big part of what the cultural push is...it is to have impact and to you know, make part your bottom line be of service.”

Working in the industry of maternal health, Thomas has been working in a socially oriented industry from the beginning.

Research also points out that the terms “social entrepreneur” and “social entrepreneurship” are relatively new. They became widely popular in the 1980s, when Bill Drayton founded Ashoka, the largest organization of social entrepreneurs worldwide ([ashoka.org](http://ashoka.org)). With the term being relatively new, there has been some confusion for some on what exactly a social entrepreneur is and what s/he does. One of the women I interviewed was not familiar with the term, though her work fell within the definition of the term. Nevertheless, there have been valuable contributions being made within this industry. This work sought to add to the discourse surrounding entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship. By bringing exposure to the contributions of black women to the field of social entrepreneurship, this study seeks to encourage further research into this area, in hopes of offering a clear image into the dynamics in the social entrepreneurship field.

Much confusion surrounding social entrepreneurship and the contributions of those in the field have both added a misconception of the kinds of businesses social entrepreneurs run. One popular misconception is that all social entrepreneurs run non-profit organizations. When in

reality, that is not the case. A social venture can be a for-profit business or a non-profit business. Of all the interviews conducted, only 3 out of 7 were founders of non-profit organizations. One of those women had a combination of a for-profit and non-profit organization. Because people associate social entrepreneurship with non-profits, they tend to also assume that social entrepreneurs do not have a strong desire to make money. A common theme among majority of the women expressed concerns about how the field is viewed. Rapley stated:

“Hmm, I think that there is a misconception that people who are social entrepreneurs do not want to make money and that can be further from the truth. We want to make money, we deserve to make money.”

As social entrepreneurs, though making money is not at the center of their business model, it does not mean that it is not important to the sustainability of the overall business. The idea behind social entrepreneurship is to take business practices to impact social problems, in turn, raising money to continue to impact those problems to create a wide scale change. It is more than simply earning profit just for the sake of earning a profit.

The data also found that majority of participants did not seek careers in social entrepreneurship. Instead, this career path chose them. However, they have found the field to be rewarding, and some expressed a desire for more young women to be exposed to the field, creating intentionality in pursuing it as a career path. Carson shared:

“I would love to see more young black girls not just fall into this. You know what I mean? For this to be an intentional track (.) and an intentional decision. Because this was not intentional for me. Like, I did not go to college and say I want to be a social entrepreneur.”

She continued:

“Why is one of the most fulfilling and one of the biggest and growing industries something that you fall into? That to me is... I do not want to use the word appalling, because I think that is so negative, but I think it is just something that should be evaluated, and addressed potentially.”

Part of the issue could be a lack of clarity in to the field itself. But it did seem almost like a trait of social entrepreneurship is simply “falling into it.” If more individuals were intentional about pursuing a career in this field, it could potentially create an amount of change in no time. More importantly, seeing black women in this field in particular creates a narrative for the young black girls Carson talked about.

The limitation for this research study initially was the lack of research concerning women’s contributions to the field of social entrepreneurship. Though they exist, it was difficult securing information that related specifically to social entrepreneurs. The lack of research in this area suggested there was no prior interest in researching this, though that can change in the future with the rise of the field amongst millennials. In addition to this, as there were only seven participants involved in the study, the data is not generalizable.

### **Conclusion**

When we look closer what these women’s motivations for pursuing careers in social entrepreneurship, it is more than just running a business with a distinct social impact. It is about educating their consumers so that they too can pass on the wealth of knowledge they receive to empower others. In their own ways and across various industries, they are moving past educating themselves to educating others, empowering them by supplying them with information. The information provided is enough to give voice to the voiceless, as can be inferred based on the populations their ventures serve. Sheri Crawley works to educate young black girls on their

beauty and uplift their self-esteem, while Lauren Carson seeks to normalize the conversation about mental health for young black girls.

Their motivations point back to the themes discussed earlier. However despite the appeal of social entrepreneurship, these women still experience some challenges in their businesses. As mentioned earlier, the central focus for social entrepreneurs is not to make money, though they want and arguably deserve to. But as these women pointed out, there are a variety of factors that make funding quite difficult for them. Clare O' Connor (2015) of *Forbes* magazine stated that in the last 5 years, black women have only received .2% of all venture funding. In our talk, Tonya Rapley shared that she started *My Fab Finance* with her own money and reinvested the initial revenues back into her business. Jacqueline Glass shared that many of the challenges she faces for *At The Well* involve funding. Not just funding for the program, but also for the families of the women who participate in the program. Experiencing challenges with funding herself, Valerius shared:

“I am underfunded. I have never had an investor. (.) (.) (.) I have never had an investor, I did a film with no budget. Umm, anything that I do and set my mind to do, I do it and execute effectively and efficiently and people assume that I have a budget because of the way in which I am able to execute you know... whether it is my website or promotional materials, or things like that. People think that I have an army behind me and honey, I do not. You know, it is me and my computer playing around with these images.”

Despite not having resources that would have benefited her projects, Valerius managed to make what she did have work. She used her talents to execute the project as flawlessly as possible.

So it was clear that these women did have some challenges when it came to funding, though that did not seem to bother them. Thompson strongly advocated that her work always

created a stream of revenue for her. If the work is good, the money will follow. In terms of other support, majority of the women received emotional support when first starting out as well as now. Typically the original sharers of their content were friends and family. In other instances, there was not much support initially due to differing opinions or simply because what there was not a business model to refer to when trying to envision what these social entrepreneurs were attempting to do. The women also expressed the relationships they have built from their work and how those relationships have led to various types of support. Latham Thomas shared:

“So make sure you have that support system too, so you feel like you are thriving and that is one thing that I definitely developed. As I started to meet other people with businesses, umm, other people of color (.) you know with businesses. We just developed this business ability to kind of connect when we needed to and vent and I think that is also really crucial. Even if you do not have people who can be there to help you start off and grow the business.”

Thomas has used her relationships within her network as a support system for when she needs it the most.

These women are game changers. Despite the odds put against them whether it was through funding or questions about their ability to get the work done, these women have made strides and impacted very important issues in their communities. These women were motivated to become social entrepreneurs because of the ills they witnessed. There was a void and the missing voice within that void was that of black women. These women were motivated to become social entrepreneurs because the traditional business model offered them no other options. While access to funding, improved diversity policies and inclusive networks are not within easy reach for black women, their entrepreneurial spirit cannot be denied. More so, their

passion for wanting to spark discourse in society cannot be denied. Their contributions to the field of social entrepreneurship are fundamental to the growth of our economy.

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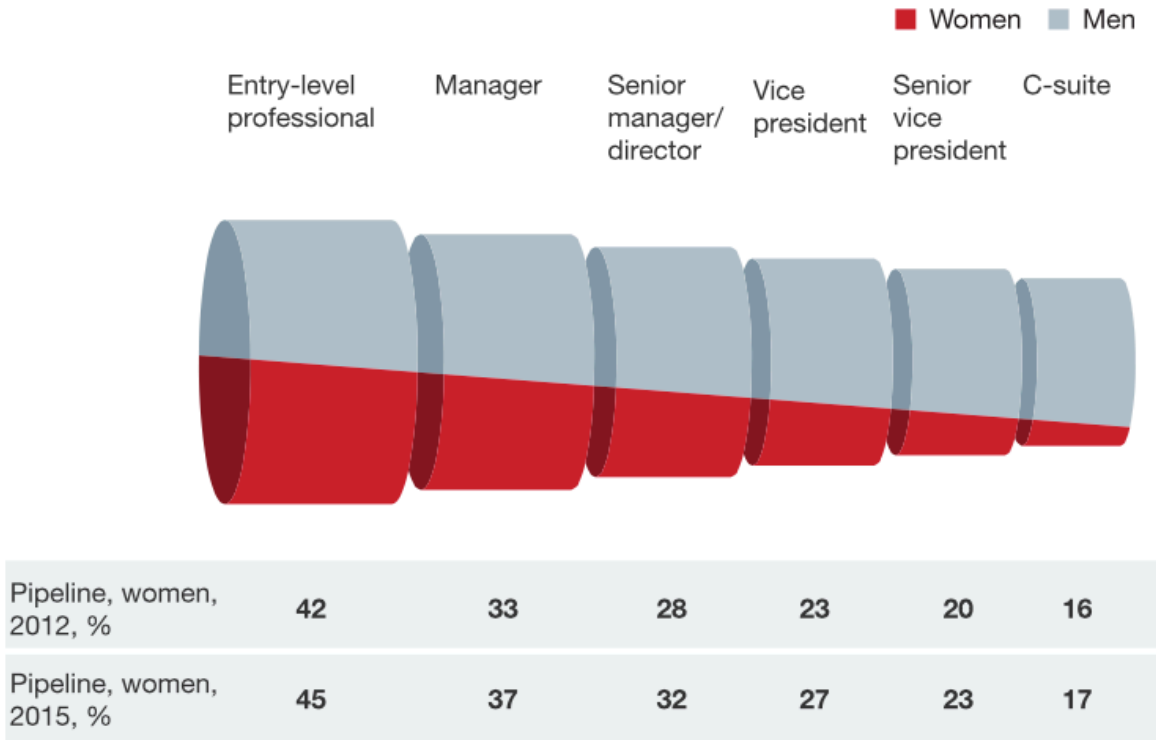
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## Appendices

### Corporate-talent pipeline by gender



### Full List of Research Questions

- 1.) Name?
- 2.) Age?
- 3.) Name of business and how long have you been a social entrepreneur?
- 4.) What ignited the spark in you to start a new business venture or to make significant changes in an existing business? How did the idea for your business come about?
- 5.) Why did you choose entrepreneurship? Why call yourself a social entrepreneur instead of an entrepreneur?
- 6.) Why incorporate a social goal into your platform/initiative?
- 7.) Does your venture target a specific group? What needs does it seek to fulfill if any?

- 8.) Describe/outline your typical day?
- 9.) What motivates you?
- 10.) What support (if any) did you receive when you first started off? What support (if any) do you receive now?
- 11.) How have your experiences in the business world been impacted by your race and gender?
- 12.) If you work on your own, reasons for this decision. If not, reasoning used in hiring process.
- 13.) What are you passionate about as a social entrepreneur and what exciting projects are you working on right now?
- 14.) Do you network with others interested in combining social and economic goals? If yes, how important is this to you? If no, is there a reason for this?
- 15.) What would you say are the top three skills needed to be a successful social entrepreneur?
- 16.) How do you define success?
- 17.) What are some challenges you face as a social entrepreneur?
- 18.) Research has shown that many start-ups tend to fail within the first year of business. What steps have you taken to avoid failure for your business?
- 19.) If you had to start over, would you do anything differently?
- 20.) Is there anything else that you want to add or that you feel I missed?

## **Appendix**

The transcription system used here is adapted from the Gail Jefferson system.

(.) A short untimed pause or gap within or between utterances. For example:

M: I just know (.) I (.) I know I just have a feeling