



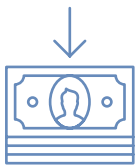
# Women's Social Entrepreneurship in FRANCE

Facilitating societal transformation through innovative, participation-driven social enterprises

**Boasting high revenues, job-creation, and measurable social impact, women social entrepreneurs in France aspire to create large-scale social change**

**SNAPSHOT\***

*\*Out of 55 women surveyed*



**130 000€**  
Average yearly revenue



Average length of operation of a woman's social enterprise is  
**4 YEARS**



**34%**  
have care responsibilities

**88%**

feel they empowered themselves by starting and running a social enterprise



more than **40%** of income is market-based revenue (for the majority of women)



**7** full-time jobs & **4** part-time jobs are generated by women-led social enterprises on average

**KEY FINDINGS**

"After our first actions we had engaged more than a hundred people and thought 'we can do more'"

**Chiara Condi**

FOUNDER OF LED BY HER

(an association that helps vulnerable women start businesses)

**ECOSYSTEM**

- Social economy sector accounts for 10% of total employment in France

**SECTORS**

- Health and Social Work, Education, Scientific & Technical Activities, Information & Communication

**MISSIONS**

- Diversity Inclusion, Vocational training, Workforce integration, Women's Empowerment, Economic Independence

**MOTIVATIONS**

- An innovative idea for a new process or product, the desire to acquire new skills and grow professionally, passion for social change, personal experience with a social issue

**BARRIERS**

- Lack of funding, lack of visibility on the national level, structural and political barriers, lack of role models/successful examples

**GENDER**

- Women manage their social enterprise in a more participatory and collaborative manner • Women perceive themselves to be more connected to, and have more passion for their social mission

**IMPACT**

- High revenue and job creation, positive public awareness of specific social issues • The majority measure social impact and seek to have national level impact

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# SOCIAL ENTERPRISE IN FRANCE

## **History**

Although the concept “social enterprise” is becoming more popular today, it only came into existence in France in the early 2000s and is still less commonly used than ‘social economy’, a concept which originates from the 19th century. Research from 2011 indicates there existed approximately 180,000 associations, 24,000 cooperatives, 7,200 complementary health insurance and around 1,100 foundations in France (European Commission, 2014). The first French enterprise that identified as a “social enterprise” is Groupe SOS and was created 30 years ago, currently employing 18,000 staff.

## **Sectors**

Social enterprises in France are primarily located in the social care sector. The number of employees in this sector account for over 60 per cent (850,000 jobs) of the total job sector. Another important sector with significant share of the social economy is education.

## **Legal Format**

Since its establishment in 2002, the legal structure of social enterprise in France is the Société Coopérative d'intérêt Collectif (SCIC). It is more common for social enterprises to take on the shape of an association. The reason for this is because a social enterprise in the shape of an association is more flexible and cheaper for the social entrepreneur (European Commission, 2014).

There exists also the label “solidarity enterprise” which can be adopted by any legal statuses as long as some conditions in the statutes are respected (democratic governance, search of a social utility, limited distribution of profit). If we aggregate all existing statuses in France, there are more than 215,000 organisations that meet the EU operational criteria of a social enterprise. There were only 315 SCIC's registered in 2015 (European Commission, 2014).

## **Size of Social Enterprises**

The social economy in France is mainly constituted by micro entities - few are large organisations. The majority of organisations (77%) have less than 10 employees.

## **National Policy**

Putting aside the terminological differences, there exists a strong political recognition of the sector which is reflected by the existence of specific structures within government departments and various initiatives. Recently, a new law was even adopted acknowledging the sector. However, there are no formal policies to specifically support social enterprise.

## **Support**

The majority of public support in France tends to be geared more towards associations than social enterprises. The public bank Banque Publique d'Investissement (BPI) was created in 2012 which has an effect on the supply of finance. However, only 10% of these funds have been devoted to the development of social economy groups (European Commission, 2014).

## CASE STUDY



### L'Effet Papillon

In 2007 one of Mélanie Perron's relatives was diagnosed with a serious illness. Having had little first-hand experience with the issue, she was shocked to witness how profoundly such a diagnosis affects every aspect of one's life. *"Everything just stops,"* she explains.

She began researching support services for people with serious illnesses, but was unsatisfied with the kind of care and types of services available. After meeting with various groups and associations, she was left feeling that *"nothing was going to change."* So she took matters into her own hands, and decided to create her own solution. In 2011 she launched her social enterprise L'Effet Papillon, offering non-medical services to women who had been diagnosed with serious illnesses.

The first action of the organisation was to support 14 women that just received a cancer diagnosis with a non-medicated program over the course of six months. During this time, their life quality and social economy were checked and measured by oncologists and economists. The initial results proved extremely promising: patients felt less alone and more relaxed and some side effects of the treatment were easier to endure.

Additionally, oncologists were amazed by the changes in relationships they had with their patients and patient's relatives. *"Oncologists are amazed."* Perron reveals. *"They are now thinking about how to broadly rethink patients care."*

**By diminishing depression, and thus helping preventing patient relapse, this innovative programme has the potential to not only improve lives, but also produce significant cost-savings for the State.**

# WOMEN SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS



## Motivations

Amongst the ten women interviewed in-depth for this research, the major motivation for starting a social enterprise was overwhelmingly connected to a "personal connection to a particular issue", a "series of first-hand experiences", and/or to "a strong personal conviction and desire to create change". However, amongst the 55 women surveyed, "having an innovative idea", and "the desire to acquire new skills and grow professionally" were also cited as important motivating factors, ranking slightly higher than personal motivations.

Analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data indicates that women are firstly and primarily moved by a personal connection to a social issue, which then sparks innovative thinking about a possible solution. Once the possibility of starting a social enterprise is considered, it seems that the desire to acquire new skills and grow professionally are the incentives which push the entrepreneur from the "thinking" stage, into the "doing stage," ultimately leading to the creation of the enterprise.

## Personal Experience with a Social Issue

The personal stories that lead women to create a social enterprise could not have led to a tradition enterprise most of the time: the need to fight an injustice, the urge to design a solution for a marginalised population, a personal conviction or a previous violent working environment. Overwhelmingly, women social entrepreneurs in France indicated that first and foremost, they were driven by a desire to meet a specific social need with which they had personal experience.

*"The link between my personal story and the company is deeply intimate,"* says Sarah Da Silva, founder of Constant et Zoé, a company that designs and sells practical clothes for disabled people. It is Da Silva's personal experiences around the difficulty of dressing her disabled brother that led her to launch her social enterprise. She chose the deeply personal name "Constant" for her company, in reference to him.



In a similar vein, Mélanie Perron, founder of L'effet Papillon, a social enterprise that offers women diagnosed with cancer non-medical support services, explained her motivation, noting, "I had a personal experience that shocked me." When a close relative got very ill, Perron realized that there was very little support available for patients. "I did not think anything was going to change" she recalled, "so in 2011 I thought to myself: 'I have to do it.'"

Marine Couteau, founder of Leka, a social enterprise that creates robotic toys to help autistic children, observed, "It's the feedback of educators and parents at the beginning of the project that made me want to continue." This example illustrates the intertwined nature of the "innovative idea" element of women social entrepreneurs' motivation, with the personal. It wasn't simply the technological innovation that motivated Marine, it was crucial for her to personally experience the interest of her future beneficiaries and see with her own eyes how much they needed support: a support that her project turned into an enterprise.

### Desire for Social Change

Women have a clear desire to create change at a societal level, and possess a keen understanding of the importance of the social changes that occur through their enterprises. Beyond local or community level change, they look to change the way the French society views and understand specific issues, through missions that often focus on raising public awareness and dismantling stereotypes.

For Chiara Condi, founder of Led by Her, an association that supports vulnerable women to launch entrepreneurial projects, creating her social initiative

"was also a way to overturn taboos that we have in our society about violence against women".

Deza Nguembock, founder of EHLab, a company dealing with diversity issues in the private sector, is clear on the global change she aims to create:

"We have a mission to support

a change in the perceptions [of disabilities]".



## Gender and Social Entrepreneurship

### Gender Roles

Amongst women interviewed, there was a strong sense that the founder's relationships (with collaborators, partners, providers, beneficiaries) were and are being affected by the fact that the founder is a woman.

Marine Couteau, founder of Leka, noted that

"being a woman can make things simpler when you want to start working in this field... I mean, women are well represented in educational professions and mothers are usually the ones who directly deal with the autistic children."

Some social entrepreneurs mentioned that women tend to have more honest exchanges of ideas and partake in a different kind of communication style. Da Silva observes that:

"Acting is much more present in male interactions and exchanges. As for me, a more honest and straightforward manner of communication is more valued."

In the field of women-led social entrepreneurship, motherhood and family were also noted as being an important asset rather than a weakness. A women's family can serve to support the entrepreneur and in addition the family can be an area for learning skills or to foster personal developmental skills that can ultimately benefit the company. Ingrid Sem, founder Com'3elles, a socially-conscious communication agency, stated:

"Whereas many men place their company before their personal lives, we value our family balance as much as our professional balance. I know very few entrepreneurs who

can say: "I changed my working hours to get my children to school on time- We are able to do so."

### Gender Equality

Most of the time gender equality is not initially a primary concern for women in social entrepreneurship (except when the venture is precisely focused on that particular matter). However, over time it can become apparent that such attention could be beneficial. Responding to the question of whether gender equality was a focus of her organisation's mission, Deza Nguembock, founder of EHLab, noted,

"At first no, that (gender equality) was not a concern. But, today yes, today it is an important topic. [...] Our mission is to try to restore the balance wherever there are differences."

### Women's Empowerment through Social Entrepreneurship

An overwhelming 78% of women social entrepreneurs see themselves as contributing to women's empowerment, and 88% think they empowered themselves. All women interviewed noted that their entrepreneurial project changed them in some way.

Céline Laporte, founder of Tipkin, an online platform facilitating the collaborative economy, noted "It completely helped me grow as a person" She is not the only one that perceived positive changes: self-confidence often grows as a result of entrepreneurship. Emilie Schmitt, founder of Activ'Action (see Case Study), elaborated on this:

"It revealed my competences, it taught me how much I could achieve and how much I could learn".

The impact on other women can also be very strong. Mélanie Perron, founder of L'Effet Papillon, talking about the women that benefited from her enterprise's services said "After a workshop, they leave as different people: they come to life."



## SOCIAL IMPACT OF WOMEN-LED ENTERPRISE

Women have many varying social missions, from helping the day-to-day life of autistic children or disabled people, to reinventing the concept of work. However, over time, this social mission grows and becomes more ambitious, as if along the way the obstacles encountered by the woman were an opportunity to solve an even bigger issue.

On this ever growing ambition, Chiara Condi, founder of Led By Her, says: *“after our first actions we had engaged more than a hundred people and thought «We can do more» [...] We are trying to broaden our mission.”* Aline Herbinet, founder of V@si, which offers customised solutions to patients to experience adapted physical activity regularly and easily, explained, *“Things have evolved, we expanded to adults and to different diseases. [...] We thought «We will make our products for everyone.» [...] now we deal with public health concerns.”*

Although women are often strongly rooted in one particular region, they seek to have at least a national impact and most of the time their goals are not achieved until the whole society has changed. Perron reveals, *“There is a part of me that says «Yes, not too bad!» and the other that says «We are still very far from what we should be doing.»”*

Even though it was not part of their mission at the beginning, women tend to believe that their most significant impact is the awareness they spread on their particular issue. Couteau says it quite clearly when she explains: *“Whenever we meet someone and explain what autism is, that is already a success for us.”* These awareness campaigns on particular issues are part of the change in society they seek to create.

### CASE STUDY



## Activ'Action

Emilie Schmitt launched Activ'Action to transform unemployment into a constructive experience for people in France. The organization created and offered workshops to fight against the loss of self-confidence, to help people think about their dream jobs, etc. They did not anticipate it, but 70% of participants were women and only 30% were men.

They found this quite interesting and presented a study to their participants. The reason that emerged was that women **might be more comfortable having negative thoughts and feelings, allowing themselves to participate in such workshops.** Emilie Schmitt explained, *“Afterwards, we thought that we needed to adapt our communication to the male audience so that they could also feel concerned, and that they could identify with our actions. [...] Men do not realise how gender equality could be beneficial to them.”*



# Recommendations for Policy Makers

\*Increase support to women social entrepreneurs through better visibility: the project "La France S'Engage" is a good initiative that could be replicated and scaled.

\*Increase funding opportunities: a larger part of the BPI funds could be devoted to the development of social economy organisations

\*Reduce paperwork and legislative complications: the actual "simplification shock" should specifically address 215,000 organisations that are part of the social enterprise eco-system regardless of their legal status

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### Personal interviews featured with the following social entrepreneurs:

Aline Herbinet (V@si) / Céline Laporte (Tipkin) / Chiara Condi (Led by Her) / Deza Nguembock (EHLab) / Emilie Schmitt (Activ'Action) / Ingrid Sem (Com'3elles) / Marine Couteau (Leka) / Mélanie Perron (L'effet Papillon) / Sarah Da Silva (Constant et Zoé)

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## ABOUT THE PROJECT

This mini-report is based on primary empirical data gathered by Melanie Marcel from February to May 2015 in France, on behalf of European Women's Lobby. Data was gathered via desk research, in-depth semi-structured interviews with 9 informants using feminist interview methods and an internet survey available in French and English taken by 55 respondents.

These findings are part of a 1-year pilot study initiated by the European Women's Lobby entitled WEstart: Mapping Women's Social Entrepreneurship in Europe. Focusing on 10 European countries, WEstart seeks to gain a better understanding of the situation and state of play of women's social entrepreneurship in Europe.

For more details about WEstart visit:

[www.womenlobby.org](http://www.womenlobby.org)

or [www.WEstartEurope.org](http://www.WEstartEurope.org)

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