



# **Social Entrepreneurship and Equity: Looking Ahead with Ashoka's Global Lead for DEI**

*Founded in 1980, Ashoka is a cornerstone of social entrepreneurship and cited as one of the most influential social sector organizations in the world. Credited with coining the term "social entrepreneur," founder Bill Drayton spearheaded a paradigm shift in the social sector, funding early-stage leaders with no strings attached and creating a global network for mutual learning and support. Over the past four decades, Ashoka has recognized and supported 3,800 social entrepreneurs as Ashoka Fellows across 92 countries.*

*In late November, GoodCitizen caught up with Lorena Garcia Duran, Ashoka's Global Lead for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, to learn more about the latest developments at the organization.*

**You've been named the Global Lead for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) at Ashoka. What does this big role entail?**

When you think about it, we are in the business of creating a better world for all. It's not just about starting a DEI initiative, reexamining our hiring process and other internal structures, and setting up staff trainings. Ashoka's vision of "everyone a changemaker" is about building a world where everyone is powerful. Like others, we have biases and blind spots to address, which takes time. Ashoka Fellows are also fighting to build a more equitable world. They work in different geographies and contexts, and they come at the problem from different levels and angles. While they may not all be addressing the topic of equity directly, at the core of all Ashoka Fellows' work is the fight against a dysfunctional system. In fact, systems change is one of our selection criteria for electing our Fellows, so it makes sense that working to dismantle systems of oppression is a common thread uniting our network of social entrepreneurs.

### **What brings you to this work?**

My passion for DEI work comes from a combination of events and realities in my life. I grew up in a privileged environment in Mexico and was constantly conflicted by the class separation and discrimination towards domestic workers in my country. Then, when I came to the United States, my identity as a woman of color and the new identity of being an immigrant made me curious about the history of my new country of residence. I have always felt an urge for justice, especially in defense of those who are disadvantaged and face discrimination. I think all of these factors have been important in shaping who I am and what I bring to this work. Most of us had no say in our own privilege; most of us were born into it. What interests me is when we become aware of it, what will we do with it? I wrote a bit more about my personal journey in an article earlier this year.

### **Can you put the equity work in context for me? What has Ashoka been doing and what have you learned along the way?**

We've been on this journey for a while. In 2015, Ashoka made a commitment to "redraw the map" and diversify the U.S. Fellowship. Overall, we realized that

social entrepreneurship in the United States skewed male and white, with the majority coming from major coastal cities. Over the last five years, we've increased representation across the board to be more reflective of the makeup of the country as a whole. Specifically, we've almost doubled the percentage of Ashoka Fellows from under-represented geographies, we've almost doubled the number of women, and we've more than doubled the number of non-white social entrepreneurs elected to the Fellowship. In our work globally, we've always looked for social entrepreneurs working directly in communities striving to create positive change. We believe in supporting people who are proximate to the problem because they are best suited to solve it.

Now we're in the process of documenting what we've learned and plan to share it with other organizations. I'd point to three things specifically. First, we had to look in different places than in the past. Instead of trips to New York and California, we went to places like Utah and Georgia. Second, we had to reexamine how we communicate and use a different language to talk about social entrepreneurship. We realized we had been speaking to a specific audience and tended to talk about our work in a jargon that didn't connect well outside certain circles. Third, and most important, we needed to diversify our network. Research shows that most of us, individuals and organizations, have very homogenous networks; without deliberate effort to the contrary, we tend to surround ourselves with people who look like us. So, for Ashoka, this meant bringing new people on board to help us find social entrepreneurs across the country. This also means working with our existing network of nominators to make sure that our selection criteria for the Fellowship isn't being interpreted through biased and paternalistic lenses.

For those of us who are in the "business of doing good," we should be out in front. It's important for social sector organizations to invest in this work because trying to "do good" with blind spots is irresponsible and dangerous. If you are trying to solve a social problem, but not checking your power and biases, you are actually getting in the way of making the world a better place. Good intentions are not enough.

**As 2020 comes to a close, what are some priorities that Ashoka has**

## **identified for the coming year?**

First, we want to grow the number of social entrepreneurs we're supporting globally, specifically in Latin America, Africa, South Asia, and South East Asia.

Second, we're committed to working with youth so they self-identify as changemakers and recognize their power to build a better world.

Third, we're focusing on four specific fields as part of an initiative called Next Now—aging and the new longevity, gender equity, planet and climate, and technology and humanity—where we can identify cross-cutting patterns and solutions and move whole systems more quickly.

Finally, we're focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion, both internally and externally. Internally, the work is about minimizing our blind spots and biases; creating a more inclusive environment by reexamining our policies and processes; and putting systems in place to measure our progress. Externally, it's about amplifying the equity-focused work of the Ashoka Fellows and other Ashoka efforts.

## **Given the equity focus you just mentioned, what are some of the things you're focusing on in your role as the Global Lead for DEI?**

Internally, we are launching the Ashoka Fellows for Equity Council, which consists of a group of Ashoka Fellows who are experts in DEI. They will be an external force to guide us and keep us accountable on our internal equity work. And, I should mention, I haven't been doing this alone! We have a dedicated DEI Team and a global DEI Taskforce, and we've been working with Ashoka Fellow Dr. Emilia Zenzile Roig of the Center for Intersectional Justice to make sure our efforts are grounded in the insights of experts in this field. It's uncomfortable to admit that we've gotten this wrong in the past and that we will continue to make

mistakes. It also feels strange to invest internally when we are used to investing in others. But social sector organizations have a lot of power, and it is critical that we stop reinforcing systems of oppression and replicating inequities, even if we did so unintentionally in the past.

Externally, and specifically in the United States, we are working on an initiative called Equity Now, a new five-year commitment to identify, support, and connect social entrepreneurs working on issues directly related to equity. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed some of the long-standing inequities in our society—in healthcare, education, democracy, etc. Our next step is to focus on lifting up and supporting the social entrepreneurs driving systemic change and policy change in these areas.

So, it's an exciting time, and there is a lot of work to do!